

# A review of Assessment Models in Higher Education and Implication for Vietnam's Regional Integration Efforts

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**Abstract** – In the context of regionalization and internationalization of higher education, quality assurance is considered an important passport to such efforts. Together with teaching and learning, assessment of learner's learning is a complex issue, which receives a great deal of attention and triggers most research concerning innovations in higher education. In this regard, a clearer understanding of current assessment models among the stakeholders of higher education, especially at the faculty level in Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs), will help middle academic administrators better prepare their program for integration efforts. This paper aims to (i) give an overview of current assessment models applicable to the teaching and learning at HEIs, (ii) briefly describe some common practices related to how students' learning is assessed at the faculties or department (hereafter referred to as departments) of foreign languages, say English in this study, of some selected Vietnamese HEIs, and (iii) identify major implications and suggestions for regional integration among those institutions from the perspective of learning assessment. The paper identified four major findings in light of learning assessment theories applicable to the context of Vietnam.

**Keywords** – Assessment Models, Challenges, Integration, Higher Education, Vietnam.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Assessment of student learning is a complex issue, receiving a great deal of attention and triggering most research concerning innovations in higher education. In Vietnam, in the last two decades since early 2000s, different stakeholders have made great efforts in improving how the students' performance are evaluated and assessed. On the verge of regional integration, a clearer understanding of current assessment models among the stakeholders of higher education, especially at the faculty level in Vietnamese higher education institutions (HEIs), will help middle academic managers better prepare their program for integration efforts. In this regard, the article aims to (i) give an overview of current assessment models applicable to the teaching and learning at HEIs, (ii) briefly describe some common practices related to how students' learning is assessed at the faculties or department (hereafter referred to as departments) of foreign languages, say English in this study, of some selected Vietnamese HEIs, and (iii) identify major implications and suggestions for regional integration among those institutions from the perspective of learning assessment.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *An Overview of Models of Learning Assessment at Higher Education Level*

The last two decades has seen an urgent call for assessment reform at higher education institutions (HEIs). In fact, *traditional assessment* practices which heavily rely on discrete items and statistical tools have been greatly challenged by a wide range of factors such as innovations and initiatives in cognitive science (Hager & Butler, 1996), the requirement of sustainable assessment in a world of lifelong learning (Boud, 2000), and the need of integration under the influence of internationalization in higher education (Vinther & Slethaug, 2013). In this regard, there is a growing body of literature proposing assessment models from various perspectives to address the focal question: "What does it take to improve assessment in a university?"

Hager & Butler (1996) suggested adopting *judgmental model* as an alternative to the traditional scientific measurement model, basing their idea on the belief that testing and assessment in HEIs should primarily be rooted in "professional practice, skill levels or occupational competencies" rather than assessment of mere knowledge so that the students are actually well-prepared for the reality at the future workplace. This viewpoint comes along with the new understandings of cognition which indicate that capacity lies in the reasoning process and can develop through our interaction with different contexts. Accordingly, assessment in HEIs should be better aligned to the complexity of practices and procedures that students are expected to perform, entailing application of innovations such as "problem-based learning, education for capacities, and portfolio-based performance assessment". In this regard, the traditional scientific measurement model which has long dominated assessment practices with overuse of multiple-choice tests and discrete chunks no longer seems sufficient despite its practicality. All these factors pave the way for the introduction of judgmental model whereby students' capacity should be assessed, as the term suggests, on evidence accumulation in a similar way to a legal process. This new model includes 3 levels: (1) assessment of knowledge, attitudes and skills (scientific measurement); (2) performance in simulated or practice domain; and (3) personal competence in the practice domain.

Also, *formative assessment* has been widely discussed as an innovation for educational assessment at tertiary level. This term refers to a shift in assessment objectives, moving from mainly documenting students' outcomes (summative assessment) to primarily providing

information to enhance teaching and learning during a course/program (formative assessment) (Bennette, 2011). For a better understanding of how formative assessment can take place within classrooms, Cowie & Bell (1999) worked out an action model (as shown in Figure 1) which suggests the interaction between *two* kinds of its –*planned* and *interactive*. Planned formative assessment entails a 3-stage process in which teachers elicit assessment information using planned specific assessment activities, interpret and take action on the information. It is used mainly with the whole class for information about the learning progress. Meanwhile, interactive formative assessment is characterized by teachers’ noticing information in the context of the learning activities, recognizing its significance and responding accordingly. As the term indicates, this kind of formative assessment spontaneously occurs during teacher-student interaction and consequently, is mainly intended to individual students or small groups. The connection of these two forms lies in the purposes of formative assessment in that the regular switch from one kind to the other results from whether attention is paid to the whole class or individuals.

