Students' Experiences with Formative Assessment in Institutions of Higher Education: The Case of a University in Uganda

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Abstract

The shift in emphasis from teacher to learner-centred pedagogies worldwide has foregrounded formative assessment as a pedagogical tool that increases student engagement. The purpose of the current study was to explore students' perceptions and perspectives regarding the way formative assessment is implemented in order to guide teaching and assessment in institutions of higher education. The study was guided by Lev Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism which regards learning as a social activity. Purposive sampling was used to select 15 second-year pre-service teachers from one public university in Uganda. Focus group discussions were used to collect in-depth data on students' views and experiences with formative assessment practices. The themes and sub-themes generated in the study indicated that students perceived formative assessment as continuous assessment whose purpose is to test understanding by grading. In addition, their understanding of formative assessment was consistent with the methods of assessment used. The study also revealed that traditional methods of assessment were dominant in higher education, yet most students preferred alternative methods that were more beneficial because they provided immediate feedback and increased their participation compared to tests and written assignments. Many students reported challenges with getting feedback, which was attributed to large class size, emphasis on the grading purpose and university policies. The insights will inform institutions of higher education about the benefits of using learner-oriented assessment

strategies that provide opportunities for students' engagement in learning and assessment. In addition, the study may guide policymakers to institute policies that promote a balanced assessment and revise the assessment guidelines to align them with the principles and practices of formative assessment.

Keywords: *Assessment; Higher education; Students' perspectives.*

Introduction

Formative assessment is a 21st century pedagogical tool that is widely applied in education systems worldwide (Scott, 2015). This follows a paradigm shift to a more student-centred approach to learning which emphasises the student's active role in the assessment process (Greenstein, 2011). To ensure effective formative assessment practices, students must understand learning targets, set their learning goals, select effective learning strategies and assess their own learning progress (Moss & Brookhart, 2019).While summative assessment involves summary assessment of students' performance in tests or examinations that may be used for grading and promotion, formative assessment is the process by which teachers elicit and make sense of evidence of students' learning and provide feedback purposely to inform instruction in order to achieve learning goals (Voinea, 2010).

As such, in an increasingly changing higher education space, the role of formative assessment has become crucial in shaping students' learning experiences (Irons & Elikington, 2022). Boud and Falchikov (2000) contend that the key purpose of higher education is to facilitate the autonomy of learners in a world of lifelong learning while empowering them to be their own assessors as they develop metacognitive skills. Since students are central to teaching and learning, their engagement in assessment is key to achieving positive learning outcomes (Looney, 2015). Therefore, formative assessment is best supported by learner-centred pedagogies that provide better opportunities for determining evidence of learning and providing timely feedback (Carless, et al. 2017). Additionally, for feedback to be effective, it must address answers to three key questions, that is where the learner is going (learning goals), where the learner is right now in relation to the goal and what the learner needs to do to achieve their goals (Moss & Brookhart, 2019; Voinea, 2010).

Given that much emphasis is placed on the grading function of assessment in Uganda, there is need to gain insights into how formative assessment is perceived by students and what their perspectives and views are with regard to the way it is implemented in higher education.

Theoretical perspective

This study was guided by Lev Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social constructivism which regards learning as a social and collaborative activity in which knowledge is socially constructed (Amineh & Davatgan, 2015). The zone of proximal development (ZPD), in which the study

is situated, demonstrates how learners transit from their current problem-solving ability to solving more complex problems with support from a more skilled person (Yorke, 2003). In formative assessment the teacher gathers information on where students are in their learning and through interactive methods, scaffolds the learning process. Gradually, through continuous feedback, students are able to work independently to attain their goal (Voinea, 2018). The theory that underpins student-centred learning guided this study to explore students' experiences with the way assessment is conducted in higher education.

Therefore, to gain insights into the status of formative assessment, this study sought to explore students' understanding of formative assessment and their perspectives and views regarding its implementation in order to guide teaching and assessment in higher education. The study was guided by two research questions:
1. What understandings do students ascribe to formative assessment in higher education in Uganda?
2. What are the students' experiences with the way formative assessment is implemented in higher education in Uganda?

Related literature

Formative assessment strategies and students' perception
Several studies have shown that formative assessment improves learning (Weldmeskel, 2015; Andersson & Palm, 2017; Pereire & Flores, 2018). The assumption underpinning formative assessment is that it has a positive impact on students' learning when used effectively (Moss & Brookhart, 2019). This requires that students take a central position in the assessment process as highlighted by Herman (2013) who affirms that, with the teacher as a facilitator, students understand the learning goals, monitor and self-assess their progress, provide feedback to their peers and act on the feedback to move forward.

