Postgraduate students' views on their assessment and evaluation at university: A case study

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Abstract

This study seeks to explore postgraduate students' views about their assessment and evaluation at university, as they experienced it as undergraduate students. Written texts were used as a research tool while as a research method the qualitative content analysis was applied. Findings indicated that student assessment and evaluation was a multifaceted process, being influenced by the interpersonal relationships developed between the students being evaluated and the academic faculty evaluating them. This study also identified that summative assessment was usually used in Greek universities, where students were assessed through written examination at the end of each academic semester. Finally, students indicated that their evaluation was mostly unbiased and fair, although they wanted their assessment to be based on criteria other than those used by faculty. Despite the no generalization of the findings, the evidence suggests that teachers should base their educational work and students' evaluation in contemporary assessment and teaching methods, while further research should be conducted.

Key words: postgraduate students, assessment, evaluation, university, academic faculty, qualitative study

1. Introduction

It is well-established that the issue of assessment generally in all the subsystems of a society, whatever society, especially in modern, not only in the Greek but also in the international community was and undoubtedly is a necessary and needed evil or good, regardless of both the ideology of political parties that govern and the ideological position of each of us. One of the subsystems and areas of society where the necessity of assessment is discussed is the field of education. The effort to implement assessment in Greek education (Chatzidimou, 2019; Kassotakis, 1981 & 2018; Taratori-Tsalkatidou, 2009) with all its difficulties and reversals, can be traced almost back to the formal institutionalization of education as a public good (Chatzidimou & Chatzidimou, 2019). It is noted however that this effort for assessment is mainly concerned with student assessment, whereas teacher assessment, one might argue, is today obliterated, as can be seen from the relevant literature and decisions of all the political parties having governed the country.

Before the current situation established, teachers were being assessed by inspectors. It is noted that the institution of inspectors was introduced in the mid-1930s (Iordanidis, 2006; Karafillis, 2010), which was an institution with many black spots and problems due to not only the power exercised by inspectors but also political parties' interventions over the career progression and the evaluation of teaching staff. The above-mentioned institution, after many struggles of educational institutions and progressive political parties, and when political conditions were

matured, was abolished and instead the institution of school counselor was introduced (Nomos (Law) 1304/1982). The latter at first was welcomed with great enthusiasm by the educational community which, however vey soon began to question it, and as a consequence the institution exhibited wigwags, until it finally reached the point of being abolished and replaced by the institution of educational coordinators (Nomos (Law) 4547/2018). Nevertheless, this does not mean that the institution of school counselor did not contribute to many of the educational activities of the country, and especially in the field of reeducation (Chatzidimou & Chatzidimou, 2019). But, the abolition of the school counselor's institution and its replacement by Law 4547/2018 seems to be unacceptable to both the educational community and the first announcements of the new government of July 7, 2019, which is studying and discussing again its reinstatement. All these changes, as it is realized today, have failed to contribute to the teachers' assessment, despite the efforts in 1992 (Nomos (Law) 2043/1992) and 1997 (Nomos (Law) 2525/1997) under the Ministry of Souflias and Arsenis respectively. Later, since 2009, there has been an attempt to evaluate teachers indirectly through the implementation of a new institution being referred as the self-assessment of school units, but this endeavor, at least to date, has not been fruitful.

It should be clarified how the phenomenon of non-assessment of primary and secondary teachers is not applied, but has been applied for the last forty years, however, the assessment of students in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has already been in place since the establishment of the first university (the National Kapodistrian University of Athens) in Greece, in 1837. The academic faculty evaluates students through different ways and methods, but without students themselves have a voice in their assessment. This situation is beginning somewhat to change with the possibility offered to students to express their opinion about the faculty's teaching knowledge, interpersonal relationships, etc. during their studies (Nomos (Law) 3374/2005).

Thus, all the above as well as the discussions taking place both among students and between students and the present researcher during the various academic years on the manner and effectiveness of their assessment has prompted this research. This paper specifically aims to unravel postgraduate students' views on their evaluation at the university, as they experienced it during their undergraduate studies.

2. Methodology

This study was conducted in the spring semester of the academic year 2017/2018. The research sample consisted of 21 postgraduate students attending a postgraduate course entitled "Education Executives in Education Sciences" provided by the Department of Primary Education of the Democritus University of Thrace in Greece. All the postgraduate students participated in the research had already completed their undergraduate studies at various Departments of Greek Universities. In addition, fifteen of them were women and the rest 6 were men.