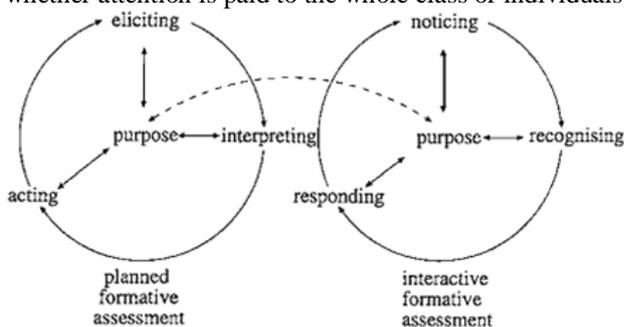


Fig. 1. A Model of Formative Assessment (Cowie & Bell, 1999)

Likewise, Yorke (2003) drew a distinction between formal and informal formative assessment in a similar way to planned and interactive. The author, however, suggested that much of the model proposed by Cowie and Bell (1999) relies on teachers’ intention and a comprehensive model of formative assessment should be much broader with reference to other factors such as the subject/discipline structure, educator/assessor’s professional knowledge and understanding of students’ developmental stages, as well as theories of communication and interpretation. Then, another model of formative assessment is built up, indicating a more detailed sequence of what is expected to take place in case a student’s formal task is submitted for formative assessment.

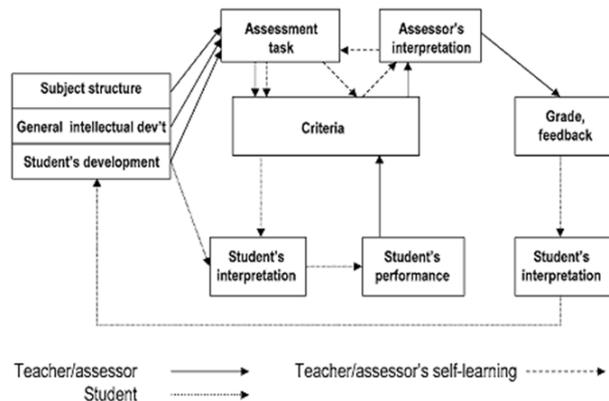


Fig. 2. The process of Formative Assessment applied to a formal task (Yorke, 2003)

From *learner-centered* perspective, Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) re-interpreted the concept of formative assessment, emphasizing that its main function is to provide information (feedback) on students’ performance for learning enhancement. Their arguments are centered around the idea of sustainable assessment (Boud, 2000) whereby formative assessment and feedback should be used in support of students’ autonomy in a learning society. Accordingly, the idea that feedback is only messages about students’ performance transmitted from teachers is rejected. The authors instead asserted that self-regulation already forms naturally via students’ internal feedback gained from interaction among different factors such as cognition, motivation, beliefs, goals, behavior, outcomes, etc. As a consequence, students should be central to all the feedback processes and play an active role in their own learning/assessment. In this regard, the model of formative assessment is modified with reference to 7 feedback principles to support students’ self-regulation: (1) clarify what good performance is, (2) facilitate self-assessment, (3) deliver high quality feedback information, (4) encourage teacher and peer dialogue, (4) encourage positive motivation and self-esteem, (6) provide opportunities to close the gap, and (7) use feedback to improve teaching.

