

# **PROCESSES OF EXAMINATION AND ASSESSMENT IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR CAPACITY BUILDING**

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## **Abstract**

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is fast becoming an accepted and indispensable part of the mainstream of the educational system in all most all the countries of the world. This is because of the recognition of the fundamental right of all people to learning. The globalization of ODL has provided us in the developing countries a lot of opportunities for the realization of our educational system-wide goals. The growing need for continual skills, upgrading and retraining of our labour force, especially in the areas of examination and assessment within our ODL system is imperative. We are faced with new training demands and new competitive challenges for capacity building especially in the process and procedures of examination and assessment in ODL. This is because ODL needs to be integrated with other approaches to education and professional development. This paper takes a look at ODL in the context of the challenges, opportunities and/or prospects for capacity building in the area of examination and assessment. It also highlights the properties of assessment properties like validity, reliability, fairness and alignment; and the construction of assessment procedures with attention to quality.

## **Introduction**

Examination and assessment are very vital in our educational system and therefore in Open and Distance Learning (ODL). These very important components of educational system require continual updating of skills, upgrading and retraining of the labour force. We should not therefore pay lip-service towards capacity building in those areas. Otherwise we may not reach the target of making quality education available for all by the year 2015 (Peraton, Hilary, Creed, Charlotte, Robinson and Bernadette, 2002). In many countries of the world, there is a national desire not just to raise the quality of education to match the present demands on it, but also to change education as the society are changing. Many countries have come to terms with new demands and new goals. New goals create new demands. According to Peraton et al (2002), such new demands include Universal Basic Education; Inclusive Education; Education for Democracy;

Peace and Social Cohesion; Multi-grade teaching; increased accountability for achieving learning targets. The development of learners who are self-managing and independent, skilled in critical thinking and problem solving, equipped with life-skills; the preparation of learners who are competent for knowledge based economies, capable in the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and are ready to face the challenges imposed by these new demands. The new demands require radical changes in the educational system. ODL has inbuilt mechanisms to face the new demands.

The society itself is expecting the components of the educational system like examination and assessment and even the educational practitioners to change the approaches as education itself is being reformed within the context of social changes. The changes in both role and expectations are likely to affect the professional development. All these create new challenges for continuing professional development, the need to find ways of using existing resources differently, of expanding access to learning opportunities at affordable cost, providing alternative pathways to teacher training, the use of technologies appropriate to enriching examination and assessment and the support practices, stimulating and supporting active learning and re-conceptualising the traditional organisation of examination and assessment and continuing professional development.

Attempts at reforming teaching, learning, assessment and examination in the school system have revealed that examination and assessment have usually been the most resistant features to reform (Morris et al, 2000). The introduction of formative assessment or continuous assessment in the educational system and Tutor Marked Assignments (TMAs) in the ODL system have challenged a traditional emphasis on fairness and objectivity as the main features of assessment process (Morris et al, 1999; Young, 2001 & Biggs, 1998). An examination oriented culture is firmly embedded in our educational system (Pong & Chew, 2002; Morrison and Tony, 2002). It is also a fact that examinations have dominated the curriculum and there is likelihood that any moves to introduce progressive practices may be stifled unless there is a corresponding challenge in high-stakes examination (Cheng, 1999). It is noteworthy that the Nigerian educational system is witnessing on-going attempts to reform teaching, learning, assessment and examinations through the 'learning to learn' reform which contains a vision of students attaining all round development and life long learning through ODL. It is hoped to promote what we call 'assessment for learning'. We also hope that this will reduce excessive tests and examinations. That it will help to provide information for both learners and teachers to improve learning and adjust teaching.

According to Tyack and Cuban, (1995); Fullan, (1999); experiences of change in the past have shown that reform is a complex and elusive endeavour. However, it has become a truism that change cannot be achieved without actively engaging the hearts and minds of the practitioners of assessment and examination. Capacity building in this area is central to the reforms. The rest of the paper looks at the challenges, prospects and skills needed to be changed in the reforms for capacity building.

### **Challenges of Examination and Assessment in ODL**

A look at our educational system will show that there is:

- disconnection in examination and assessment policies and practices;
- a view of assessment that occurs at the end of the educational train instead of something that influences teaching and learning;
- a range of bold reforms to improve teaching and learning without reforms in assessment and examination ; and
- a gap between philosophy and curriculum reform for learning and the paradigm of assessment of learning.

These have become challenges of examination and assessment in an ODL situation. To this effect, we should begin to talk about the development of some structural reforms in our assessment process in ODL. These include Basic Competency Assessment. This will include web-based resources to support learning and the pen and paper examinations.