As research tool the written text was chosen (Taratori-Tsalkatidou, 2004). Specifically, the participated students were asked to write during one hour a text about "Postgraduate students' views on their Assessment at university". This specific research tool was chosen, as the most appropriate one, in our opinion, because it allows the views of the research participants to be freely expressed, without any influence on the part of the researcher.

As research method the qualitative content analysis was chosen, because it makes possible to present the material collected in a systematic and methodical way (Schreier, 2012). Specifically, the steps followed in conducting the qualitative content analysis, after the written texts had been read several times for their content to be fully understood, are the following:

At the *first stage*, the collected material was quantified and the unit of analysis was also determined. The latter was a word, a phrase, or a sentence.

The data were categorized, while the words, the phrases, and suggestions being related to different aspects of assessment and were often referred by different students, were identified as the themes at the *second stage*.

Finally, the quantitative and qualitative description (Chatzidimou & Stamovlasis, 2014), as well as the discussion of the research findings (Taratori-Tsalkatidou, 2004) were followed at the *third* and *final stage* of the research.

2.1. The quantitative analysis of the research findings

The systematic reading of the written texts and the categorization of the postgraduate students' accounts and descriptions about the subject under investigation resulted in a total of 124 reports, which were divided into 4 main thematic categories (A1, A2, A3, A4) (Table 1). In addition, each of these categories includes several sub-categories.

Table.1 Aggregate table for the quantitative distribution of the research findings

	- CO	Number of	Perce
No.	Main thematic categories	accounts	nt %
A1.	Characterizations for assessment	30	24.19 %
A2.	Factors impacting on assessment	43	34.68 % 24.19
A3.	The type and methods of assessment	30	24.19 % 16.94
A4.	The criteria of assessment	21	%
Total		124	100.00 %

As can be seen from the Table 1. above, the main thematic categories that were formulated, based on the statements of the participated students, cover various aspects of their assessment at university, as they experienced it during their undergraduate studies. Particularly interesting is the fact that first in the reports came the thematic category regarding the factors that according to students themselves influence their assessment (A2). Second with the same amount of accounts are both the category concerning the characterizations used for assessment to be described and the category dealing with the type and methods being used for the assessment. It is also apparent from the Table 1. that the category about the assessment criteria gathered the fewest reports and came in the last place (A4).

In summary, not only from the variety of research participants' statements about the issue of assessment, but also from the multitude of the collected reports, it can be concluded that the research object of the present study arouses the interest of the students, who fervently submitted their views on their written texts.

Moving on now to analyze the identified subcategories, we observe that of the characterizations used by the students for assessment (A1), the first place with a great difference took the notion that assessment was objective and fair. On the contrary, only a very small percentage of students reported that they were evaluated in a biased and an unfair manner (Table 2).

Table 2. The quantitative distribution of the research findings about the characterizations for assessment

N		Number of	Percent
0.	Characterizations for assessment	accounts	%
1			
·	Unbiased and fair	22	73.33%
. 2			70.0070
2	Biased and unfair	8	26 670/
•	Diased and unfair	8	26.67%
			100.00
Total			%

From the quantitative analysis of the second subcategory, it is found that most students claimed that their assessment was primarily determined by the interpersonal relationship they had formed with their professors-evaluators, after by professor himself/herself, and to a lesser degree by the type and the nature of courses, that is, whether the courses were theoretical or more practical in nature and whether they were compulsory or optional (Table 3).

Table 3. The quantitative distribution of the research findings about the factors

impacting on assessment

1		Number of	Per
0.	Factors impacting on assessment	accounts	cent %
1			39.
	Professor	17	53%
2			16.
•	The type and nature of courses	7	28%
3	The interpersonal relationship between		44.
•	professor and students	19	19%
			100
Total			.00%

Regarding the type and methods of assessment applied in Greek HEIs, the students supported that their assessment was mainly accomplished through written exams at the end of each academic semester and after the completion of each course - namely, the traditional type of assessment was exclusively used. The students also stated that they were assessed less through their written assignments, where they chose a topic for development as part of the course. To a lesser extent, they were assessed orally or the formative assessment was chosen, where their performance and progress were monitored with a test taken in class, as a review for exams, during the academic semester (Table 4).

Table 4. The quantitative distribution of the research findings about the type and methods of assessment

1		Number of	Perc
0.	The type and methods of assessment	accounts	ent %
1			13.3
	Oral examination	4	4%
2			33.3
•	Written examination	10	3%
3			
•	Written assignments	6	20%
4	· ·		23.3
	Final examination	7	3%
5	Tests taken in class for review of		
	exams	3	10%
			100.
Γotal		30	00%

Finally, our participants gave their views on the criteria on which their evaluation was based, and it is of particular interest that they proposed to a very large extent other criteria than those applied. This indicates to some extent that students were probably not satisfied with the criteria used by their professors for their performance, resulting in the degree to which they were assigned (Table 5).

