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Assessment and Feedback Practices in Higher Education: Bridging the Gap for 21st-Century Learners

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Abstract

In the 21st century, the educational landscape has witnessed a transformative shift towards learner-centricity, emphasizing active learner participation throughout the learning and assessment processes. However, the role of assessment, as a vital component of education, has often overlooked the active involvement of learners, leading to untimely and inadequate feedback. This study explored the perspectives of students across diverse academic programs to investigate the relationship between assessment practices, learner engagement, and feedback utility. The survey questionnaire was employed to gather insights among 110 international students enrolled in Higher Education and explore their perspectives on assessment feedback and their engagement in the assessment procedures across their courses. Additionally, the study explored students' insights into the relevance of the feedback they receive to their real-world career prospects. The findings uncover that, despite the shift towards learner-centric education, students across various disciplines often do not actively participate in shaping assessment processes, with engineering students exhibiting even lower engagement levels. Additionally, a significant proportion of engineering students question the practicality of the feedback they receive. While the majority still encounter traditional assessment methods, the study highlights the need for innovative approaches aligned with modern education paradigms to enhance student engagement and meaningful learning experiences. This research underscores the importance of feedback and engagement in preparing 21st-century graduates and provides recommendations for improving assessment practices.

Keywords: Assessment, Feedback, Learner Engagement, Evaluation, Higher Education

1. Introduction

In the contemporary landscape of higher education, the importance of feedback and learner engagement in the assessment process has been a subject of enduring scholarly debate. Feedback plays a pivotal role in enabling students to comprehend and derive meaningful learning experiences from their education (Adarkwah, 2021). Additionally, learner engagement enhances the overall learning experience by shifting the educational paradigm from a teacher-centric approach to a learner-centric one (Vattøy *et al.*, 2020). Engaged students tend to perform better in assessments and are more likely to become lifelong learners capable of adapting to the demands of the 21st century (Koranteng *et al.*, 2019).

However, a noticeable disparity exists between the theoretical significance of feedback and learner engagement and their practical implementation in higher education (Mamoon *et al.*, 2016). Many institutions predominantly rely on traditional pen-and-paper assessments, despite the recommendations from scholars advocating for assessment modalities that provide immediate feedback and actively engage learners (Ryan, 2019). Consequently, this study aims to bridge this gap by investigating the frequency and effectiveness of feedback and learner engagement practices in higher education.

While extant literature has examined the importance of feedback and engagement in the educational process (Ajjawi *et al.*, 2021; Care & Vista, 2017), little research has explored the extent to which students participate in feedback processes or find them beneficial in the context of the 21st century (Ajjawi *et al.*, 2021). This study thus fills a crucial gap in the literature by providing a nuanced understanding of student perspectives on engagement and feedback, shedding light on their utility in preparing students for the evolving demands of the 21st-century workforce. It underscores the need to incorporate students' voices in the design of assessment frameworks (Boulton *et al.*, 2019).

2. Literature Review

Authentic assessment is a fundamental pedagogical approach that not only engages learners actively in their educational journey but also provides them with the necessary feedback to enhance their learning experiences Authentic assessment involves learners participating in their learning and providing the feedback needed to improve the learning process. The engagement of learners will make deep learning happen to their learning and the feedback will shape their learning by pointing out where to stress while improving their learning, feedback is a supportive measure of the learning process (Mamoon *et al.*, 2016; Rawlusyk, 2018). Authentic assessments vary from conventional tests as

authentic assessments focus on imparting skills for the real world, involve learners, and are likely to focus on the high order of thinking to the learners (Centre for Innovative Teaching and Learning, 2017).

Moreover, an authentic assessment provides students with opportunities to get constructive feedback on their learning and be engaged in the learning process. The world with fast developing technological development needs learners who are competent in their profession, the graduates who will only be a product of authentic assessment (Care & Vista, 2017; Rawlusyk, 2018).

