

Junior College Assessment Practices: Perspectives of the Departments

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Abstract: *The CPPA (Committee for the Policy and Practice of Assessment) was set up with the concern that the Junior College lacks an assessment policy. This paper presents a research study conducted by this committee with the aim of identifying current assessment practices, their strengths and weaknesses and what further alterations might be feasible to consider. A questionnaire was distributed to all Departments. This survey shows evidence that the preferred assessment practices are those that integrate both summative and formative modes. It also points out that there exists a desire for modifications in the external Matsec examinations mainly to include a measure of an institution-based assessment. Furthermore, this study recommends that a credit system and a Junior College Diploma be introduced within the College.*

Keywords: *Assessment policy, higher education, school management.*

Introduction

The Committee for the Policy and Practice of Assessment was set up in September 2002 with the aim, amongst others, of analysing critically current assessment practices at the Junior College with a view to proposing changes towards their improvement. The Committee's first priority was to gather data about assessment practices presently being used at the College, what changes are in the offing and what further alterations might be feasible to consider. Thus, a questionnaire was designed and distributed to all Area and Subject Coordinators at the Junior College as well as the Principal (Total N=19). The respondents were asked to answer a set of structured and semi-structured questions in consultation with the other Junior College academic staff.

The questionnaire was distributed and collected in December 2002. The response rate was satisfactory. The respondents returned the filled questionnaire and even though most parts of the questionnaire required the respondent to write down comments and not simply tick off answers, the responses were clear and coherent.

* This paper was written in conjunction with the CPPA Committee which included, the author, and Elsie Baldacchino M.Ed. [English Department; elsie.baldacchino@um.edu.mt], Mario Cutajar M.Ed. [Maltese Department; mario.cutajar@um.edu.mt], both at the University of Malta Junior College, Malta; and Saviour Rizzo M.Ed. [Sociology Department; University of Malta Workers' Participation Development Centre, Malta; saviour.rizzo@um.edu.mt].

Results

Of the nineteen questionnaires distributed, sixteen were returned. The results and analyses are outlined for each question. The small number of departments does not render statistical work feasible, so analyses carried out are of a more descriptive nature. They are also not specific to the department such that confidentiality is retained and no individual can be identified.

Question 1

This question dealt with the variety of different assessment techniques used and their relative importance to specific departments. Table 1 below summarises the findings. The first two columns indicate the frequency with which each assessment practice is being used, while the next two columns refer to the relative importance attached to these practices by the respondents.

Table 1

<i>Assessment Practice</i>	<i>Frequency</i>		<i>Rank Score</i>	<i>Rank</i>
	<i>Advanced</i>	<i>Intermediate</i>		
<i>Monthly Tests</i>	3	2	6	
<i>Term Tests</i>	9	10	22	1
<i>End of 1st Year tests</i>	7	6	13	4
<i>Mock Tests</i>	4	3	3	
<i>Practical/Lab Work</i>	4	2	6	
<i>Tutorials</i>	7	–	16	2
<i>Assignments</i>	8	5	16	2
<i>Seminar Presentation</i>	6	1	3	
<i>Concept Mapping</i>	–	–	0	
<i>Projects/Research</i>	4	3	9	5
<i>Others (3 different)</i>	3	3	3	

The data clearly indicate that Term tests are the assessment methods that are most widely used and also considered important by the different departments. Assignments are also deemed valuable especially since they are used at both Advanced and Intermediate levels. One should also note that tutorials rank second even though they are only available at Advanced level. Only seven departments reported using them and these departments must think highly of the utility of tutorials since they are ranked second overall. The value that tutorials would assume if they were extended to the Intermediate level cannot be overlooked. End of First Year Tests are also regarded as important assessment tools although they are not ranked as high as one would have expected.

From this result, it would seem that departments tend to use those assessment practices that have summative qualities. This may be due to the fact that these traditional practices have been the official mode of assessment sanctioned by the Junior College administration since its inception in 1995. However, of these summative practices, it seems that the more diagnostic are preferred such that Term Tests are favoured over End of First Year Test. Similarly tutorials and assignments, which combine summative and diagnostic functions, are also very much in use. On the other hand, more formative tools such as Monthly Tests, Seminars and Concept Mapping find little relevance.