Table 5. The quantitative distribution of the research findings about the criteria for assessment

ľ		Number of	Per
0.	The criteria for assessment	accounts	cent %
1	Criteria already used for		28.5
•	assessment	6	7%
2	Desirable criteria to be used for		71.4
	assessment	15	3%
		_	100.
Total		21	00%

From the quantitative analysis of the research data the following can be concluded:

- Students' assessment at the Greek universities is judged by the students themselves as objective and fair.
- Student assessment in HEIs is a multifaceted process, on which impact the interpersonal relationships developed between the students being evaluated and academic faculty which evaluate the former.
- Students are usually assessed at the end of the six-month course, through final written examination. This means that normally the assessment called in the literature as "summative assessment" (Brown & Knight, 2005, p. 15) or "final or overall assessment" (Chatzidimou, 2019, p. 302) is used. To a lesser extent other methods are used, such as the conduct of assignments and taking in-class tests during the academic semester. In other words, the known in the literature as "formative assessment" (Brown & Knight, 2005, p. 15) or "gradual evaluation" (Chatzidimou, 2019, p. 303) is not applied.

• Students want and suggest their assessment to be based on criteria other than those used by their professors and academic faculty generally, such as collaborative experiential methods, e.t.c.

2.2. The qualitative analysis of the research findings

As has already been stated in the quantitative analysis of the research data, the majority of our participants considered that their evaluation was objective and fair. Thus, the grade that they finally took represented their performance in their writing or their assigned duty and it was what they expected most of the times. Indeed, one student in particular mentioned that the grades she received were the ones she "deserved". And there were also those students who emphatically pointed out the need for their assessment to be objective, meritocratic and "not irrational" on the part of their professors, so that the resulting grade reflects the "job of each student".

On the other hand, those who commented that their assessment was unfair and biased, in support of their position, cited specific incidents and examples, such as, for instance, that their assessment was based on issues which were not included in the curriculum and that academic faculty had not objectively assessed their writings. Specifically, postgraduate students indicated that written assessment strengthens the impersonal relationship between the person who assess and the person who is assessed while oral examination is not conducted on equal terms, due to the fact that not all the questions being posed have the same degree of difficulty.

Furthermore, in most of the written texts that were gathered for the purposes of the present study the students' strong dissatisfaction with the lack of communication and the lack of meaningful interpersonal relationships that claimed to exist between teachers and students in Greek HEIs, which have also been confirmed by previous research (Manthou, 2009; Stravakou & Kougiourouki, 2009), was evident. Interestingly, this lack of interpersonal relationships is identified in the present study as the most critical factor affecting the students' assessment. In particular, students emphasized that because their teachers did not know them, they could not gain a holistic view of their interest, their presence and their participation in lessons, their consistency in their obligations, as well as the difficulties, the needs and the particularities of each of them. Especially for some participants, this was the reason that they considered their assessment unfair. Some students also argued that the development of communication and closer interpersonal relationships with their teachers would allow them not only to receive feedback and clear information about their performance, but also to gain an understanding of the importance and of how they were actually assessed which would further contribute to their more systematic and organized study, to the exchange of their views with their teachers, which have also been highlighted by previous research. For example, research findings have shown that the positive relationship between students and teachers in higher education fosters students' intellectual development, satisfaction, performance, effort, commitment, motivation, and engagement etc. (Hagenauer & Volet, 2014).

Moreover, the effect of teacher-student relationships on students' perceptions of assessment was also identified by Crossman (2004) in a qualitative research with a sample of candidate teachers from an Australian university. In this study, Crossman also found that the way that students will engage in learning depends on each person's motivation in relation to the existing conditions for learning and assessment (Crossman, 2004). The relationship between assessment and learning is prominently noted in the literature (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007; Sambell, 2016), and was also found in some written texts of the students involved in the present study. For example, a male student wrote about the written examination:

"So, judging this written product of a brief examination... the teacher, through grading, presents a picture of the student which represents an entire semester while the student in turn tries to derive a grade that will create an illusion of his/her success or failure and, of course, a wrong way of learning and assimilating. The wrong way to learn emerges from the fact that the student knows that he/she will be involved in the learning material only 2-3 days before the exam to complete the course, and as a consequence he/she does not learn the basic knowledge of his or her future profession."