Additionally, the engagement of students in assessment is the factor that makes assessment useful in higher education. A body of literature supported the engagement of learners in assessment (Boulton *et al.*, 2019; Paulsen & McCormick, 2020; Ting *et al.*, 2020) and how in recent years the engagement has resulted in more learning for students in higher education. Further, when engaged students feel more entitled to their learning and tend to perform more (Koranteng *et al.*, 2019; Mandernach, 2015; Rajabalee *et al.*, 2020). Also, when engaged and receiving immediate feedback it proved feedback had the role of providing information that closes the gap between the level a student is and the level a student needs to be (Lombardi, 2019). Students complain when not engaged in learning is that the feedback provided does not exactly tell them how they need to improve their learning (Ambrose *et al.*, 2009; Care & Vista, 2017) which hinders the chance to opportunity to achieve learning objectives.

Furthermore, feedback given to students is affected by various factors such as students' experience, prior knowledge and sex. Vattøy *et al.* (2020) argued that most of the feedback given to males is related to a lack of effort while the female is more of internal ability and can be improved by engaging students in their assessment. In line with addressing gender differences, Mamoon *et al.* (2016), supported by Adarkwah (2021), advocate for providing both male and female learners with equal opportunities for feedback and engagement. This approach not only ensures fairness but also creates an inclusive learning environment that fosters the improvement of learning outcomes. As such, Vattøy *et al.* (2020) suggested that gender differences are one of the concerns when giving feedback in higher education. This means students act differently to engagement and feedback and students must have clarity of the assessment they are participating in. On the same Mamoon, *et al.* (2016) supported by Adarkwah (2021) added that both learners have to be provided with the same opportunities for feedback and engagement to allow for the improvement of learning.

Despite the importance of feedback, less has been done by universities to ensure students are fully participating in their learning including getting proper feedback and engagement (Mandernach, 2015), which makes learners not able to fit in the 21st-century world. Mamoon et al., (2016) asserted that in higher education institutions most teachers are still using the traditional way of teaching and providing feedback which is not useful in the 21st century, as such it is a time for universities to look for assessment that is both supporting the learning in the 21st century and involves the learners as the centre of learning. Further, students often express dissatisfaction when they perceive a lack of engagement in their learning experiences, particularly when the feedback they receive does not offer clear guidance for improvement (Ambrose et al., 2009; Care & Vista, 2017). The disconnect between engagement and feedback can impede students' ability to achieve their learning objectives, highlighting the critical importance of aligning assessment practices with student participation.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted at a higher education institution located in India, which hosts a diverse student population, including international students. The sampling process involved purposefully selecting individuals who met criteria relevant to the research objectives, such as enrolment status and willingness to participate, and efforts were made to include students from various academic disciplines and demographic backgrounds, with a particular focus on international students. The objective was to collect pertinent data regarding students' perceptions of feedback reception and engagement in their educational experiences. Before commencing data collection, ethical approval was obtained from the university's educational department, ensuring the research adhered to ethical guidelines.

To gather data, an online questionnaire was meticulously developed, aligning with the research's objectives. The questionnaire encompassed various aspects, including demographic information such as gender, age, and current courses. Additionally, it featured questions related to feedback reception and engagement in assessments. These questions were carefully crafted to resonate with the pertinent literature reviewed earlier, allowing for an exploration of students' satisfaction levels and perspectives concerning feedback and engagement. The international composition of the student body was crucial in providing a global outlook on students' experiences regarding feedback and learner engagement in higher education.

Before its implementation in data collection, the questionnaire underwent a pilot phase with a select group of students. This pilot phase aimed to assess the questionnaire's validity and gather recommendations for improvements. Subsequently, the questionnaire was refined based on the feedback received during the pilot phase.

Upon collection, the data were processed and stored in an Excel file format. Subsequently, the data were imported into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for comprehensive analysis. The analysis encompassed various statistical techniques, including frequency analysis, descriptive tests, and correlation analysis. SPSS version 25 was employed for these analytical procedures. Importantly, Cronbach's alpha was computed for the survey, yielding a value of $\alpha = 0.72$, indicating a favourable level of internal consistency for the data collection tool.