In an attempt to make use of both *formative* and *summative* assessment, Harlen and James (1997) reviewed their different functions and characteristics, then indicating a possible link between them. While formative assessment is part of teaching with diagnostic information to promote students’ learning, summative assessment is intended to measure students’ achievement with strong alignment to criteria and test reliability. It was suggested that pieces of information about students’ capacity obtained through formative assessment can be used summatively as long as they are compared to external criteria of students’ developmental stages, the criteria are employed holistically, and reliability is ensured among different teachers/assessors. Similarly, Bennett (2011) renewed the concept of formative assessment, suggesting neither absolute summative nor formative assessment. In fact, the former in addition to its focus on performance report (Assessment of Learning-AoL) can also contribute to students’ learning if carefully designed and conducted.

Likewise, teachers while exercise the latter to provide information for modifying instruction and enhancing students' learning (Assessment for Learning-AfL) cannot ignore their knowledge about students' achievement. Consequently, the author proposed a more comprehensive concept of the two terms, drawing a relationship between them regarding whether the purpose of assessment is more intended to AoL or AfL. In this regard, an action model of formative assessment called KLT (Keeping Learning on Track program) is introduced as an illustration, entailing five key strategies: (1) sharing learning expectations (i.e. those about how to succeed) , (2) questioning (i.e. designing effective classroom activities to obtain information about learning), (3) feedback, (4) self-assessment, and (5) peer-assessment.

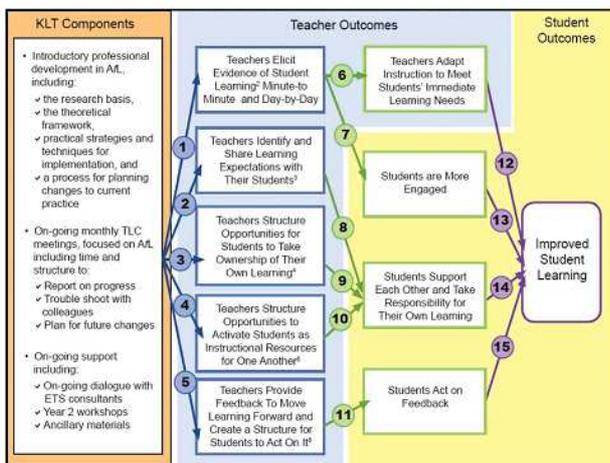


Fig. 3. The KLT theory of action (ETS, 2009; as cited in Bennett, 2011)

As far as integration in higher education is concerned, Vinther and Slethaug (2013) warned that assessment at HEIs is likely to be prone to the pressure of global benchmark, leading to a wide range of undesired consequences such as lack of autonomy, domination of standardized testing rather than holistic assessment, over-emphasis on policy-based framework at the cost of nationally or regionally based pedagogy, etc. Educational integration itself is not beneficial and satisfactory through merely adopting an international test framework without taking the local characteristics into consideration. In this regard, it was suggested that innovations and initiatives in teaching/assessment should be implemented in a *well-blended approach* to take advantage of both international and national values.

This section has so far reviewed a few key assessment ideas and models over the last two decades in response to assessment reform at HEIs. Obviously, the key arguments have been centered around assessment innovations and initiatives whereby students are central to education through valid assessment of occupational competencies, learning enhancement, and self-regulation. It is also worth noting that assessment at HEIs while aims at students as the global citizens should retain their national characteristics as well.

### III. METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

Based on the review of the key related literature above, this article reflects on the current practices of assessment at some faculties/departments of English at selected HEIs in Vietnam. As a partial report of the larger-scale project that investigated the current status of regional and/or international integration efforts among at departmental level of English at five major HEIs in Vietnam, one selected institution per large city including Hanoi, Danang City, Hue City, Ho Chi Minh City and Can Tho City. The selection of these HEIs was intentionally done on the basis of their national reputation in terms of their notable development history since the country's liberation and their large number of enrollees and graduate each year. They are all public institutions with a history of more than 30 years of operation. The real names of the faculties and studied HEIs are encoded as Inst. A, B, C, D and E and Dept. A, B, C, D and E respectively) and kept anonymous for ethical commitment while collecting data from them.

Related to internationalization of academic programs at these faculties, as a part of the larger-scale project, this study partially investigates the current practice of assessment at these selected faculties, the data of which were obtained from face-to-face interviews with their department heads, deans (or vice deans) and a group of two-three teachers as well as from analysis of assessment methods presented in the course syllabi from these cases, mainly focusing on the regular undergraduate programs. The main aim here was to understand how assessment was manifested and incorporated in their programs and curricula, from the perspective of the academic managers at the selected cases.