Owing to their central position in assessment, students' experiences with formative assessment have been investigated in several studies (Green, 2021; Huisman et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2011; Veugen et al., 2021; Weurlander et al., 2012). Although formative assessment may be understood differently, students' perception of formative assessment has been associated with the methods and nature of assessment tasks they are exposed to (Pereire et al., 2021; Weurlander et al., 2012). Weurlander et al. carried out an exploratory study on the experiences students of pathology in a Swedish university had with different methods of formative assessment. Two groups of students were exposed to two modes of assessment, one to an individual written assignment that focused on knowledge and another to group oral assessments that encouraged students to solve problems in groups. The results indicated that students who did individual tasks largely focused on reading lecture notes and acquiring the basic knowledge necessary to pass examinations. They were also extrinsically motivated by the pressure of exams while their counterparts enjoyed sharing ideas and dealing with challenging assessments, which intrinsically motivated them. The findings are corroborated

in a more recent study where Pereira et al. used a quantitative paradigm to investigate undergraduates' perception of traditional and alternative methods of assessment. Alternative methods referred to unconventional methods like portfolios, project- based assessment, students' oral presentations, peer assessment and self-assessment, while traditional methods meant conventional methods like written tests and examinations. Reports indicated that though students appreciated the importance of both forms of assessment, they preferred alternative methods, which they found more effective and fairer than the traditional form. Pereira et al. concluded that involving students in alternative methods of assessment leads to their perception of formative assessment as an engaging and fair mode of assessment. Nevertheless, the researcher suggested the use of a variety of assessment methods basing on their suitability for the teaching and learning objectives. Weurlander (2012) agrees with Pereira et al. on the conclusion of the study and adds that activities, too, should be varied to promote collaboration and to widen learning opportunities.

While these studies focused on evaluating how the two methods are experienced by students, this exploratory study sought to investigate, in depth, students' understanding of formative assessment, their perspectives, engagement, benefits and challenges in connection with the way it is implemented.

The influence of assessment methods on students' perception can further be traced in the exploratory study conducted by Bahati et al. (2016) on feedback practices in a Rwandan university in East Africa. The findings revealed that teachers understood formative assessment as continuous testing and feedback as communicating marks to students. This understanding, according to the researcher's analysis, was linked to their traditional assessment practices that were characterised by tests and written assignments as the dominant methods. Similarly, data collected from focus group discussions (FGDs) showed students' great concern over their marks compared to getting feedback that could move them forward. In addition, they reported challenges such as late feedback and inadequate comments on their marked assignments. Such practices are not in conformity with the requirements of formative assessment. Boud and Falchikov (2007) criticise traditional methods of assessment that focus on testing current knowledge and on generating marks for grading, which does not prepare graduates for life. Greenstein (2011) contends that tests simply determine whether a student is 'there' while, on the contrary, formative deals with how they can get 'there' with the teacher's assistance. Much as Bahati's study had significant findings, it only focused on feedback practices. This study, however, addresses this content gap by investigating students' experiences with the entire formative assessment processes.

Adopting alternative strategies to improve formative assessment

When teachers are trained in using formative assessment, their classroom and assessment practices improve, which enriches learning (Andersson & Palm, 2017; Carless et al., 2017). For example, Andersson (2017) investigated students' experiences with the methods of formative assessment used by teachers who had undergone professional development training in

formative assessment. Through observations, the teachers were reported to have adopted effective strategies of classroom assessment such as sharing of learning goals, use of mini-white boards and exit passes to collect evidence of learning as well as peer assessment and self-assessment. The methods ultimately increased students' learning opportunities that enabled them to direct their own learning, engage in collaborative activities and work independently. On the contrary, in studies where teachers had no prior training in assessment, challenges in their formative assessment practices were observed (Bahati et al., 2016). This illuminates the importance of training in improving teachers' competencies and ultimately impacting positively on students' engagement with the methods used. Carless et al. contend that the development of assessment literacy is essential for teachers to understand the principles of assessment.