Table 1 presents the gender distribution among the participants, showcasing those 53 participants (48.2%) identified as male, 54 participants (49.1%) as female, and 3 participants (2.7%) preferred not to disclose their gender. This demographic diversity within the sample ensures a balanced representation of gender perspectives in the study.

Table 1: Gender profile of the participants

Gender	Frequency	Per cent
Male	53	48.2
Female	54	49.1
Prefer not to say	3	2.7
Total	110	100.0

Table 2 illustrates the distribution of participants across various academic courses, highlighting that 47 participants (42.7%) were enrolled in Arts and Humanities programs, 17 participants (15.5%) in Technology courses, 26 participants (23.6%) in Science and Mathematics disciplines, and 20 participants (18.2%) in Engineering programs. This diverse representation across academic domains enriches the study's scope by considering the experiences of students from varied fields of study.

Table 2: Distribution of courses of the participants

Course	Frequency	Per cent
Arts and Humanities	47	42.7

Technology	17	15.5
Science and Maths	26	23.6
Engineering	20	18.2
Total	110	100.0

Table 3 provides an overview of the gender distribution within different academic courses among the participants. It elucidates the gender breakdown within each academic stream, demonstrating the study's comprehensive approach in accounting for gender diversity across various fields of study.

Table 3: Gender Distribution across courses of the participants

Gender	Arts and Humanities	Technology	Science and Maths	Engineering
Male	27	6	9	11
Female	18	11	17	8
Prefer not to say	2	0	0	1
Total	47	17	26	20

The methodological approach employed in this study ensured a robust and comprehensive examination of students' perceptions of feedback and engagement in higher education, leveraging quantitative data for a well-rounded understanding of the research objectives.

4. Findings and Discussions

The study aimed to find out the current aspect of feedback and engagement of students in assessment in higher education. Students who responded to the questionnaire provided light on how the current integration of assessment is in higher education.

4.1 The current method of assessment of learners in various courses in higher education

To gain insights into the level of student engagement and participation in their current courses, it is imperative to first ascertain the prevailing assessment practices employed within these academic programs. The collected data provides valuable information regarding the predominant methods of assessment adopted in higher education.

The findings reveal that most students who participated in this study experience assessment predominantly through traditional means, primarily involving pen-and-paper examinations. This traditional assessment method is followed closely

by research-based assessment approaches within their current academic programs.

These results shed light on the prevalent assessment landscape in higher education, showcasing that conventional assessment methods continue to hold prominence. The extensive reliance on pen-and-paper assessments suggests that a substantial portion of students encounter assessments that may not fully embrace modern, learner-centered approaches or provide immediate feedback. Consequently, this underscores the need for institutions to explore innovative assessment strategies that align with contemporary educational paradigms, fostering greater student engagement and meaningful participation in the learning process.

The institutions of higher learning mostly use pen-and-paper methods of assessment in their institution. The data shows that among the 111 participants, 68% of all participants are being assessed by pen and paper, followed by research work 14% and 11%. Coaching and incubation are rarely used in higher education institutions as they have been observed having 5% and 2% consecutively which is relatively low considering their usefulness and relevance in the 21st century as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4: Distribution of assessment methods among participants

Course	Per cent
Pen and Paper	68%
Research Work	14%
Coaching	5%
Incubation	2%

Relatively, only the courses related to arts and humanities have less than seventy per cent (70%) of all assessments using pen and paper systems compared to other courses. Course versus assessment method indicates that Arts and humanities, Technology, Science and Maths, and Engineering courses assessments are pen and paper-based by 66%, 71%, 72%, and 74% respectively as indicated in Table 5.