Specifically in the context of Vietnam, the investigation and analysis of the selected departments' assessment practices were based on six important foci in terms of (i) academic administrator's understanding of theoretical background for assessment, (ii) efforts in regional integration, (iii) alignment with national standards of outcomes, (iv) construction of test item banks, (v) types of assessment strategies and/or approaches commonly applied in the curriculum, and (vi) existence of on-going training on testing/ assessment issues. The analysis of the data collected was a basis for suggestions on the context of teaching and learning at these faculties or similar ones in Vietnam.

### IV. HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE PRACTICES OF LEARNING ASSESSMENT AT THE SELECTED CASES

Information and data collected were specifically presented in within-case analysis and then cross-case analysis of the five departments' practices. While the within-case analysis portrayed a different 'picture' of each selected department in how assessment was viewed by the departmental administrators, what their concerns were and how assessment of learning and for learning were employed in the teaching and learning at their departments, the cross-case analysis provides a more

general “context” of assessment across the five departments.

Despite the fact that the practices differed from one another, the analysis was made simpler in terms of ‘existence’ (‘exhibited’, ‘evident’, etc.) or ‘non-existence’ (or ‘non-exhibited’, ‘not evident’, which also includes not clearly seen/observed or documented) of a certain assessment issue or focus. Table 1 attempts to visualize the current realities of assessment at the selected departments up to the time of study.

Table 1. Summary of assessment practices at the selected departments

Major foci	Selected Vietnamese institutions (Inst.)				
	Dept. A	Dept. B	Dept. C	Dept. D	Dept. E
Understanding of theoretical background for assessment	Evident	Not clearly evident	Evident	Not clearly evident	Not clearly evident
Efforts in regional integration	Yes, through quality assurance (AUN-QA)	Not evident, aware of but not yet committed to	Yes, through quality assurance (AUN-QA)	Not evident, aware of but not yet committed to	Not evident, aware of but not yet committed to
Alignment with national standards of outcomes (English competence)	Yes, CEFR-based standards set by MOET	Yes, CEFR-based standards set by MOET	Yes, CEFR-based standards set by MOET	Yes, CEFR-based standards set by MOET	Yes, CEFR-based standards set by MOET
Construction of test item banks	Yes, documented but not well-planned	Yes, documented but not well-planned	Yes, documented but not well-planned	Yes, documented but not well-planned	Yes, documented but not well-planned
Types of assessment strategies commonly used	Oral presentations Group assignments Individual tasks Project-based tasks Class quizzes Class exams Internship portfolios	Oral presentations Group assignments Individual tasks Project-based tasks Class quizzes Class exams			
Training on testing/assessment issues	Yes, but insufficient	Yes, but insufficient	Yes, but insufficient	Yes, but insufficient	Yes, but insufficient

Notes:

CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Language competence)

AUN-QA (Quality Assurance Network – Quality Assurance)

MOET: Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam

As shown in Table 1, it is commonly found among these cases that learning assessment strategies take similar types and format such as oral presentations by groups or individuals, group assignments and project-based tasks, individual tasks, class quizzes and exams. However, the interview results and analysis of documented regular syllabi revealed a *lack of well-articulated statement of “teaching and learning strategy” as well as “assessment strategy or philosophy”*. Though the practices did not go really smoothly like the from one end (‘existent’) to the other (‘non-existent’), it would have been more convincing if such crucial philosophical and guiding statements of teaching, learning and assessing had been well-formulated and informed to the stakeholders involved, i.e. the teachers and the learners.