Assessment can be regarded as a method, a way and a means rather than a purpose. Its main function is to promote the development of ODL. The process by which assesses receive internal and external assessment and make self-assessment is just a course of self-improvement and being perfect while education is being carried out. The large amount of data and information collected during examination and assessment serve as the educational basis for further improvement of teaching and learning.

### **Prospects of Examination and Assessment in ODL**

Assessment and examination are the practices of collective evidence of students learning. They are integral part of the learning and teaching cycle, rather than a separate stage at the end of teaching. They help to provide information for both students and teachers to improve teaching and learning. This is what we call ‘Assessment for Learning’ (AFL). In the ODL system, we advocate for a move away from the dominance of summative tests and examinations in favour of greater integration of assessment with teaching and learning. As we focus on learning, assessment and examination processes we should also focus on the products of the on-going process. To achieve this process-product focus, we should pay attention to the practices highlighted by C.D.C (2001.80-82) to be used to encourage AFL presented thus:

- the development of school assessment policies, including more diversified modes of assessment and a reduction in tests and examinations;
- a focus on feedback to inform students of their strengths or weaknesses and how to address the weaknesses;
- opportunities to do assessment collaboratively with students or to allow students to carry out peer or self-assessment;
- sharing with students the goals of learning, so that they can recognize the standards they are aiming at; and
- the use of assessment that probe higher-order thinking skills, creativity and understanding rather than rote memorization of facts.

A closer look at this process-product principles focus on assessment shows that they are directed towards teaching and learning rather than the traditional concepts of assessment

as measurement. The basis for these principles within current learning theories can be inferred from Shepard's (2000) social-constructivist framework of assessment for learning which warns that externally imposed testing for accountability discourages thoughtful AFL classroom practices. Black (2001) in his own view, places formative assessment within approaches of learning which lay emphasis on constructivism, situated cognition and social discourse. This view can be contrasted with the theories of behaviourism. They indicate that behaviourists approaches are consistent with a neglect of thinking processes which are dominated by assessments composed of short de-contextualized questions, a strategy of teaching to test.

Traditionally educational institutions have relied largely on paper and pencil tests and examinations for the assessment of students' academic achievement. In the conventional system, teachers can use their interaction with the students as an opportunity for providing feedback to them, and to let them know about their strengths and weakness. But in the ODL situation opportunities for the interactions are limited. This implies that the traditional examination or test – based assessment methods falls in ODL should be varied and should be used to provide as much feedback as possible to the learners.

Most of the ODL institutions make use of too main forms of assessment. These are:-

- i. Formative assessment which are used as a learning tool, and/or to give and gain feedback on learners ability and performance
- ii. Summative assessment or end of semester examination which can be used as an evaluation method for grading and making judgement about learners' achievement in a course.

Based on the learning outcomes of a course, the skills and knowledge which are the foci of each course, and besides written output, learners in ODL can be asked to show evidence of learning using different artifacts such as:

- Audio or video recording of performances especially in the areas of science and technology and practice teaching in education;
- Graphs, charts, diagrams or designs in prints or digital form;
- Online data bases, course ware or presentations; and
- Executable computer programmes.

The types of assignments that may be used in formative assessment in ODL include:

- *Portfolios*: collection of learners work over a period of time. For instance, an action plan and outcomes at the various stages of implementation, series of paintings on a number of different subjects or of different genre, followed by the learners self-reflection or self – evaluation; or a collection of readings accompanied by an annotated bibliography and a critique. Portfolios require self-managed skills and a large amount of learners' autonomy. It can be used at the start of a semester when learners may be assigned projects or broad based activities which require some degree of research as well as implementation of a plan.
- *Reports, essays and journals*: these may be done over time and may be based on specific areas of interest. The aim of this type of assessment is for the

development of critical thinking and also making judgments about various actions, plans, ideologies, movement or history or a discipline, specific collection or readings. Reports can be used based on what learners have experienced or implemented at work or on a series of experiments or practical work carried out by learners.

- *Case studies or scenarios*: these are mainly for developing analytical skills based on specific areas of knowledge. Learners can be made to solve problems related to a work place situation or to develop a plan for improving the living conditions of their community. It should be noted here that this process may require some amount of interpretations, identifications and articulations of problems and presentation of solutions.
- *On-line conference discussions*: these could be asynchronous and/or synchronous oral examinations. They involve assessment techniques that favour the learners who are skilled in presenting their thoughts and ideas through inter-personal interact. The technologies are useful for such courses that assess communicative ability, demonstration of knowledge and understanding of a topic as well as the demonstration of aesthetic on-the spot problem solving skills.

### **Highlights of Properties of Assessment Processes in ODL**

A good assessment system should have some indications which represent the critical elements. These indicators of quality and properties are – validity, reliability, fairness, alignment, civility and credibility among others. These belong to the assessment process.