In line with teacher competence in using appropriate formative assessment strategies, the reviewed literature suggests that formative assessment is beneficial when learner-centred assessments are used. This is evidenced in several studies (Andersson &Palm, 2017; Green, 2021; Pereira al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2011; Veugen et al., 2021). Thomas et al., in their study on assessment for future learning, focused on the use of peer and self-assessment among first-year pre-service primary school teachers in La Trobe University in Australia. The students were able to assess one another and to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, which increased their engagement in learning and promoted the development of self-regulatory skills. This is corroborated by Green, who investigated students' experiences with feedback in mathematics, and the findings showed that students with a learner-oriented approach enjoyed autonomy in using feedback that gave them clues rather than one that gave them direct answers. As a result, students found learning fun, challenging and rewarding. This is contrary to findings in the study by Bahati, where feedback was perceived as marks rather than improving learning.

In higher education, peer assessment, formative feedback and self-assessment have been identified as key strategies that greatly improve students learning outcomes (Weldmeskel, 2015). According to Boud and Falchikov (2007), the key purpose of higher education is to facilitate the autonomy of learners in a world of lifelong learning. One way of effecting this is by empowering graduates to be their own assessors, which is essential in promoting deep learning as well as developing metacognitive and self-regulation skills. Indeed, the importance of these strategies can be traced in the work of Weldmeskel, who used a mixed methods design to investigate the use of peer assessment, feedback and self-assessment among students. The findings revealed that students who were exposed to what was termed as quality assessment in the experimental group were more motivated and confident, and demonstrated self-regulation compared to their counterparts in the control group. This notwithstanding, studies have shown that self-assessment and peer assessment are rarely used because teachers lack adequate skills and a clear understanding of how to integrate them in teaching and learning (Carless et al.).

Although many studies have investigated alternative methods of assessment over traditional ones, few studies in Africa, particularly in Uganda, have focused on understanding

students' perceptions and perspectives regarding their engagement with formative assessment practices as well as their successes and challenges with the way it is implemented. Contextually, many known studies on students' experiences have been conducted in countries outside Africa yet formative assessment is still a big challenge in sub-Saharan Africa (Vaurus et al., 2011). This gap would be addressed by exploring students' experiences with formative assessment in higher education, particularly in Uganda where it has been under-researched. The findings of this study will add knowledge to the already existing literature concerning the effectiveness of various formative assessment strategies.

Methodology

Research design

The study was guided by the constructivist orientation that acknowledges the principle that humans generate knowledge and meaning from the interaction between their experiences and their ideas. This guided the choice of a qualitative paradigm in which meanings are generated as a result of the interaction between the researcher and the participants (Bhattacherjee, 2012). Since knowledge is subjective, interviews and FGDs were used to capture students' views and perspectives, which were shared with the researcher to construct meaning (Cresswell, 2014). The methods enabled the collection of rich data to understand the meaning students ascribe to formative assessment and to generate insights into their perceptions, views and challenges.

A case study design was used to investigate one public university, which is one of the largest and oldest public universities in Uganda. It was chosen because, being well established and offering a wide range of programmes in the field of education, it would offer appropriate standards to understand assessment practices in higher education through students' perspectives.

Sampling strategy

Purposive sampling was used to select 15 second-year students of education in which five students were chosen from each of the three main fields of study, namely Arts, Business and Science with Education, with the aim of capturing students' experiences in different fields. Students of education were chosen because teachers, being key drivers of the curriculum, need to experience effective assessment mechanisms for proper understanding of how formative assessment can be effectively used. Second-year students were chosen because being a middle year, they had had enough experience with the assessment practices and were eager to share their experiences compared to the finalists who were in their last semester.

Data collection and procedure

Data was collected through FGDs using open-ended questions. Two FGDs were separately held within the university premises. Each discussion lasted for about 90 minutes, with one group consisting of seven participants and another with eight participants. FGDs allowed

students free expression of opinion, which stimulated further thoughts and comments from others, resulting in the collection of rich data. Open-ended questions such as 'What do you understand by formative assessment?' 'What do you have to say about the way formative assessment is implemented in your institution?' were asked. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to express their views and experiences in their own words, which provided valuable insights and generated rich discussions for the researcher to explore students' diverse perspectives. Permission was sought from the participants to record their discussions, which were audio-taped and later transcribed. Segments of data that represent significant concepts, ideas and themes were manually identified and assigned codes. Using the content analysis technique, the codes were grouped together to form themes that captured the main ideas emerging from the data basing on the pre-defined research questions.