Table 5: Distribution of pen and paper assessments by course

Course	Percentage Pen and Paper

Arts and Humanities	66%
Technology	71%
Science and Maths	72%
Engineering	74%

Further, relying on pen and paper and the absence of learner-centred assessment in higher education programs resonates with existing literature. Brown, Bull, and Pendlebury (2013) argue that traditional methods may not adequately prepare students for the modern workforce, emphasizing the need for learner-centred approaches to foster critical skills. Additionally, the lack of coaching and incubation, especially in Technology and Engineering courses, reflects a significant gap in pedagogical practices. Biggs and Tang (2011) advocate for alignment between teaching, learning, and assessment, emphasizing personalized support through coaching. Boud (2000) suggests sustainable assessment should promote lifelong learning and transferable skills, proposing incubation as a means to nurture creativity and innovation. Mamoon *et al.* and Mandernach (2016; 2015) underscore the urgency of re-evaluating assessment practices, while Black and William (1998) highlight the transformative potential of formative assessment. Additionally, integrating learner-centred approaches can better equip students for success in the evolving landscape of the 21st century.

4.2 Applicability of teaching activities to assessment practices.

In the realm of higher education, it's essential to recognize the intrinsic link between instructional methods and subsequent assessment practices. The way students are taught significantly influences the nature of their assessments. Students' experiences with teaching and assessment underscore the correlation between these two facets of education. Notably, a substantial majority of students, approximately 70%, express the belief that the methods of instruction employed are closely intertwined with the assessments they encounter.

This alignment between teaching and assessment is perceived as beneficial by most respondents. It suggests that these students perceive a meaningful connection between what they learn during instruction and how their knowledge is evaluated. However, it is worth noting that a significant portion, 30%, of the participants perceive a weaker correlation between their instructional experiences and subsequent assessments. This perspective suggests that, for this subgroup, there may be a perceived gap or misalignment between what is taught in the classroom and the way their knowledge and skills are assessed.

This finding raises pertinent questions about the efficacy of teaching methods and their ability to prepare students adequately for the assessments they face. It underscores the importance of ensuring that instructional strategies are effectively aligned with assessment practices, ultimately maximizing the educational experience for all learners. Addressing these perceptions and potential misalignments can contribute to a more cohesive and impactful educational environment.

Further, the relevance of teaching and assessment varies across the learners' course of study. Twenty-six per cent (26%) of learners taking Arts and Humanities courses thought the teaching and assessment did not relate, in Technology, 41% of learners did not see the correlation, and 30% and 36% per cent of learners in Science and Maths and Engineering consecutively did not see any applicability of what they have been taught and what how been assessed as detailed in figure 1 below.
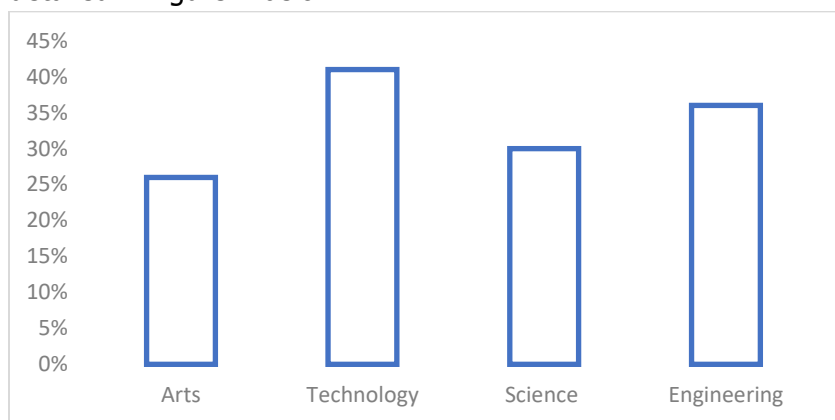
Figure 1: Students' perception of the missing connection between teaching activities and assessment

Learners that are taking Technology courses are seeing the teaching and assessment do not correlate to a greater percentage (41%), followed by Engineering with 36% and Science and Math with 30%. However, the rate is low in Arts and Humanities where only 26% felt like the teaching and assessment were not related in their courses.

4.3 Learners' participation in the preparation and designing of learning assessments.

Learners' participation in the preparation and designing of assessments is an important aspect of authentic assessment. Learners disclosed that in their assessment they participated in the preparation and designing of the assessment in fewer accounts.

