

# Assessment in Chinese Higher Education: Chinese Students' Conception of Assessment

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**Abstract:** Information about students' learning is necessary for educational decision making. Therefore, classroom assessment, comprehended as the procedure in which students' reactions to spontaneous activities are used to draw inferences about their knowledge and skills assumes a significant role in education. In higher education, students' learning is more impacted by their originations of the instructive condition than by the real instructive practices. In China, which has a long history of examination-oriented education, an assessment reform in basic and higher education was kicked off by the Ministry of Education as part of the New Curriculum Reform in 2001. This paper reviews literature on students' upheld conceptions of assessment and then reports a study into Chinese students' conception of assessment. Literature reviewed revealed that students conceive of assessment in at least four major ways (i.e., assessment makes students accountable; assessment is irrelevant because it is bad or unfair; assessment improves the quality of learning; and assessment is enjoyable). The findings of the study also indicated that students conceive assessment as being for improvement of learning and assigning grades.

**Key Words:** Assessment, Conceptions, Higher education, Students.

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

Assessment is a continuous process through which teachers and students communicate to advance more prominent learning. The assessment procedure stresses information assortment of students' performances to analyze learning issues, screen progress and give criticism for development (Stiggins, 2002). Assessment is essential to helping students become effective. It is an assortment of various techniques which are accepted to cause students to become efficient in their learning. Considering this, Airasian (1991) characterized assessment as the way toward gathering, deciphering and combining information to assist instructors with understanding their students, plan and screen guidelines and build up a favourable classroom atmosphere. Researchers accept that students can learn best and become effective if assessment is successfully executed in the teaching-learning process. That is the reason nations, for example, England, Spain, Australia and others are applying assessment halfway or entirely in their educational framework.

Conceptions are mental portrayals of phenomena in reality (Thompson 1992), which clarify intricate and troublesome classifications of experience, for example, assessment (White 1994). Students' conceptions of instructive procedures are significant in light of the fact that there is proof that those conceptions affect their instructive encounters and learning. Duit and Treagust (1995) contended that students' capacity to comprehend instruction is formed and constrained by their pre-instructional developments or understandings. In higher education, students' learning is more impacted by their view of the instructive condition than by the genuine instructive practices (Entwistle, 1991). Besides, students' conceptions of assessment are of specific significance since assessment significantly affects the nature of learning (Ramsden, 1997).

Students in China are especially as often as possible tested (Cheng, 2008). They are engaged with tests and examinations; competitions with other local or regional schools; and most in a general sense, enormous scope high-stakes assessments which profoundly sway on their future life possibilities. There are, notwithstanding, not many significant documents which record how Chinese high school students react to testing and assessment. How students respond to planning for and stepping through taking tests? How much tests lead to students fulfillment and accomplishment? How and why some students get some developmental direction from assessment, though many appear to see it as for the most part conveying a summative capacity? In the more extensive Chinese educational setting, the education system has imparted a testing culture into teachers, students, and parents (Gao & Watkins, 2001). Assessments and tests are basic methods of evaluation used to choose and remunerate ability in Hong Kong just as in terrain China (Cheung, 2008).

The prime purpose behind this study is the view that assessment can improve students' learning and create self-controlled learning. Numerous scholars guarantee that assessment can work past giving evaluations or positioning students' accomplishment (e.g., Boud, 2000; Boud & Falchikov, 2006; Carless, 2009). Assessment can likewise bolster further learning using proof picked up from tests or assignments (Stiggins, 2002; Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Studies into assessment in higher education have for the most part been attempted in Western countries (Willis, 2011; Fletcher, Meyer, Anderson, Johnston, & Rees, 2012) and a couple of studies examining perceptions and experiences of lecturers and students have likewise been directed in Asian higher education contexts, though these studies may not be applicable to originations of assessment in Chinese higher education. In Asian context, educational framework, assessment strategy and practices may differ starting with one nation then onto the next, for instance high stake tests as seen received in Chinese education system (Brown & Wang, 2011; Fook & Sidhu, 2011). Along these lines, it merits examining the conceptions of assessment in Chinese higher education as studies in higher institutions in this context are limited. To address this gap, the current study investigates conceptions of Chinese higher education students about the "what" and "why" of assessment.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