Ethical considerations

Permission was sought from the Dean, School of Education of the participating university to access the study site and the participants. Permission to collect data and put it to use was sought and granted but to ensure confidentiality, the identity of the participating institution was not disclosed. Verbal consent was sought from participants before conducting FGDs and interviews to allow voluntary participation. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for the participants.

Findings

The aim of this study was to explore students' experiences with the way formative assessment is implemented in higher education. The findings were based on the two research questions: What understandings do students ascribe to formative assessment in higher education in Uganda? What are students' experiences with the way formative assessment is implemented in higher education in Uganda?

What understandings do students ascribe to formative assessment?

Formative assessment was perceived as continuous assessment done during the course of learning purposely to test whether what had been taught was understood. Bella, a student of Business Studies in Education affirmed this thus: "You study a certain topic in a certain subject and after studying it very well, they assess you with a test in the middle of a topic to evaluate you whether you have understood the topic very well or not." This view was corroborated by Jenny, also a student of Business Studies with Education: "Formative assessment is done in the course of the term or semester to determine the academic progress of learners…the purpose is to determine the progress of your learning academically or how students have understood the topics they have so far been taught." Another student explained: "In formative assessment you assess students during the course of the activity, for example giving tests or take-home assignments." The phrase 'to test whether what had been taught was understood' and 'testing done at the end of a topic, course or semester' were common in all students'

responses. Students' understanding of formative assessment reflected a summative function where current knowledge of a student was measured either at the end of a topic or course.

Formative assessment was also understood as testing done at a particular point of time, like in the middle of a semester, beginning of a term, after completion of a topic and after a lecture. The positioning associated with formative assessment was illuminated by Jenny, a student of Business Studies, who asserted: "Formative assessment is like you are given work…at the beginning of a semester. This is mainly in high school whereby people do beginning-of-term exams. The term is beginning but they assess you immediately though you have not covered anything." Kirabo, another student, affirmed: "What I think about formative assessment is what is done before and during the term. It is mainly set by schools but at the end of the day, there are other assessors." From this perspective, formative assessment was considered as an activity that is programmed to take place at some point of time to test understanding rather than an ongoing process that is integrated within learning. Interestingly, only two students of Science perceived formative assessment as an activity that takes place during the teaching and learning process: "It can also take place during a lecture when they give us in-class tasks." This understanding could be attributed to the relatively smaller Science classes where it is possible to conduct assessment while teaching and learning is ongoing.

On the whole, students associated formative assessment with conducting tests and assignments but remained silent on the provision and utilisation of feedback to improve learning. The pervasive use of the words 'exam', 'test' and 'assignments' in explaining formative assessment illuminates problematic understanding of formative assessment. The assumption that regular testing is automatically formative is misleading since many aspects related to formative assessment, such as gathering evidence of learning and provision and use of feedback, are considered.

Additionally, assessment was found to be entirely in the hands of teachers who determine what, when and how to assess. The students' repeated use of phrases like 'they assess you', 'they give you a test' and 'they evaluate you' projects the teacher as the overall controller of assessment procedures and the students as passive recipients of the assessment tasks that they need to accomplish in order to get a grade. Ronnie, an Arts student, explained: "Formative assessment is a process used by lecturers to know the level how learners have understood their content." Ronnie seemed to detach the learners from the process which he perceived to be in the interest of the lecturer yet formative assessment is a collaborative process and student-oriented. Another student echoed a similar view: "… if the lecturer is giving feedback, I listen because as a student. I know that he is the one who will mark me even when what he says is wrong." To this, Ronnie added: "They can give feedback but a lecturer can intervene and polish the answers. We feel more comfortable when our fellows comment on our work but you need the lecturer to make final comments." Much as students enjoyed being assessed by their peers, they did not have enough confidence and depended much on the teachers'

final position. The emphasis on the lecturer being the one who marks portrays the grading purpose that students associate with formative assessment.

One of the attributes of effective formative assessment is to support learners to take ownership of their learning and lead them towards self-regulation. Overall, as regards purpose, formative assessment was perceived as checking understanding as well as grading for progression and promotion. Secondly, it was perceived as being positioned at a particular point in time like at the beginning as well as in the middle of a course. Thirdly, formative assessment took the form of tests and assignments whose function was not necessarily informative but was seen as generating a mark to be added to the end-of-semester examinations. Interestingly, the words 'coursework' and 'test' were erroneously used to mean formative assessment. Finally, it was administered by teachers who control all the activities involved.