Question 2

The aim of this question was to gather data about the assessment tools that do not form part of the Term mark assigned to students. Only five departments use tools that are not incorporated within the Term mark. These tools include Assignments, Practical Work and Seminars. Also one department commented that the Attendance is not being given any weighting vis-à-vis Term marks. This question does not provide a clear answer as to whether it would be useful to include these left-out scores into the Term mark. In general it would seem wiser, and perhaps fairer for the students, if all scores were to be taken into consideration in the final Term grade.

Question 3

As assessment practices vary over time, it is necessary to try and look at any of them that were previously used but have been discarded and the reasons for discontinuing them. Only six departments reported discarded practices and the reasons cited were very much overlapping in nature.

Table 2

<i>Assessment Tool</i>	<i>Reasons</i>
Mock tests (4 departments)	Time constraints are the most important here; specifically there is no time frame during which to carry out mocks, and is no time frame during which to carry out mocks, and seminars are too time-consuming. One department lamented that Mock tests had to be discontinued because students would photocopy the test paper while being excused during test session.
Seminar	
Half yearly test	

The termination of these tools was perceived as rather regrettable by the departments concerned. One should perhaps attempt to find the necessary time window during the year to carry out these mock tests; although in any such college-wide effort it still is questionable whether the benefits outweigh the costs.

Question 4

This question looked at innovative or even tried-and-tested ideas that departments intend to introduce within their portfolio of assessment tools. It is also useful to include with this list three other assessment tools that were added as 'Others' by respondents in question 1.

Table 3

<i>Question 4: Assessment Tools intended be to be introduced</i>	<i>Question 1: included as part of to 'Others' (already being used)</i>
Tests in lab work	Assessment of Notes File
Short questions test	Topic Test
Tutorials for Intermediate – once every fortnight	Fortnightly Work (Assignment)
Oral test to increase participation	

These results are indicative of the need of more diagnostic assessment that is direct and specific to particular areas of the curriculum, again as opposed to a final examination/test. However, one should note that tests and examinations are perhaps

still regarded as the best form of assessment since the focus of the innovations listed here is once again in the form of tests, even if under some other format.

Question 5

This was a specific question regarding the transition from First to Second Year. Two thirds of the respondents agreed with the present system of 70% end-of-year test and 30% monthly, claiming it as 'fair', 'well-balanced' and 'keeps students on the alert'. In other words the majority regard this system as a means of motivating students. The other third gave mixed responses. One argued that with the current system too many students are passing, while another one that too many are failing and that it is penalising students unduly. The argument extends to the percentage allocations which also received mixed criticism: some advocate 'more coursework' as opposed to others who deem the exam's percentage of 70% as 'too small.'

The end result seems to be that the present system strikes the right balance between continuous and summative assessment; then again some evidence that one could experiment with alternative systems is not altogether ruled out.

Question 6

Nearly all the respondents argued in favour of the End of First year Test retaining its failing basis (14 out of 16). The comments made were various and listed in the following Table. There was lack of consensus between those that advocated a stricter assessment and those that argue that it should be more lenient. One suggested that students who fail should be made to change subject. On the other hand, the reason given against the present system being retained is that it does not give enough credit to the work carried out throughout the year, so more weight to coursework is suggested.

Table 4

<i>Comments</i>		
<i>N = 14 in favour</i>		<i>N=2 against</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No miracles in 7 months (2nd year) • Up to standard • Identify unmotivated • Instil hard work ethic • Makes them study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too many F/ Too few F • Failures advised to change subject • Should be stricter with absentees • As a form of Evaluation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More weight to coursework • Exam is an arbitrary cut off point; undue penalty late in the year

Comparative analysis of the responses for question 4, 5 and 6 shows the End-of-Year Test as the only standard test that can offer a consistent continuum of the performance of the College students on one variable (curriculum subject). Coupling this to the need of more area/topic specific tests, rather than to the one-off opportunity that the End of First Year Test offers the students to show what they know, one should also specify the importance for such tests to be standardised for all students within one department. This leads to the next question.

