

# Perceptions of University Faculty on Assessment of Graduate Executive Students

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## **Abstract**

Assessing adult learners and specifically executive education students has been a matter of concern for many faculty. This investigation aimed at exploring the perceptions of university faculty pertinent to assessing graduate executive students and the challenges attached to it. The study approached qualitative phenomenological design with an in depth strategy for data collection. Faculty from 5 private leading universities of Pakistan was chosen using nonrandom purposive sampling method. The data was sought via semi structured and pre themed interview guide. Manual thematic analysis was administered to analyze the data and the findings revealed four major themes a) traditional andragogy of teaching; b) constraints of university assessment policy; c). Practical life anxiety and stress of executive students and its influence on students perception of innovative assessment and lack of experiential learning and assessment framework in Pakistani universities. In conclusion, recommendations for improvement of assessment system in Pakistan higher education system are proposed.

*Keywords: adult learning, assessment in higher education, assessment policy*

## **Introduction**

Higher education is considered to be a critical component of human development across the world. It equips a person with relevant professional skills required for market and living. It is through higher education that individuals by gaining capacity and potential contribute in economic development of the society(Sadler, 2010). Considering this factor of significance of

skill based learning at higher level, universities pledge tremendous efforts in ensuring that learners are prepared for the market (Astin, 2012). Hence, teaching and learning is planned in accordance and all related components pertinent to this i.e. assessment, co-curriculum activities, research and projects are given importance (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 2013). Assessment in higher education learning setup is considered to be most crucial element of learning and development. Students are assessed by the universities in order to ensure that the knowledge, understanding and skills are acquired by the learners (Falchikov, 2013).

The true essence of assessment is to explore the level and quality of learning gained by an individual whereby testing how a certain concept is acquired and its understanding is accommodated in the mind of the learner and building upon how learners can use that particular learning for seeking professional solutions and practical life (Stephenson & Yorke, 2013). Experts of andragogy deliberate specified sets of techniques that should be used in adult learning and assessment and suggest it should mostly be experiential, independent, and research oriented and this is widely acknowledged and implemented in the western part of the world however it is catching a bull-cart speed in its execution at the eastern side of the world specifically in countries like India, Bangladesh and Pakistan (Dilshad & Ali, 2010; Winthrop & Graff, 2010).

Assessment is regarded as a core component of curriculum and a backbone of preparing learners to be skilled professionals (Fallows & Steven, 2013). Teachers play a significant role in planning, designing, administering and evaluating learning assessment whilst their perceptions related to this key component of learning are of a great value (Liu, 2011). Teachers if are not satisfied with the technique of assessment, lacks clarity, untrained and unplanned and does not incorporate students feedback in planning assessment can result in a major chaos (Hughes & Barrie, 2010). Hence, it is fundamental to ensure that the teachers' perceptions pertinent to assessment are incorporated in planning curriculum (Tight, 2012). Bearing in mind implication of this key phenomenon this study sets grounds for exploring university teacher perception pertinent to learning assessment in higher education settings in Pakistan (Abbasi, Malik, Chaudhry, & Imdadullah, 2011; Bhamani S. , 2013; Bhamani S. , 2013; Farrington & Palfreyman, 2012).

## **Literature Review**

Assessing students is one of the most important activities of educators that they carried out. It has a very direct and powerful impact on the learning actions of students. Therefore it is vital to design and adopt appropriate strategies for assessing students (Deborah Craddock, 2009). Assessment helps educators to keep student connected and focused towards their learning process. It also acts as a feedback for students to improve their learning process and facilitates them to keep up the positive attitude towards learning. Assessment for learning helps them to develop the ability of judging their own and peer's work along with their achievements. It is the most significant and fundamental part of curriculum designing and later with the development of course (Maxwell, 2012).

According to a research carried out by Stenlund, development of methods to assess prior knowledge has been given greater importance rather than building a design that could test the formal, informal or non-formal learning of students. Since assessment methods are intended to provide the decision makers information, with accuracy and reliability, on which they could determine the performance of students, therefore much attention should be given to assess the quality of assessment methods(Stenlund, 2010).