### Concept of Assessment

The term assessment is gotten from the Latin word 'assidere', which means, 'to sit down beside' (National Council Curriculum Assessment (NCCA, 2004). In the event that one consolidates this word with education which can be followed back to the Latin 'educare' (to bring out), educational assessment ought to be viewed as sitting next to the students and drawing out the possible that exists inside them, making an open door for them to show what they can do (Conner, 1991).

The Mathematical Association of America emphasized that the word assessment did not rise up out of the classroom. It was derived from an idea in educators, that of plunking down next to or along with. They further contend that, in the late seventeenth century, an assessor was one "who sits beside" or "who shares others' position". Early utilization of the word concentrated basically on deciding the value or benefit of something in fiscal terms, yet hidden those utilizations was the possibility of master judgment made based on cautious perception (MAA, 2009).

The term assessment implies various things to various individuals. Nitko (2001) cited the American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education and National Education Association, who consider assessment to be a technique for acquiring information that is utilized to settle on choice about students, educational program and national arrangement. From this, assessment can be seen as a method for gathering information about students so as to help in settling on choices concerning the students' prosperity as far as the educational program and national arrangements on education.

Tamakloe, Amedahe and Atta (2005), maintained that "assessment occurs when one person through some kind of interaction with another, obtains and interprets information about that other person in terms of his knowledge and understanding or abilities or attitudes" (p. 176). McMillan (2001) noticed that there are various fundamental assessment ideas that educators need to think going to settle on substantial choice about students. The information assembled could be from various sources so as to settle on the choice about the student.

### Assessment in China

Inside China and other Chinese societies (e.g., Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan), there is a long history of utilizing assessments and tests to choose and compensate ability and to respect high scholarly execution on high-stakes assessments as a real, meritocratic reason for upward social portability paying little mind to social foundation (Cheung, 2008). The instruction arrangement of China places incredible accentuation and incentive on achievement in some high-stakes assessments used to choose students for section, to promote openings and better schools; thus, the evaluative capacity of assessment matters for the two students and teachers (He, Levin, & Li, 2011).

The long utilization of assessment as a method for social and individual life improvement and the solid relationship between scholastic accomplishment and convictions about close to home worth and prudence implies that assessments hold incredible influence in education (China Civilisation Centre, 2007; Li, 2009). In any case, the current educational plan changes in China advocates assembling another arrangement of "assessment for development" which focuses on the inside and out improvement of students reliable with the idea of formative assessment (OECD, 2011). It is vital that this worry for all-round improvement of good character and great individual traits has been an educational program desire in China since the mid-1950s. In this manner, China has an assessment setting that squeezes instructors towards two distinct finishes; that is, superior on summative examinations and formative improvement (Han & Yang, 2001).

As OECD (2011) asserted, in China, "education is basically examination preparation" (p. 84) and "curriculum is less important than achieving high scores" (p. 85). In this manner, in China, excelling on an assessment, regardless of whether an in-class test or open assessment, matters and students are relied upon to apply enduring exertion. Chinese

parents, particularly, anticipate that students should turn out to be better scholastically, attitudinally, and behaviourally through tutoring and will implement such desires with brutal dictator child rearing practices (Gao & Watkins, 2001; Paul, 2011). Chinese students appear to acknowledge this weight due to their social commitments to their families (Peterson, Brown, & Hamilton, 2013). Thus, Chinese societies highly value both scholarly accomplishment and steady, extraordinary degrees of exertion with respect to the student (Li, 2009).