Forty-six per cent (46%) of learners revealed that they were not participating in the preparation and designing of the assessment. This indicates that many students not participating in their learning and assessment as reported in the work of Dipasupil et al., (2019) and correlates with the findings of Rajabalee et al., (2020) that students need to be more engaged in assessment and learning and the correlation existing between engagement and performance.
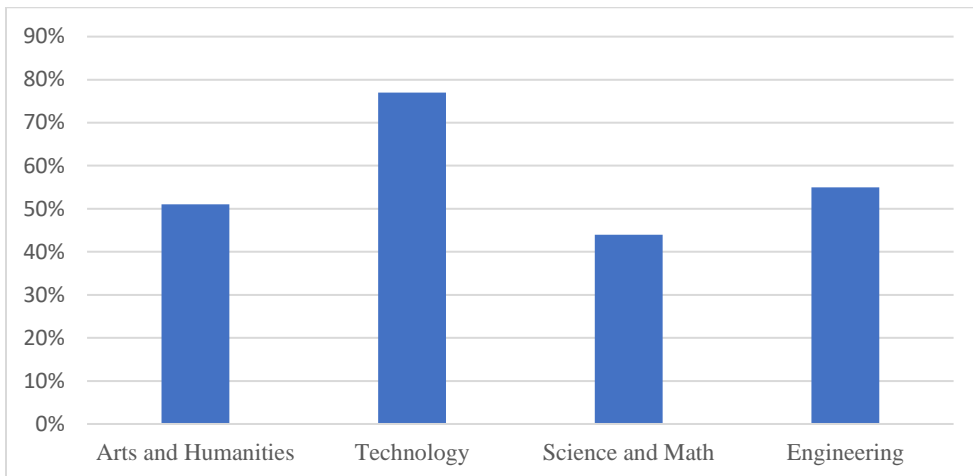
Moreover, the participation in the preparation and designing of the assessment varied greatly across the genders of learners representing gender participation in the preparation and designing assessment. Male learners were less participating in the preparation and designing of assessments in their courses compared to female learners. Forty-nine per cent (49%) of male learners were not participating in the preparation and designing of assessments while only thirty-nine (39%) per cent of female learners were not participating.

This indicates that females were participating by 10 per cent more than their male counterparts as also supported by Kruger, (2019) when pointing out that female learners participate more when engaged in learning and have higher scores.

Furthermore, it's crucial to highlight that the level of learner participation in the preparation and design of assessments exhibited significant variations across different academic disciplines within higher education institutions. Notably, Science and Maths students displayed a lower degree of engagement, with a substantial 56% of learners indicating that they were not actively involved in this process.

In contrast, the engagement levels were comparatively higher in Arts and Humanities, Engineering, and Technology courses, where the percentages of learners not participating in assessment preparation were 49%, 45%, and 23%, respectively. These findings are visually represented in Figure 2, illustrating the distinct disparities in learner engagement across diverse fields of study.
Understanding these variations in learner participation is pivotal for educators and institutions. It provides valuable insights into how assessment practices can be tailored to meet the unique needs and expectations of students across different academic domains, ultimately enhancing the overall quality of education. Figure 2 presents how Science and Maths learners were less engaged, fifty-six per cent (56%) of learners were not engaged compared to 49%, 45%, and 23% of Arts and Humanities, Engineering, and Technology courses respectively.

Figure 2: Reflection of learners participating in the preparation and designing of the assessment.

Learners are less participating in science and math, only forty-four per cent (44%) were participating and fifty-six per cent (56%) which is more than half of the learners were not participating in the preparation of assessments. Many students in technology-related courses participated more than fifty per cent (77%). Arts and Humanities and Engineering also had low participation following Science and Math by having learners participating by 51% and 55 consecutively. This links to Collaço (2014) as he found out that students' participation has to be increased to promote more student-centred learning.

4.4 The usefulness of the Feedback provided improved how students are learning.

Adarkwah (2021) denoted that feedback in assessment makes it worthwhile and improves the learning of the learners. From the students' voices, the findings of the study detail feedback on how feedback improved learning as ranked by the learners.

The responses collected from learners unequivocally affirm that the feedback they receive has positively impacted their learning experiences, aligning with the research findings of Kruger and Rajabalee *et al*. (2019: 2020), who have established a robust positive correlation between the feedback provided and students' ultimate academic performance.