In the trends of internationalization and regionalization of higher education, *quality assurance is considered a fundamental and initial step towards credit transferability and mutual recognition of degrees among the member nations of ASEAN*. As part of the requirements by the accreditation guidelines at program level among the ASEAN countries (AUN, 2011 & 2015), ‘teaching and learning strategy’ or ‘philosophy’ and ‘learner assessment

strategy’ should be explicitly stated in the curriculum and well-implemented in the teaching and learning. In this paper, it was found that two out of five selected departments that were more proactive to and better prepared for accreditation efforts at program level strongly advocated the updated requirements of quality assurance in higher education, which can be clearly seen in their incorporation of new approaches in assessing the students learning. The in-depth interviews showed the administrators and teachers alike were making efforts in bringing new ways of assessing their students’ learning through various means. One noticeable example was Case A’s effort in internationalizing its curriculum by inclusion of foreign exposure and internship, one evaluation criterion of which requires the students to accomplish an internship portfolio that incorporate all of their real-life and work-related experience. The guidelines for evaluating these portfolios put much emphasis on students’ critical thinking, creativity and their own reflection on the learning process. This second finding reflects the importance of quality assurance in regional integration efforts of ASEAN countries.

Another important finding from these cases is the *over-emphasis of standardized test in evaluating the learners’ performance*. Regarding the English language competence for example, all the studied departments had to ensure by different means that their graduates must obtain Level-5 (according to the six-level national standards of English under the Vietnam’s National Project of Foreign Languages 2020, which is mainly based on the 6-level CEFR released by European Union) or an equivalent international certificate like IELTS, TOEFL or the like. It is should be noticed that English is now used as an official and common medium of communication and exchange among the ASEAN nations. It can be argued that while using standardized tests is very good and is worth doing to ensure quality of an expected English-major graduate, the over-emphasis of such standardized tests may have caused much anxiety and opponent criticism on the technicality of assessment. The assessment, in itself not as right or wrong, is expected to promote learning and for learning than just to pass a test.

The fourth major finding from perspective of learning assessment is *the implied challenges common amongst the selected cases at departmental level*. The application of assessment for learning and of learning are not really well “spelled out” in light of updated theories of assessment as somewhat discussed earlier in this paper. Assessment at higher education level, especially in the context of Vietnam’s regional integration efforts, is expected to help promote the spirit of life-long learning. There seems a stronger need to have more initiatives to prepare the students’ for their integration in the new era of education in the twenty-first century, where the students are expected to fully develop and readily engage into the multicultural environment, like ASEAN countries in the new community.

## V. IMPLICATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

The four major findings above lead to the following implications and suggestions for the stakeholders of academic managements, especially the Deans, Department Heads or the like as well as those in charge of curriculum design, implementation, evaluation, revision and updating.

- The academic departments and faculties should *adhere to (and benchmark) national or regional accreditation guidelines and standards* for updating and revision of their curricula. This is necessary since quality assurance, and then accreditation, is the basic and essential step prior to any credit transferability and mutual degree recognition between and among institutions, either at the national level or regional level (i.e. ASEAN). The ASEAN higher education institutions, through their respective academic faculties and department, are expected to promote stronger sharing of best practices, preparing for a closer regional integration in higher education.
- The academic departments and faculties should *well articulate and clearly disseminate the philosophy of teaching and learning as a guiding principle in design and implementation of their academic curricula*. A closer investigation into the requirements of quality assurance guidelines in the ASEAN region and the world will help them better approach and implement the theory of quality assurance in their practice of designing, evaluating and updating the curriculum towards a better regional integration effort.
- Besides using the standardized tests, say English international tests, it is suggested that the syllabus designers and curriculum or academic managers should *effectively vary and integrate the use different strategies in assessing of and assessing for learning in order to motivate the learners better as well as promote their continuous learning towards better integration into the global world*. Updated theories in assessment are expected to be incorporated into the course design and implementation, thus widening the scope of evaluation while deepening knowledge enhancement for students' maximal learning and accomplishment.
- The departments and faculties must have *more proactive attitude and be more 'open' in designing and managing the curriculum for better regional integration*. Inclusion of courses that promote better understanding among the nations, like intercultural communication, ASEAN studies, global citizenship, among others should be well observed and enhanced in curriculum design. Assessing of these courses should take into serious consideration on how they can train and produce graduates with attributes highly adaptable to the new context of ASEAN countries.

## VI. CONCLUSION

While summarizing and overviewing the theories on and related to assessment can be more enormous, the paper so far has discussed the different approaches towards assessing learners. The paper highlights major findings as

well as some key suggestions and implication for enhancing regional integration at program level.

## VII. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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