Given the high-stakes results of assessment in China, it appears to be likely that higher education students will have grown sensibly solid conceptions of assessment. Since the dangers of doing ineffectively on high-stakes assessments are amazing, it appears to be level-headed to have less delight all the while, and to see the profoundly particular outcomes as essentially unjustifiable, particularly whenever quite possibly one probably won't work out quite as well varying or trusted. Subsequently, while these theories are conceivable, they depend to a great extent on university students, consequently, it is important to examine how Chinese higher education students perceive assessment.

### **Students' Conception of Assessment**

Investigation into Chinese teacher conceptions of assessment surpasses in volume. The research literature on students' conceptions of assessment isn't huge, and is barely centered around higher education students. Review of the empirical literature on students' conceptions of the purposes of assessment has recognized four significant purposes, some of which can be coordinated to teachers' conceptions of assessment. Students are reported as conceiving assessment as (i) improving achievement, (ii) a means for making them accountable, (iii) being irrelevant, and (iv) being enjoyable.

#### **i. Assessment improves achievement and learning**

Pajares and Graham (2008) studied 216 Grade 8 students language expressions classes and found that the students needed genuine, conceivable, and productive input on the most proficient method to improve, while their teachers accentuated commendation and positive effect as the significant reaction. As such, the students needed to improve and imagined that criticism in light of an assessment should assist them with doing so. Conversely, their teachers wanted the students to feel good and so denied the students' access to constructive feedback in order to protect the students from negative results. The students were able to see such 'impression management' for what it was and sought truth and instruction instead. In a comparative vein, American high school students reported that good teachers, in contrast to poor teachers, routinely tried and gave input to understudies about learning.

#### **ii. Assessment makes students accountable**

Zeidner (2012) offered Israeli junior and senior high school students' four purposes for assessment (i.e., summarising student achievement, arousing student interest and motivation, evaluating quality of teaching, and administrative purposes). The students had a more grounded view of assessment as summing up student achievement than as improving motivation or behaviour. Brookhart and Bronowicz (2003: 240) concluded that, because of the outcomes appended to classroom assessments, the 161 high school students they studied 'were "playing the summative game", which included ensuring one's notoriety, self-esteem, and self-adequacy however much as could reasonably be expected. In any event, when confronted with assessment intended to screen school viability, for instance, high-stakes remotely directed evaluations (SATs in England), expected to guarantee tutoring quality; students were found to regard low evaluations as a proportion of themselves as opposed to of the school or the teacher.

#### **iii. Assessment is irrelevant**

Assessment may be considered irrelevant to students in the event that it is thought of as being terrible or out of line. Seen subjectivity and absence of demonstrable skill in the scoring of students' assignments or assessments has driven tertiary students to see assessment as discretionary, immaterial, incorrect, and just a vital procedure for gathering marks (Duffield & Spencer, 2002). Students are well on the way to consider irrelevant assessment practices such as group projects that do not give credit to individual effort those that lack explicit criteria for assessment and end-of-year examinations (MacLellan, 2012). The dismissal of subjective assessment has showed up among school students. The mentalities towards assessment of 54 Australian students in their first year of high school turned out to be progressively negative, not just due to the expanded volume of assessment contrasted with elementary school, yet explicitly in view of the apparent subjectivity of educators' assessment choices (Moni, van Kraayenoord & Baker, 2002).

#### **iv. Assessment is enjoyable**

A great part of the writing concentrated on students' perspectives towards various assessment types. For example, Atkinson (2013) detailed that Scottish school children enjoyed all the types of assessment by which they were assessed (including, informal, formal, self, peer, grades, etc.) paying little mind to reason (i.e., accountability or improvement). Investigation into students' inclinations for alternative assessments (such as portfolios, projects, self-assessment, peer-assessment, and other non-examination assessments) indicated that the assessment that have been decidedly assessed by students were progressively credible and along these lines made learning increasingly practical or incredible (Bloxham & West, 2004).