Nonetheless, it's important to acknowledge that a notable proportion of learners, comprising 34%, expressed dissent by indicating that they did not perceive feedback as a catalyst for improving their learning outcomes. This divergence in

opinion prompts a critical inquiry into the factors that may impede the effectiveness of feedback mechanisms.

Several factors could contribute to this dissenting perspective. To make feedback more effective and universally beneficial, it is imperative to explore these variables comprehensively. By addressing these potential impediments, educational institutions can work toward ensuring that feedback consistently serves as a potent tool for enhancing student learning across the board.

In addition, an intriguing observation arises from the data, indicating that the impact of feedback on learning outcomes appears to be more pronounced among female students compared to their male peers. Specifically, the data illustrates that a substantial 74% of female students unequivocally attest to the utility of feedback in enhancing their learning experiences. In contrast, 58% of their male counterparts acknowledge the positive influence of feedback on their learning journeys.

This gender-related disparity in the perceived impact of feedback underscores an important dimension in the assessment process. It suggests that feedback may have a differential effect on students based on their gender, raising questions about how educational institutions can tailor feedback strategies to address the diverse needs and preferences of their student populations. Further research is warranted to delve deeper into these gender-related dynamics and to explore strategies for optimizing feedback mechanisms to benefit all students, irrespective of their gender.

Additionally, our investigation unveiled variations in the perceived effectiveness of feedback across different academic disciplines and its impact on learning outcomes in various courses of study. Notably, students enrolled in engineering programs expressed a notably different perspective regarding the utility of feedback compared to their peers in other fields. The data reveals that a substantial 55% of engineering students held the view that feedback provided in their courses did not significantly contribute to improving their learning experiences.

This observation contrasts with the feedback perceptions of students in other domains. Specifically, in fields such as science and mathematics, only 40% of students voiced dissatisfaction with the feedback's utility, while in arts and humanities, this figure stood at 28%. The most positive feedback reception was

found among technology students, with a mere 19% expressing dissatisfaction with the feedback they received.

These findings underscore the distinctive nature of feedback dynamics within engineering programs, suggesting that tailored approaches may be necessary to enhance its efficacy in promoting learning outcomes for this group of students. Further exploration and targeted interventions in engineering education may be required to bridge this feedback effectiveness gap.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The exploration of feedback and learner engagement in higher education reveals the intricate dynamics that underpin effective teaching and learning in the 21st century. Feedback, as a central component of the educational process, emerges as a potent tool for enhancing both academic achievement and students' holistic development. The findings underscore the pivotal role of feedback in fostering a productive and dynamic learning environment. It serves as a two-way communication channel that empowers educators and students alike. By providing actionable insights into strengths and areas for improvement, feedback contributes to the growth and development of learners. It encourages reflection, iteration, and the cultivation of a growth mindset - a mindset essential for navigating the complexities of the contemporary world.

Furthermore, feedback transcends the boundaries of conventional assessment. It is not merely a means to measure performance but a catalyst for deep learning. When feedback is thoughtfully designed and effectively delivered, it promotes active engagement and encourages students to explore complex concepts, refine their arguments, and take ownership of their educational journeys. In doing so, it aligns with the principles of formative assessment, where the focus is on continuous improvement and learning rather than summative judgment.

As institutions of higher education strive to meet the diverse needs and aspirations of their students, the role of feedback takes on even greater significance. Tailoring feedback strategies to address the unique dynamics of different academic disciplines, genders, and cultural backgrounds becomes imperative. By recognizing and addressing potential disparities in the effectiveness of feedback, educational institutions can ensure that all students, irrespective of their backgrounds or fields of study, benefit from this powerful tool. Feedback in higher education is not merely a pedagogical practice but a cornerstone of effective teaching and learning. It is a mechanism through which

educators can inspire, empower, and guide students toward academic success and personal growth. As educational practices continue to evolve in response to the demands of the 21st century, feedback remains an enduring and invaluable resource for educators and learners alike.

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