Students' perspectives on the formative assessment strategies used

The participants reported tests, take-home assignments, individual assignments, group assignments, classroom exercises and group presentations as the methods used in formative assessment. Among these, tests and written assignments were the most commonly used methods, while oral   presentations and in-class exercises were rarely used. The majority of the students frequently used phrases like "they always give us tests and coursework either individually or in groups." The word 'always' suggests a routine practice which is more like a system. This was corroborated by Mr Oyo when he explained the methods he used: "Formative assessment is in three forms: coursework, which may be group or individual written assignment, tests, then presentations or projects." The two students whose reporting differed were students of Science who reported in-class assessments, as explained by Jorum a student of Science with Education: "They give us sit-in assignments. We are taught and after that, you are given an assignment which you do and hand in."

The methods of assessment commonly used, such as written assignments and written tests, are the traditional type which contravenes the paradigm shift to learner-centred pedagogies. Assessment methods like the use of students' portfolios that encourage learners to be self-directed and take ownership of their learning were not mentioned. Though there was some mention of peer assessment, students were not fully confident about it. Presentations and projects, though rarely used, were preferred by students.

All responses suggested that no matter what mode of assessment was used, students were required to submit their work for marking and grading. This was corroborated by Ronnie, a student of Arts with Education, who explained: "In this university, they always give us tests or sometimes they can give you coursework in form of groups or individual and give you specific time to submit." The majority of participants stated that they would submit the written assignments or make presentations, after which they would submit them to the lecturers for marking. No student reported ungraded assignments.

Students preferred methods where they participated actively as opposed to written assignments. Patience, a student of Business, said: "Another tool we are forgetting is this

part of presentations (pause) they are rare but they can help us build skills." Another student, Paul, pursuing the Arts, recalled with nostalgia what he termed as a 'silent' form of formative assessment: "…these were in form of tutorials and were common when we were in year1 but now they are no more. It gave students time to exercise their presentation skills and confidence." The appreciation of classroom presentation as a method of assessment suggests students' preference for methods that are activity-based and can help them develop skills. In addition, they appreciated assessment that goes beyond content mastery, as Jenny explains: "Presentations teach you how to communicate. One lecturer awards marks according to how you communicate, introduce and conclude besides the content." Students also appreciated class presentations because they provided immediate feedback. Patience described this thus:

> I will say the positive. Some lecturers are good because they involve us in the lesson, they ask us questions and we enjoy the lecture and we understand. He gives direct feedback and we don't dose but some lectures talk to themselves and they don't mind even when students are dosing. Yes, most of them who teach professionals they involve us, even they become friendly and help us via WhatsApp groups.

The same perspective was demonstrated by Peter: "During presentations students are active and they ask their fellow students questions… they can give feedback but a lecturer can intervene and polish the answers. We feel more comfortable when our fellows comment on our work…"

The findings also revealed that class size determines assessment practices. From the students' perspective, in big classes where core subjects like Professional Studies are taught, challenges like not receiving feedback in time and not being given equal opportunity to present were reported. Among Science students where the classes were smaller, students reported the use of sit-in assignments and class exercises that were given either during the lecture or at the end of the lecture: "…they give us sit-in assignments…it's done mainly in Science. The reason they do it is because we are few. In Professional Studies, there is no way because the number is big…" The students acknowledged the fact that lecturers who handled big classes did not get enough time to mark their work and give timely feedback. One of them remarked: "…Sometimes I sympathise with lecturers. We should forgive them because they are handling very big groups." Ideally, formative assessment should aim at identifying students' challenges and devising ways of helping them reach the target.

Overall, the methods of assessment that are commonly used, such as written assignments and written tests, are the traditional type, which contravenes the paradigm shift to learner-centred pedagogies. Apparently, students were not aware of the alternative methods other than oral presentations, which they termed as 'rare'. Alternative methods like the use of students' portfolios that encourage learners to be self-directed and take ownership of their learning were not mentioned. Though there was some mention of peer assessment, students were not fully confident about it. Secondly, students are motivated in learning environments where immediate feedback is obtained and where they can freely interact with their peers.

Lecturers who are teachers by profession were preferred by students because of using learner-centred approaches.