It is far more important to have a strategy than policy for assessment. Strategy is further divided into:1) a strategy to exercise the assessment and 2) a strategy for the successful management of that exercise. There are three vital factors that are needed to effectively manage the policy: 1) structure, 2) evaluation and 3) feedback (Yorke, 1998).

According to Marina, in higher education, the term “evaluation” is used in place for “review” for assessing to make it sound more quantitative in nature. She presented a four-step model for assessment review in higher education and found that the high level of engagement of both intellect and process would smooth the progress of assessment policy(Marina Harvey, 2014).

Assessment of graduate students is a complex and tough responsibility. This statement has been supported by the number of facts like discipline-specific assessment, program-level assessment, maintaining standards among integrated programmes and assessing students in programs which allow diverse choices (Clair Hughes, 2010).

Conversely Knight (Peter Knight, 2007) stated that assessment is the best way to judge the student in terms of their time utilization and how they witness themselves as students and as graduates. He further added that through their assessment attributes, employers evaluate and see their potential. It is due to the assessment that government become evident of number of graduates and linked them with the literacy rate.

Research done by Deborah, showed that it is the nature of assessment which has direct influence on the student’s learning process and their perception about the whole process. Students generally think that they couldn’t be able to express their knowledge within given time constraint. Results of the study showed that due to time constraint, students need to react quickly in giving the answers against questions. If they are not feeling good in examination, they simply can’t wait to answer the question until they will feel better. Students complained that they never feel doing justice with their acquired knowledge while sitting in exam hall and therefore feels disappointed and stressed(Deborah Craddock, Assessment options in higher education, 2009).

It is always difficult to predict the future of the student at the time of graduating, as we are preparing them for an indecisive and unknowable future. University programmes gets critique from students as they are insufficient and unable to fulfill their professional needs and demands. Further it is associated with the assessment policies of universities as they are

irrelevant to their professional lives. However assessment is still important to improve the quality of learning process(Maxwell, 2012).

Research conducted by Muhammad Ayub to revealed the assessment quality in Pakistan and found that current assessment system is not working well and measures should be taken to build a uniform assessment system across Pakistan. These reforms will help in constructing the better educational environment in Pakistan. Teachers give their feedback after assessments so that they could improve their learning and could be able to do better. However students are not fully aware of the assessment structure before assessment, as there is no proper guidance available. Assessment structure in Pakistan is not very sound and brisk as there is always a chance for student to pass it by unfair means. They also suggested that there should be a monetary mechanism over teacher's evaluation and grading. Teachers should be given proper training, so that they could effectively assess students (Muhammad Ayub Buzdar, 2013). Apart from public and government universities, private universities too have traditional approach towards assessment.

In addition to this, there is dearth of literature available that seek perceptions of university faculty and this sets the paradigm for this current study whereby the researcher aimed at exploring perceptions of university faculty. The following research questions were determined for this study (according to faculty):

- a) Why is assessment significant in higher education context specifically at graduate level?
- b) What are the pitfalls/failures of current assessment system of assessment of graduate students in Pakistan? How would you rate the assessment policies of various universities with regard to graduate student learning assessment? Do you see any problem in that?
- c) What are the challenges that you as a faculty face in assessing graduate students?
- d) What are the challenges that in your opinion that graduate student face with regard to assessment?

## **Methodology**

**Design:** This current investigation was inspired from the qualitative interpretive paradigm informed by the phenomenological design of the research.

**Participants:** Five university faculty were recruited using nonrandom purposive sampling by ensuring that all the faculty should have atleast three consecutive years of teaching experience at the same university, are involved in curriculum planning and board of studies, and are a full time faculty. The technique of in-depth interviews was used for this study and the data was collected and audio recorded. Each interview consisted of 30 – 35 minutes and the setting for meeting the participants were recommended by the participants.

**Measures:** a semi structured interview guide was developed and four to five open ended questions were determined with a few side probes.

**Data Analysis Procedure:** The data was analyzed using pre-assigned thematic analysis and was manually analyzed by the researchers.