Taken together, the literature review has recognized four significant conceptions of assessment from the students' point of view: that is, assessment acts to improve the quality of learning, assessment is used to make students accountable, assessment is irrelevant, and assessment is enjoyable. In any event, three of these conceptions are similar to those held by teachers (Brown 2004a).

### 3. METHODOLOGY:

The study aimed to gain more insight about perspectives of students concerning assessment, consequently the interpretive paradigm was utilized. The interpretive paradigm is mainly concerned with the understanding of individual experiences and perspectives. The main focus in the interpretive paradigm is to comprehend the abstract universe of human experience (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). In this study, interpretive paradigm was deemed appropriate since it looked to uncover the participants' perspectives and experiences about assessment. Participants of this small-scale study were ten (10) Chinese higher education students (from Beijing Normal University) who were conveniently sampled. A self-developed interview guide designed in relation to the literature reviewed was used to elicit students' conception of assessment; this ensured validity and reliability of the interview guide. Thematic Analysis (TA) was used to analyze the data from the interview. Thematic Analysis is widely-used qualitative data analysis method that focuses on identifying patterned meaning across a dataset. The recordings of the interviews were transcribed based on questions that the researchers sought to investigate and finally, we defined the overall content and the message it carried before producing a report. Consideration for moral issues and respect for participants is essential in social research; hence in this research several ethical issues were taken into consideration. The research addressed all ethical concerns which included informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality.

### 4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### What and Why of Students' Assessment

Responses provided by the students answered the main research question, conceptions of students about assessment. Responses given by students shed light on how they viewed classroom assessment based on their position as students. Various definitions were presented by the students regarding the (what & why) of classroom assessment. They expressed their view points by discussing the forms and purposefulness of assessment in different classroom environment.

Students defined classroom assessment, primarily as activities that teachers use in a class to see whether students understood the contents. One student said, "before introducing another lesson, the teacher gets some information about the past lesson, at that point he gets some information about the current lesson; teachers make an observation to see the extent students are exposed to the topic". Another student illustrated that, "any productive activity that makes an expansion in student's ability to learn is assessment". This infers, by and large students are aware of various formats and events of classroom assessment. In addition, the students lit up about different forms of assessment activities that cause learning in a classroom. Students portrayed assessment as activities that included "designing projects, group activities, class participation, and solving a problem on the board". The students noted that assessment covered activities that teachers assign students. "Teacher asks our class to prepare 3-5 pages paper about a certain historical period," a student stated, "when we submit the paper and the teacher scores, that is assessment".

Lining up with the definition, students raised the issue of purposefulness of classroom assessment as a significant factor in the methodology that teachers use in their classrooms. They expressed that a teacher plays out an activity to see how much students learned, regardless of whether the instruction was beneficial, whether students were ready for the new lesson and more. One student for example, observed that the purpose of assessment is both for teachers and students, "teacher assesses him/herself, looking whether his/her teaching was effective, looking if the intended program is accomplished". Another purpose of assessment said by a student "is to make justification between students, dividing students in groups that that make the teacher mindful to structure the exercise to address everyone's needs". Meanwhile, another student contended that assessment "stimulates learning, which occurs through individual observation or group activity." Finally, one student described assessment as "tests that teachers give students to make sure students learned something and the teacher could transfer the lesson". Similarly, another student upheld saying that, "assessment is a mutual activity between students and the teacher". However, one student had a different view in terms of classroom assessment. He labelled assessment as a sub-some portion of a test, "assessment is a little area of evaluation," he summed up.

In sum, an analysis of the overall perspectives of the students as far as characterizing the what and why of assessment shows that students had a recognition of various forms and purposes of classroom assessment. In addition, students viewed assessment as activities for educational purposes not just assigning score or grade. Overall, responses from the student respondents bear witness to that they stayed one voice with respect to the definition and the purpose of classroom assessment.