Here, and in order for both our explanation of the above quotation and how this quotation is related to the connection between the way of learning and the way of assessment to better be understood, we will mention Bloxham and Boyd (2007). According to these researchers (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007, p. 17), research findings have shown that students in their study can follow either a "deep approach" or a "superficial approach", on the basis of their goals and their perceptions of learning, which are influenced by the way according to which they will be assessed and by the assessment method that is used, too. More particularly, in the first approach, students during their studies show a strong interest, they seek to understand ideas and, when they engage in the learning process, follow tactics, such as seeking to identify both the meaning in examination material and principles and patterns in it, or linking the ideas and information they are studying with their personal experiences. On the contrary, in the superficial approach, the intention of the student is merely to understand the material and to carry out the work with little personal involvement. Adopting this approach requires the least effort on the part of students, while the usual tactic is to memorize the material through repetition, while particular emphasis is given to the detail of what is being studied. Based on the above and also the participant's quotation presented previously, it appears that the written examination at the end of the academic semester, which is also the usual assessment method applied according to our research findings, favors the superficial approach for learning to be adopted by students. The latter, knowing that they are to be assessed only after the end of course, have as goal, as some clearly wrote, to pass the course by taking a 5 grade (that is, the basis), which in some cases "looked like mercy", or to achieve higher scores. Therefore, according to the writings of participating students, the assessment at university revolves around grades, which is what is referred in international literature as "assessment of learning" that is distinguished from the "assessment for learning [which is formative and diagnostic"), helping the readjustment of learning and teaching to serve the learners' needs (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007, p. 15). Indeed, in order to accomplish their goal, which was to pass the course or achieve a higher score, participated students followed a specific tactic in their study. Shortly before the exams, they were studying either the book¹ that was provided to them or the notes they had procured, memorizing as much information as possible. As for the learning outcomes they achieved, the following quote from a female student is indicative:

"I remember for some courses not having regularly attended the lessons, but having read enough about the exams to write a decent final grade. However, this did not precisely prove that I had acquired the knowledge of the course in a certain degree and I certainly had lost the

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¹ In Greek universities, the system of one textbook distributed to students, rather than multiple textbooks, is applied, which means that they do not have the opportunity and the obligation to study a large bibliography and to form a complete picture of the subject and the topics of each subject.

experience of the interaction, the exchange of views and the transfer of experiences and knowledge with my teachers."

On the other hand, another female student wrote about the assessment through final exams and through written assignments, conducted during the academic semester and the conduct of which exonerate students from final examination:

"After having lived these experiences, I conclude that final exams are harrowing and sometimes the grade attained through them may not reflect the overall performance of student on the course. However, with exams a student can achieve a high performance as his/her study is limited to one textbook. On the other hand, although the exempt written assignment is a strenuous work for achieving a high degree, its benefits for the student are immense. Student through the search of the relevant literature compares sources, recognizes the important ones, organizes them and structures them into a personal creation. Therefore, he/she develops various skills and critical thinking, without much stress. Personally ... I preferred the exempt written assignments ... as I obtained useful information that would help me in my next lessons."

3. Conclusion

Concluding the present study, one might comment that: both the conclusions from the latter quote and the others discussed above show that the exploration of a topic in an exempt written assignment encourages the students' adoption of a deeper approach in their studying material, thus helping them to develop various skills. This means that it is advisable for academic faculty to continually take into account not only the new knowledge produced in the area of assessment, but also their students' opinions for a more effective assessment of their students.

However, it should be noted that the findings of the present study, despite their interest, cannot be generalized due to the nature of the research approach taken (Chatzidimou & Stamovlasis, 2014). This implies that for the subject under investigation as well as for others the researchers will have to apply other alternative research methods in order to give the teachers who will conduct the assessment other data and other suggestions. In this way, teachers will be informed and be aware of other ways of assessment that, by applying them, will help both themselves and their students achieve better learning outcomes. Teachers-evaluators may -and should, one could argue- focus their attention during their educational work and on evaluating their students in contemporary assessment (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007) and teaching methods. Thus, they will be able to answer the question why they are considered a key factor in the assessment of students' performance. Other findings emerged in this research from the participants' texts are that students' assessment was influenced by their teachers' strictness or pliancy. Indeed, some students correlated their teachers' rigor in grading either with their high level of teaching ability and their scientific training or with the objectivity of their assessment. Adversely, other participants stated that they preferred to attend particular courses, not because they fit their interests, but because the teachers who taught them put higher grades, apparently for reasons of acquaintance and good interpersonal relationships developed with students (Stravakou, 2015). This contradiction that has been observed in some of the findings of this research indicates, among others, that the object of the present research needs further investigation, which the researcher intends to do very soon, using different research methods that are included in the quantitative example etc. (Chatzidimou & Stamovlasis, 2014).

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