Question 7

This question analysed the opinions in favour and against the introduction of a credit system similar to the one for undergraduates at the Junior College. This idea received very mixed judgements; ten were in favour, six against. Some were convinced that a credit system 'reduces stress' while enhancing motivation and ameliorating the students' output. Others were equally, if not more, certain that 'structural problems' would ultimately result in a system with 'more tests and less lectures'. Some of the language departments argue against a credit system since their current syllabus cannot be adapted to fit such a system and thus radical restructuring would be necessary.

One must add here that as with all educational reforms, it would be unwise to introduce such a scheme without proper research to analyse its impact on the managerial, administrative and above all educational and curricular level and how this affects all stakeholders. Brushing the whole issue under the carpet will not make it go away!

Question 8

Almost all of the respondents (12 out of 16) agreed that the external Matriculation examination, offered by Matsec of the University of Malta, should include a measure of continuous school-based assessment. This is not surprising as this is one of the few University examinations that completely exclude some form of internal assessment. The issue of what is external and what is internal to the Junior College can somewhat be problematic on two accounts. First, the Junior College is an institution of the University of Malta and secondly, such a small nation may not have the luxury of having too many qualified academics to serve as moderators.

The respondents suggest a weighting that ranges between 10% and 50%. This variation underlines the different outlooks that different departments hold. The mean percentage turns out to be 28% while the mode is 30% - in line with the End of First Year transition.

Question 9

The Junior College Diploma received near unanimous assent from the department heads. Thirteen out of sixteen respondents agreed with the idea of a Junior College Diploma that would help students’ job hunting and motivation. The College would also gain more visibility and develop its identity. The disagreements with this suggestion were limited to the Diploma being of too little value and not up to International standard. Naturally, these reasons both for and against are speculative and only if the College has such a Diploma could one gauge its value in any sphere.

Table 5

<i>Comments</i>	
<i>13 in favour</i>	<i>3 against</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help students who do not go to University to find a job • JC gains recognition/identity • Specific Diploma awards • Contiguous to University • Enhances Motivation/Incentive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very little value • Not up to International standard

One must add here that a College Diploma would be awarded on the basis of the students’ performance. Furthermore, the Diploma should be devised such that it has the advantage of acknowledging and accrediting the students’ achievement on two years. This would be different from the current Matsec Certificate that in its pure summative form ignores completely other forms of academic performance, participation in curricular and extra-curricular activities, modes of learning and attitudes. A College Diploma would thus be more formative and holistic in its nature and on its own should suffice to award, to accredit and to give a legal assurance of entry to University Faculties.

Question 10

The final comments focused on a variety of issues. In some of these comments, the coursework was viewed as being possibly defective, so ‘Matsec (Board) has to be careful’ if the coursework were to be incorporated within the Matriculation Certificate. Another respondent argued that the coursework implied too much administrative work that might bog down the system.

Some suggestions pertained to piecemeal improvement of the present scheme of things like the reduction of class size and the improvement of communication

with parents. Both of these suggestions are backed by extensive international research that correlate parental involvement and class size with student achievement. Another suggestion was the introduction of Half Yearly examinations. However, this does not seem to be supported by all respondents as it is not mentioned by them in other parts of the questionnaire.

On a more radical note, one respondent explained that the volume of the syllabuses at Advanced and Intermediate level should be spread over three, not two, years of study. On the other hand, another respondent argued that students should be made to pursue studies at Intermediate level only during their First year. During the Second year the students would be asked to specialise at Advanced level a selection of curricular subjects from the ones that they had studied in the First year.

Finally, one respondent argued that the College Diploma should be contiguous with University such that it should be the entry requirement in the respective Faculties.