Challenges associated with feedback

Regarding their experience with receiving feedback, many students did not see any value in tests because they did not get meaningful feedback about their work. Marked scripts were returned very late and sometimes not returned at all. Those that were returned did not bear constructive comments to guide the student on how to address the gaps. Teddy, a student of Business Studies, reported: "To me, we do tests and courseworks (pause) but to me those tests are not done for lecturers to know whether we have understood because most of the courseworks and the tests we do, they are returned when we are in another semester…" This was reiterated by Maria, a student of Business, who asserted: "No one has ever received their scripts but sometimes when they bring them back they don't guide you on how you should have handled the question so the feedback is not beneficial to us."

The comments put on students' written work do not give feedback as shown by Ronnie's explanation: "…a comment can be, say, when you have written a wrong registration number and they say 'see me'. Those are the comments or a wrong spelling of a name." Simon adds: "…yeah, and even sometimes it can be you shared work, *yes* sharing work, they can comment but regarding marks if you fail, you fail." The same disappointment was expressed by Jessie, a student of Arts with Education: "Lecturers don't put any comments; they only put marks on the answers. It is very bad. Why mark me wrong when the process is OK? You may think that everything is wrong."

Students felt that the feedback given did not help them to work on their weaknesses and, worse still, it was not actionable to direct them on what to do to improve. What was perceived as formative assessment was judgemental rather than informative. Similarly, what was considered as delayed feedback was actually a delay in returning marked scripts for students to see what they scored other than receiving constructive feedback. Some students were ignorant about the purpose of providing feedback and how they could utilise it to optimise learning, as demonstrated in the dialogue:

Talemwa: After giving the tests, they mark and when they return the scripts you know that you did not get the concept well or you are lagging behind.

Interviewer: How do you know that you did not get the concept well?

Talemwa: When the answer you wrote is not marked correct.

Ken echoed a similar complaint but regarded marks as feedback, "…most of us get feedback from our portals (pause). They don't bring back the scripts… at least we would want to get feedback during the course of the semester". Miria adds, "They don't guide you on how you should have handled the question so feedback is not beneficial to students. That's where the

presentations are better because it's clear what you have done." To Simon, lack of feedback was frustrating:

> … even when scripts are returned, time is not taken to clarify or analyse how that particular question should be handled…if I do a test or coursework and I get two out of twenty I need to know why I got two out of twenty and why my friend got twenty out of twenty and I think the lecturer is in best position to answer that.

The feelings expressed by the students reveal their frustration with not getting feedback or getting it late. Their preference for presentations reveals the importance they attach to getting timely and meaningful feedback that corrects their misconceptions. For formative assessment to be meaningful, feedback should be immediate, descriptive and actionable

Some students felt that lecturers attached little value to the assignments. They thought that tests are given to fulfil the obligations required by the university of giving at least two assignments per semester for grading. In this connection, Jenny remarked: "… but to me those tests are not done for lecturers to know whether we have understood because most of the courseworks and the tests we do, they are returned when we are in another semester (pause). So the lecturers do that task of giving us tests I think… to perform the task that was given to them by the senate (pause) or by administration…" Andy adds, "…so they don't basically use tests to assess whether you have understood, unless as we are given back our scripts you reflect in yourself … but it is still the same thing; they are only looking for marks, marks to be uploaded so that when they are questioning them 'Did you give assignments?' [they can answer] 'Yes' but for the issue of us understanding… I doubt."

The students' views highlight the negative feelings held about the lecturers who seem to assess them to merely fulfil institutional requirements.

