Equity in Higher Education – suitability for ‘others’?

Do traditional assessment methods of post-graduate business students truly measure their knowledge on a subject, or are grades dependant on the student’s demography?

Coventry University has recently introduced an interactive verbal exam alongside the traditional written modes of assessment as part of the post-graduate Human Resource Management Masters programme. This research is a longitudinal study examining the relationship between exam results across a range of assessment methods and the demographic status of the student. Students are classified as a) Home/EU or b) International students (others).

The Masters programme is modular based. The majority of assessments in Post-Graduate business studies are limited to written coursework, written exams and/or pre-prepared presentations. Due to incorrect perceptions of cost and time implications, too few educational institutions utilise oral assessment techniques. Knight (1995) states assessment must be part of the learning experience and relevant to real life. Interactive oral assessment aids continuous learning through the interaction itself, and is a mirror of real life situations within organizations.

The interactive nature of oral examinations allows assessors to confirm the meaning of exam questions and meaning within a student’s response. Chinese students have a propensity to write in an ideological mirrored fashion of Chinese culture; papers lack originality and have sameness about them (Cai 1997). Using an interactive verbal assessment, assessors are able to negate sameness of answers via contextual questioning. Levine & McGuire (1970) found oral exams improved the relationship between supervisory evaluations and test scores; initial results support Levine and McGuire’s claims.

Interviews held with students before the verbal exam exhibit a clear preference for the written exam; this supports Kingston and Forland (2008) who argue that international students prefer written assessments. However, post exam discussions (prior to grades being released), revealed the vast majority of home/EU and international students preferred the verbal exam experience.

For reasons listed above, and perhaps more importantly, a sense that grades obtained by international students did not correctly reflect knowledge exhibited during lectures, seminars and debates, it was decided to change assessment methods to include a verbal exam. Two modules were chosen whereby assessment included the following: -

1. A 3000 word written report - students have approx. 8 weeks to produce an individual report against a specific question given to them at the onset of the module. (50% of module mark).
2. A written in-class test – this is a one-hour closed book exam where students are asked to answer 3 out of 8 questions. The students do not see the questions until the start of the exam. All students sit the exam at the same time in one location. (20% of module mark).
3. An interactive verbal exam – this is a 10 minute verbal assessment on one of 3 module specific subjects. Students are aware of the subject matters several weeks in advance, but only become aware of the specific question once the exam commences. Each subject matter has 3 questions (nine in total). Students blindly pick one of the nine questions. Students sit the exam on a one-to-one basis. All proceedings are recorded for moderation and external examiner requirements. (30% of module mark).

To verify the suitability of assessment between demographics, the grades of fifty-five Post-Graduate HRD/HRM students were analysed across the three forms of assessment. Students were classified as Home/EU or International. Initial significant findings point to International students (others) performing better in verbal rather than written examinations. Differences in mean grade averages between the two student groups for the 3 assessments were (written report) =8.4, (written exam) =9.6, (oral exam) =1.8. Additionally, t-tests showed significant differences for the written tests only. A repeated measurement ANOVA confirmed that the pattern of performance between the two groups in the 3 assessments was significant. F 1.9, 100.4=3.27, p=0.044. Research on two additional cohorts is currently taking place. More reliable longitudinal and between groups data will be available shortly.

An issue emerging from initial findings point towards a relationship between exam results and country of origin, in addition to the classification of international or home/EU. However, Due to the difficulty in determining the true nature of country of origin (e.g. perceived, birthplace, passport status), this requires further investigation.

Not only are results relevant from an education perspective, exam results are used by organisations as a recruitment and selection criteria. Perhaps organisations are ignoring ‘other’ students due to lower classification of degree compared to home/EU students, when in fact, had they been assessed verbally, they would have achieved far better, and more accurate results.

References

Cai, G. (1999). ‘Texts in contexts: Understanding Chinese students' English

Compositions’. In C. Cooper and L. Odell (eds.), Evaluating writing: *The Role of Teachers' Knowledge about Text, Learning and Culture*. Urbana, Ill: National Council of Teachers of English.

Kingston, E., & Forland, H. (2008). Bridging the Gap in Expectations Between International Students and Academic Staff. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol. 12 No. 2, pp. 204-221.

Knight, P. (1995). *Assessment for Learning in Higher Education. Staff and Educational Development Series*. Kogan Page, London.

Levine, H, G., & McGuire, C, H. (1970). The validity and reliability of oral examinations in assessing cognitive skills in medicine. *Journal of Educational Measurement*. Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 62-74.