- *Validity*: This is the extent to which an assessment measures what is needed for a particular purpose and to which the results, as they are interpreted are used, meaningfully and thoroughly represent the specific knowledge or skill. It is very important that the procedures must assess knowledge or skill or learning goal, outcome or objective that they claim to measure. It is also important that the type of data produced must be useful for the intended purposes. The validity criteria for any assessment process in the ODL situation should include the following:
  - i. *Content coverage* – focus on comprehensiveness of assessment content and seeks to enquire whether the assessment content and the process are covered sufficiently in breadth and depth.
  - ii. *Consequences* – focus the effects of assessment and seeks to enquire if the assessment is likely to produce results that will be used to improve instructional programmes or otherwise improve students learning
  - iii. *Content Quality* – focus on the consistency with current content conceptualization. It seeks to enquire if the assessment is consistent with the best available and current conceptualization of the knowledge or skill assessed
  - iv. *Transfer and generalization*: focus on the assessments representative of a large domain. It seeks to enquire if the assessment results can be generalized to the broader domain of knowledge, skill or outcome which they intend to represent
  - v. *Meaningfulness*: focus on the relevance of the assessment in the minds of the learners. It seeks to enquire if the assessment items or tasks are meaningful for students

- vi. *Cognitive complexity*: focus on whether the level of knowledge assessed is appropriate. It seeks to enquire if the assessment tasks represent the complexity level of knowledge and skill that are intended for assessment.
- vii. *Cost and efficiency*: focus on the practicality or feasibility of assessment. It seeks to enquire if the assessment is a reasonable burden on teachers, instructional time and finances. It also seeks to find out if the data resulting from the assessment are worth the required costs in terms of money, time and efforts.
- viii. *Fairness*: focus on the fairness to all members of all the groups. It seeks to enquire if the assessment is biased against racial, ethnic, gender or students with disabilities.
  - **Reliability**: This is the consistency or stability of assessment results. It is a necessary condition of validity. A test where students respond to quite differently one day than the next day can not produce trust worthy results.
  - **Fairness**: ODL institutions should ensure that assessment procedures are fair to all students especially since the students come from varied circumstances and situations. Assessment procedures are not fair if they offend members of some groups, if the way they refer to some groups distracts students and lowers their scores, or if other qualities of the procedures reduce the ability of group members to answer questions correctly.
  - **Alignment**: This refers to the coordination among various elements of a system. It is critical to the effectiveness of cyclical processes. These are processes which involve identifying educational intents such as goals, outcomes and objectives; developing curricula, arranging instruction to help ensure that students reach the intents, assessing students and using data to inform subsequent planning as the cycle is repeated. Alignment which functions well should provide smooth, cyclical transitions from planning to instruction, to assessment, to remediation and enrichment, and then back to planning. Everything works together.
  - Other important assessments processes required in an ODL system but are not covered in this discourse are civility, credibility and utility.

### **Ensuring Quality in Assessment**

Everybody who participates in any way in the development or implementation of assessment system is responsible for helping to ensure that assessment and examinations are of very high quality. Quality must be a concern at every stage. It must be involved when designing assessment system; selecting or developing assessment procedures; administering the procedures; scoring, reporting and using the results. It should be noted that any assessment which is of poor quality is of limited utility. Data from such assessment do not represent students learning well enough to inform decision makers about the type of changes that are needed to help improve the educational system. Again the time, resource and effort devoted to the planning and administration will have been poorly spent or wasted. Therefore, to ensure quality in the examination and assessment in the ODL system every one involved at every stage should not play down on the processes of assessment.

## Conclusion

The terms Open Learning and Distance Education represent approaches that focus on opening access to education and training provision, freeing learners from the constraints of time and place, and offering flexible learning opportunities to individuals and groups of learners. ODL is one of the most rapidly growing fields of education. Its potential impact on all education delivery systems has been greatly accentuated through the development of internet based information technologies, and in particular the World Wide Web. To this effect, we need training and re-training of the personnel involved in the ODL system especially in the areas of assessment and examination. This is to make sure that the processes and procedures of examination and assessment are handled by the right people for improved quality.

Many changes have taken place in the world economy in particular with regards to the information-bearing technologies. These demand the attention of governments for education and for human resources development. The rapid development of ICTs and the move towards more knowledge intensive, interdependent and internationalized societies create new challenges and opportunities for the design and delivery of education. ODL has answers to these challenges. ICTs open up new horizons for progress and the exchange of creativity and inter cultural dialogue. All we need is to train our people on the use of the ICTs in order to reform our educational examinations and assessment in ODL.

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