Figure 1: Assessment strategies reported by students and lecturers
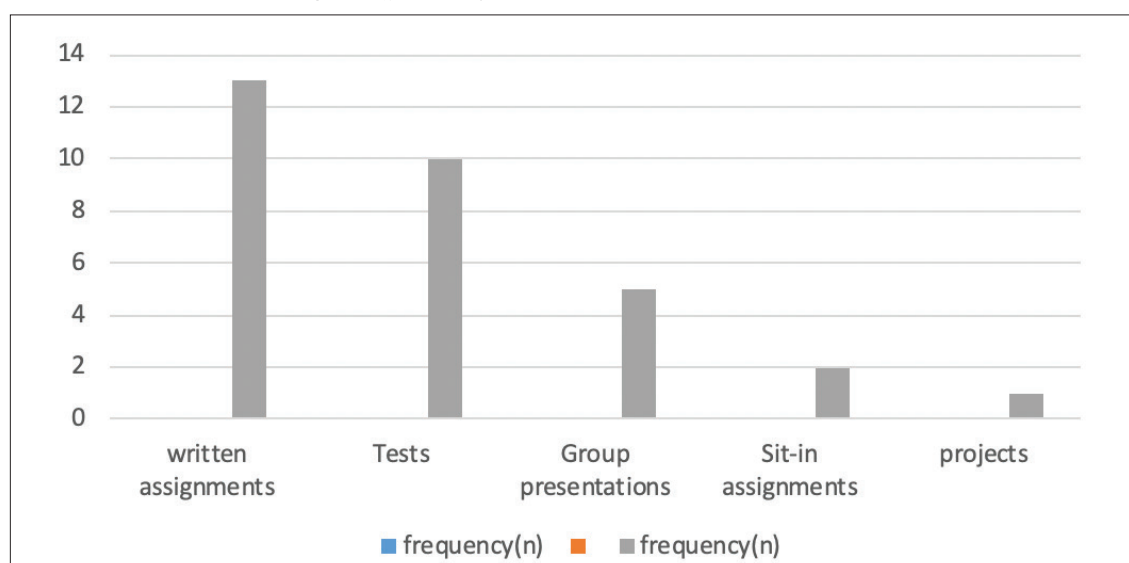
The figure above shows the frequency by which various assessment methods are used. The representation shows that the methods that would be suitable for eliciting immediate feedback are rarely used by teachers.

The findings revealed that formative assessment was perceived as serving a summative role. The study also showed that students' experiences with formative assessment are shaped by the assessment practices used by their teachers. Traditional methods of assessment were found to be dominant yet students preferred participatory methods of assessment where they could assess one another and receive immediate feedback. Students were dissatisfied with the feedback practices, which included delayed feedback or even not getting any feedback at all, and if they did, it was not constructive. Though some students perceived feedback as marks, others acknowledged the importance of formative feedback in correcting their misconceptions. Large classes were also found to be a challenge to giving timely feedback and providing a supportive environment for learner-oriented assessments.

Discussion of Findings

The understanding of formative assessment as continuous assessment done during the course to test understanding ignores critical aspects. Formative assessment is much more than testing because it gives teachers information that they can use to inform their teaching as well as informing students about their learning in order to improve instruction while it is in progress (Greensten, 2010; Siarova et al., 2017). Similarly, perceiving it as regular testing done at a particular point in time reduces its role to an institutional requirement.

In the findings, the methods that were commonly used were tests and written assignments, which were mainly used to generate the official marks for grading at the end of the semester. Such practices influence students to perceive formative assessment as a kind of continuous assessment meant to create a record of their performance. Pereira et al. (2020) demonstrate the same idea where students who were exposed to alternative methods of assessment like portfolios and quizzes perceived formative assessment as being fair and engaging while those exposed to traditional methods perceived it as unfair. Bahati et al. (2016) investigated feedback practices in a Rwandan university and found that lecturers did not give constructive feedback and that what they regarded as feedback were the marks the students obtained. Similarly, in this study, students, too, perceived feedback as grades they got in the assignments given by their teachers.

The findings suggest the use of specific methods of assessment that were uniformly used by most lecturers, namely tests and written assignments. Though commonly used, they were not suitable tools for effective formative assessment. According to Greenstein (2010), standardised tests alone as a measure of knowledge do not typically lead to improved learning because of their inability to give timely feedback. The majority of students decried not receiving feedback or receiving it late. Literature demonstrated that students are intrinsically motivated and satisfied when they receive feedback that they can use to move forward (Andersson & Palm, 2017; Green, 2021). Much as some students attached value to getting meaningful

feedback, others were more concerned with knowing their marks. This may be attributed to the university examinations policy that emphasise the grading purpose of progressive assessments. Weurlander (2012) and Wedmeskel (2015) observed that effective feedback enables students to identify their weaknesses and increase their motivational engagement that directs them on what they should know or do to improve.

Students doubted the purpose of tests and assignments, which they thought were conducted as a formality. Two students expressed fear that lecturers conducted them merely to meet institutional requirement of generating material for grading. The implication here relates to the policy on assessment where lecturers strive to meet the requirements without paying attention to the key beneficiaries. A key idea emerging from this is that the examinations regulations could deter lecturers from using alternative methods and innovative approaches because they may not align with the grading criteria as tests and assignments do. This fear is emphasised by Boud et al. (2017), who criticize a system where university teachers are constrained to produce numerical marks for grading. In the findings, all students reported submitting all the assignments they had been given for marking. Although grading provides extrinsic motivation, associating it with formative assessment undermines its role in developing other competences, such as self-regulation and metacognitive skills. Weurlander et al. (2012) found that the group of students who were exposed to learner-oriented methods of assessment and were ungraded were intrinsically motivated and developed self-regulation, while the ones exposed to traditional methods were extrinsically motivated and focused largely on passing exams.