Conclusions

The high response rate and the quality of the responses indicate that the lecturing staff at the Junior College is reflective on this issue and their insights about it are quite perceptive. The audit phase of this study showed that the preferred techniques for assessing students were neither wholly summative nor wholly formative. Tutorials, Assignments and also Term tests correspond to such characteristics. Furthermore, even the techniques that departments intend or are planning to introduce are of a similar nature. It still has to be seen whether the more summative practices have been abandoned through conviction that they could be replaced with something better or simply because of time constraints.

As such the respondents still see an important role for more summative assessment. For instance a vast majority is in agreement that the End of First Year Test is to retain its failing basis as there can be 'no miracles in 7 months.' Similarly the introduction of a credit system did not receive unanimous support. But there is still a rather quiescent desire for change. The respondents were overwhelmingly in favour of modifying the Matsec examination by including a measure of institution-based assessment, some going to such lengths as suggesting a 40–50% share.

In an analogous fashion, most respondents agreed almost enthusiastically with the idea of a Junior College Diploma, so much so that the comments in this question were rather extensive and sometimes overlapped into the final question. In effect, this can bridge the gap between the College's expressed need for more recognition and the students' gains in assessment tools that reflect their efforts better. At present, the assessment practices at the Junior College are limited in scope and outcome since the system is conditioned by external factors remote to

the specific circumstances of learning at the Junior College. As such the Junior College lecturers are in no direct way influencing the accreditation of the students in their charge.

In essence, this was definitely not an exhaustive analysis of assessment practices at the Junior College but it was certainly useful in pointing out certain trends and also in identifying strategies for future policies. Perhaps before putting to paper the final word one should embark on further study. That is to say this is not the end but the beginning towards a much desired best-fit assessment policy.

Recommendations

1. As regards the assessment practices themselves, the idea of trying to balance out the rigour and reliability of summative assessment and the diagnostic ability of formative assessment seems to be the best viable option. Perhaps there should be some more space for experimentation with new techniques within a standardised framework. For instance, the proposal of having fortnightly tutorials for Intermediate courses seems a sensible suggestion provided that logistic problems are adequately addressed.
2. The present system of transition from the First to the Second Year is perceived as the best practice by the respondents. There seems to be no better alternative to it in the present structure, especially bearing in mind its validity as the only standardised test. Introducing continuous standardised assessment would make the system fairer by enabling the student to move towards a more holistic learning.
3. With respect to the introduction of a credit system in the Junior College, a two-year pilot study with a select number of departments could be embarked upon to forestall any problems encountered. This committee could also initiate a feasibility study with a select number of departments. Once the piloting of this system is started, this committee would monitor its functioning and research its practicality and applicability to other departments. The credit system would also enable the Junior College to provide more effective and useful breakdown of a students' course of study. Transcripts of credits, besides offering a source of revenue, are deemed very useful in seeking employment and also to continue further studies abroad that are expected to increase in the near future.
4. Another aspect of assessment concerns the Matriculation Certificate. The Junior College should definitely start putting some pressure on Matsec to effectively include a measure of continuous assessment within the Certificate result. The Matriculation Certificate in one way or another shapes and influences the modes of assessment practised at the Junior College. Unless there is some form of restructuring of this examination, changes effected in assessment practices at the Junior College may only be cosmetic in nature. This restructuring should be

aimed at enabling the Junior College to address a wider range of student skills. This would ensure that the work of the student throughout the two years of study has a direct reflection on the final grade.

5. Another open front with both Matsec and the University Rectorate seems to be the introduction of a Junior College Diploma to be awarded in conjunction with Matsec. At a time when young people are seeking employment in various European countries, this Diploma may provide the added value to the curriculum vitae of Junior College students. In fact the European CV format asks candidates to include their personal, social and organisational skills and competencies. Thus the important benefits that would accrue from such an endeavour far outweigh the administrative costs incurred. It is therefore being suggested that talks with the necessary officials be started as soon as possible.

Finally, a more evaluative study into assessment practices should be undertaken, perhaps on a departmental level and also including the views of the students. This Committee intends to embark on more qualitative study to analyse any relevant local and international literature that is available. This is aimed at making more recommendations towards achieving an Assessment Policy that should reflect its worth to education.

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