**Ethical Consideration:** Written informed consent was sought from each of the participants and they were ensured that their data would only be used anonymously ensuring confidentiality. They were also given rights of withdrawal at any point of data collection and later.

## **Results and Discussion**

Several themes were identified with the data analysis. The first theme aimed at exploring the significance of assessment in higher education context specifically at graduate level. Second theme dealt with identifying the failures and pitfalls of current assessment system of the assessment of graduate students in Pakistan. Third theme explored the challenges that the faculty face in assessing graduate students? And the fourth them aimed at identifying the challenges that in the graduate student face with regard to assessment.

### **a) Significance of Assessment**

Assessment is the process of determining the efficacy of teaching and evaluating student's achievement in learning. In higher education, assessment is a relatively new term which came in to use as a substitute to evaluation during 1970s (Astin A. W., 2012). Assessment is used as a performance indicator of students, academic program and teaching strategies. One participant highlights that "Assessment's goal is to keep the students informed about their status and to assess the quality of teaching learning outcomes."

Mode of assessments are found to have a strong influence on the learning process of students and assessing the learning of students therefore is considered to be the most important activity carried out by the educators (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 2013). One participant pointed out that "without assessment teachers cannot evaluate the learning and skills of students". Another participant continued that "assessment is very significant in higher education because it reflects the level of understanding on the part of students regarding the contents that they had been taught."

Significance of assessment can be gauged by the research studies that have found assessment to have a direct and powerful impact on the learning actions of students. Participants during this research also validated that assessment helps evaluate the understanding of students about thought concepts and their critical thinking abilities and also helps educators to keep student connected and focused towards their learning process (Stephenson & Yorke, 2013). It also acts as a feedback for students to improve their learning process and facilitates them to keep

up the positive attitude towards learning. One participant pointed out that “assessment can be used to modify the course curriculum to improve course content, identify difficult areas for learning and measure the outcome of the course. “ A study conducted by Maxwell reiterated the importance of assessment in designing and development of curriculum.

Significance of assessment increases at the at higher education level when students are being prepared to enter the professional fields. To this one participant asserted that “assessment determines the suitability of the student for professional and graduate level studies.” Evidence also suggests that assessment helps educators to judge their own and their peer’s work and achievements in education.

### **b) Current Assessment System in Pakistan: Failures and Pitfalls.**

Second theme dealt with identifying the failures and pitfalls of current assessment system of the assessment of graduate students in Pakistan (Butt, 2010). Since assessment has a powerful impact on the learning of students, it is important to design and adopt appropriate strategies for assessing students. Assessment of graduate students however is not a easy task and requires a lot of effort and planning on part of the academia for the assessment to be carried out effectively (Latif, 2011).

A research study carried out by Stenlund (2010) emphasized on the importance of developing quality assessment methods for effective assessment. The reason for this is that assessment methods are intended to provide decision makers information, with accuracy and reliability, on which they could determine the performance of students which increases the significance of devising appropriate methods and strategies for assessment (Stenlund T. , 2010).

Research studies also emphasize on the development of a strategy with an aim to exercise the assessment and to successfully manage the exercise of the assessment. For a successful management of the strategy to carry out assessment, it is suggested that there be a structure, evaluation and feedback system devised (Abbasi, Malik, Chaudhry, & Imdadullah, 2011; Bhamani S. , 2013; Clair Hughes, 2010; Tight, 2012).

Present assessment structure in Pakistan however lacks appropriate strategy for assessment. Research conducted by Muhammad Ayub revealed the assessment quality in Pakistan is not working well. Some research studies indicate that many universities still assess students on rote memory rather than on critical thinking and reasoning.

One participant shared similar observations. “Generally speaking, it does not assess their skills, it only evaluates students’ content knowledge and in most cases students use rote memory skills to study. Also the type of examinations set, encourages rote memory” she shares

Semester system in universities also poses problems in assessment. One semester in universities in Pakistan stretches from 4 to 6 months generally. Due to the restricted duration of each semester, universities are found to be focusing more on the delivering of the content in the given time frame instead of focusing on developing the understanding or knowledge of the students. To this one participant emphasizes that “Universities should promote knowledge based economy system and in Under Graduate level university have to focus on Facilitation rather than teaching”.