Students' preference for oral presentations suggests the importance of the role of active learning in increasing learners' motivation and engagement. Students felt more comfortable being assessed by their peers and were satisfied with receiving immediate feedback during presentations. Learner-oriented assessment, therefore, was more beneficial as it provided students with the opportunity to develop communication skills and to build confidence. This is highlighted by Ken: "I don't like tests and exams because they are never followed up by lecturers. No one knows how and why you get certain marks. Presentations help me more than tests and exams because there is someone to help you."

In contrast to oral presentations, teacher-dominated assessment does not empower learners to be autonomous yet it is one of the aspirations of higher education. Although there was evidence of peer assessment, as reported by students, they still believed in the lecturer's final judgement. Over-dependence on the teacher could be attributed to the grading purpose attached to assessment, which contradicts Lev Vygotsky's (1978) theory that denotes learning as a social activity. In a study where formative assessment was learner-oriented, Green (2021) reported that students disliked feedback that gave them direct answers.

Class size was found to limit the use of some methods, such as sit-in assignments and exercises given during a lecture. Much as students liked class presentations, they were rarely used by lecturers. Students attributed the rare use of such methods to big class sizes. The results

suggest that formative assessment is more suited to smaller classes that facilitate interaction and make it easier for students to respond to feedback. This is acknowledged in the study by Boud et al. (2017), who propose using rubrics, exemplars and audio-tapes as tools to manage feedback in large classes.

Implications

These results build on existing evidence that students' perception of formative assessment is determined by the assessment practices they engage with. In this study, many students misunderstood the meaning and purpose of formative assessment because the methods used by their teachers were more suited to summative assessment than to formative. Therefore, to correct the misconceptions, lecturers should exploit a wide range of assessment methods and activities that are geared at improving learning. Secondly, the results of this study revealed a disparity between the methods commonly used and what students preferred, which points at a gap in the formative assessment practices. For example, oral presentations which were rarely used were the most preferred yet students did not seem to have a say in what suited them. Thirdly, while previous research showed that students understood feedback as marks, this study showed the value students attached to receiving quality feedback which goes beyond marks. Lastly, these findings suggest that students' dependence on their teachers was attributed to the control they had over their grades. While in other studies students enjoyed the autonomy of peer assessment, in this study some students felt comfortable assessing one another, but lacked confidence in their ideas.

Conclusion

The study sought to explore students' experiences with the way formative assessment is implemented in higher education. It focused on investigating pre-service teachers' understanding of formative assessment and their perspectives and views regarding the way it is conducted. The study highlighted the challenges student encounter in learning and assessment in a context where traditional methods are dominant. The findings revealed that students' understanding of formative assessment was closely linked to the practices their teachers used, which were characterised by testing. Additionally, students perceived formative assessment as serving a summative role because of the grading function linked to it. The study was limited to exploring students' experiences and did not investigate teachers' assessment practices. Considering that teachers are key to supporting learning, further research should be done to investigate teachers' competencies in managing assessments and the possible interventions that can be taken up to enhance their knowledge and skills.

Recommendations

Broadly, formative assessment in higher education should empower learners to take charge of their learning, leading to deeper understanding and development of metacognition and self-regulatory skills (Greenstein, 2010). This will require re-thinking formative assessment

by adopting alternative instructional and assessment methods that are learner-oriented, among which are portfolios, project-based assessments, group presentations, peer assessment and self-assessments, which increase learner engagement and empower learners to take charge of their learning and develop metacognition. The emphasis on grading as a function of formative assessment will inform policies to re-direct assessment guidelines and focus more on implementing formative assessment as a tool to improve learning. In addition, university lecturers should be supported through professional development programmes and equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to enhance their understanding and effective implementation of formative assessment to improve student learning. Muganga and Ssenkusu (2018) concede to this affirmative action but add that transformation requires changing the mindset of lecturers and students about their changing roles in teaching, learning and assessment. Lastly, an appropriate teacher-pupil ratio should be enforced to enable the effective use of learner-centred pedagogies and to improve on the feedback practices.

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