## 5. DISCUSSION:

The findings of the study uncovered that identifying students' strengths and weaknesses is viewed as an essential goal of assessment. In this regard, students considered purpose of assessment as checking students' understanding and their learning progress. While it is imperative to check the advancement of their learning through appraisal, supporting and upgrading learning ought to likewise be considered as motivations behind assessment. Accordingly, the purpose for assessing students' knowledge or understanding is to generate accurate information that leads to valid changes in teaching practice or student learning such that improvement in student achievement can be facilitated. In addition, these students identified feedback as another purpose for assessment since it contains information and strategies that can be used to improve future performance of students and increased ownership of learning. Along these lines, the significant premise is that assessment informs the improvement of students' own learning and improves the quality of teaching. This improvement is related with two significant prerequisites; (a) assessment depicts or analyze the idea of students' accomplishment or execution and (b) the information provided by assessment is of adequate quality to be viewed as valid, reliable, and accurate description of students' performance. Brown (2004a) explained that the improvement view of assessment requires teachers to be effectively engaged with diagnosing and discovering what students have learned using a wide assortment of assessment techniques. To do this high-quality information including, accurate and efficient description of a student's performance is required. Black and Wiliam (1998) underscored that the improvement procedure is upgraded when students, either through self-assessment or peer assessment, are associated with the way toward deciding standards for assessment and in leading such assessment. Therefore, students need to realize how to autonomously assess their own work and become mindful of measures for distinguishing potential upgrades in their own performance. The findings were in agreement with Brown (2004a), Pajares and Graham (2008) and Duffield and Spencer (2002) who found similar results and concluded that students needed to improve and imagined that input in light of an assessment should assist them with doing this.

The findings also revealed that, students conceive assessment as relating to ranking student achievement. Marking or grading is seen as important for academic learning in this context; students may feel no motivation to learn when completing tasks carrying no marks. Scoring is a prize image for students to show their work has been done. The premise of this conception of assessment is that students are individually accountable for their learning through their performance on assessments. This is commonly seen in the various qualifications examinations that secondary age students participate in either for graduation or for entry selection to higher levels of educational opportunity. Thus, it is largely about high stakes consequences such as graduation or selection or being publicly reported on as earning a certain grade, level, or score. The finding is similar to Zeidner (2012) who found that teachers and secondary school students had very similar perceptions of classroom assessment practices, in that the goal of grading was to evaluate student achievement and that this should be done through objective testing. Measuring students' achievement is a common view of students and students see that a student's high score equates to a better learning performance. However, the way students are assessed and the formats of assessment should be considered in relation to the purposes of assessment. If this current conception of assessment purposes remains at this university it will be difficult to move towards developmental notions of assessment discussed in the literature. In any case, as summative assessment systems have been practised in Chinese education, some students may prefer to adopt passive learning strategies rather than active learning roles requiring them to think critically and manage a bigger workload.

## 6. CONCLUSION :

Classroom assessment gives criticism on students' advancement over some undefined time frame with the goal that any blunders or learning challenges can be recognized and adjusted. The role of teachers in ensuring that assessment leads to effective teaching and learning cannot be over-emphasized. Teachers are relied upon to assume a double job of encouraging students' learning and of actualizing classroom assessment in a way that will improve significant learning results. Their role in assessment encompasses the whole process of constructing and administering of assessment tasks to interpreting the results generated from assessment. This study has discussed conceptions of assessment from a group of Chinese high school students (specifically Beijing Normal University) and has revealed some of the different dimensions of student responses. Although the findings may have revealed relatively few surprises, it is believed that reporting students' conceptions in some detail makes an important commitment to the information base and can go about as a springboard for future examination endeavours. Therefore, the study asserts that assessment does not have to function solely for improvement or to give marks or give students certificates. Assessment activities can perform 'double duty', which implies that the purpose of assessment can integrate both assessment for learning and assessment of learning. The tasks should be designed in a way that students are able to develop themselves beyond just their academic life. The purpose of assessment should be to promote productive student learning regardless of a predominance of summative or formative purpose.

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