Problem also seems to lie with the traditional teaching methodologies that emphasize n theory rather than on experiential learning. One participant shared that “most of the public sector universities are still following the traditional examination methods. At graduate level more independent and research based project oriented assessment must be adopted”. Another participant shared that the problem of assessment also lies with testing students learning through a “subjective written paper and pen examination.” The participant continued that the “traditional method of essay type subjective exams are not at all appropriate to assess student learning and to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the graduate studies. Research done by Deborah suggests the same.

Evidence suggests that due to time constraint in a written exam, students need to react quickly in giving the answers against questions which they are not able to a lot of times because of the mental pressure and exam stress. This leaves them disappointed and stressed as they feel they have not done justice with their acquired knowledge while sitting in exam hall.

### **c) Challenges to the Faculty**

Third theme explored the challenges that the faculty face in assessing graduate students. Pakistan’s education system supports rote learning from the start. There are very few schools that aim at developing the conceptual and analytical skills of the students. However, at higher education level when the situational factors that affect certain phenomenon are changed, students lose their confidence and fail to explain the phenomenon in general instead of using specific knowledge about the situational factors (Brown, Bull, & Pendlebury, 2013).

The reading culture among students also remains very weak. All of these factors combine and pose challenges to the faculty while assessing students at higher education level. One participant shares that “It becomes difficult to assess students when they are good at certain things like proficient in language but have a below average understanding of the concept” Another participant shared that because of the low reading habits it becomes difficult for faculty to make an unknown topic understood “faculties have to start from the ground level to make the topic understood”.

Plagiarism is another problem in assessing the skills and abilities of students. In context of long distance learning, one participant shared that it becomes very difficult to assess the students in the exams as “most of the students are only using copy pasted materials from text books and a few other sources”

### **Challenges to students**

And the fourth theme aimed at identifying the challenges that in the graduate student face with regard to assessment. One of the major challenges identified during this study was with regard to the awareness about assessment methods (Clair Hughes, 2010). Universities in Pakistan do not counsel students about assessment structure or assessment rubrics (Abbasi, Malik, Chaudhry, & Imdadullah, 2011) for each specific course. “Students are not fully aware of the assessment structure before assessment, as there is no proper guidance available” shares one university teacher.

Then there is a chance that a student might pass by unfair means as assessment structure in Pakistan is not very sound and brisk and a monetary mechanism over teacher’s evaluation and grading remains on existent in many universities. One participant suggests that to cope with this problem “Teachers should be given proper training, so that they could effectively assess students”.

Another challenge posed to the students is as to how to apply theoretic knowledge in the practical situations. “They usually focus more on How and less on Why. They are reluctant to understand the process of structuring knowledge but just want to understand the use and therefore lack creativity and innovation (Fallows & Steven, 2013). And for the same reason, the process of developing ideas and new knowledge is growing at a slow rate,” shares one participant.

### **Conclusion**

Assessment in higher education is an important task which needs to be strategized and applied efficiently for effective learning. In Pakistan however, this area is neglected and not practiced in its entirety. The reasons for this are many. This range from the absence of an affective structure that supports conceptual based learning rather than rote learning, the lack of devising strategic assessment methods, lack of teacher’s training for correct assessment and low reading habits among students (Abbasi, Malik, Chaudhry, & Imdadullah, 2011; Bhamani S. , 2013; Dilshad & Ali, 2010; Farrington & Palfreyman, 2012; Muhammad Ayub Buzdar, 2013)



Participants during this study suggested that in order to have effective assessment, the present assessment techniques need to be amended so that practical aspects and real life applications of course contents could be given more significance. For effective assessment, Universities re also suggested to involve practical approaches/exposure or hands on approaches in curriculum, develop entrepreneurial abilities among students, discourage spoon feeding practices to the students and focus more on experiential learning tan on the theoretic knowledge.

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