

Potentials and Challenges of Student Progress Portfolio Innovation Assessment for Quality in an ODL Context: A Case of The Open University of Tanzania

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Abstract: *This paper aims at stimulating discussion on Students Progress Portfolio (SPP) Innovation in assessment. It analyses the potential and challenges of SPP as well as how it can be harnessed to improve assessment practices and its contribution to quality education. The paper is based on a recent qualitative research which used The Open University of Tanzania as a case study. The objectives of the study were to identify the knowledge of tutors and students on SPP innovation; analyse the information that student needed to fill in the SPP; and to examine the views of the students and tutors on SPP. Participants included: 23 students and 7 academic staff. Already filled 10 SPP forms were also analysed. The findings indicated that the potentials of SPP included that: it empowers students to participate in their own assessment; instils in students a desire to learn; enhances students' better understanding of their learning skills and the need for improvement. SPP also allow tutors to identify gaps in students learning. The challenges found included: Lack/limited knowledge on SPP; discussions focused more on content rather than learning process. The conclusion was that SPP potentials outweighed challenges. The recommendations were that knowledge on SPP should be enhanced amongst students and teachers; SPP assessment should focus more on developing and improving students' capacities for learning to learn; SPP should be graded; and there should be regular evaluation of tutors and students experiences with SPP.*

INTRODUCTION

Portfolio assessment is a relatively new approach to assessment of students' progress. It was not until in the late 1980s that interest in using portfolios for assessment of progress in different educational setting grew (Belanoff and Dickson, 1991). Prior to 1980s the behavioural approach to education was used. In the behavioural approach, assessment is based on testing basic knowledge and the proof of learning is seen as changing the behaviours. Thus, tests such as multiple choices, true false and matching item were used for assessment. However, the behavioural approach (tradition) exhibits weaknesses of promoting memorization rather than conceptual understanding and a focus on small, discrete components of the domain (Dochy, 2001). Portfolio assessment, on the other hand, is based on the constructivist approach. In constructivism the model of learning that is underpinning assessment is more student centred (Shepard 2000).

Portfolio assessment is a procedure of assessment that is based on student portfolio. According to Venn, (2000) student portfolio is a systematic collection of student work and related material that depicts a student's activities, accomplishments, and achievements in one or more school subjects. Venn (2000) further contends that there are two major types of portfolio including Process and Product portfolios. A process portfolio documents the stages

of learning and provides a progressive record of student growth, while a product portfolio demonstrates mastery of a learning task. However it is possible to employ an assessment procedure that comprise element of both process and product portfolio. The Student Progress Portfolio (SPP) used by the Open University of Tanzania seems to encompass elements of both types.

The Open University of Tanzania (OUT) is an educational institution that offers higher education programmes through open and distance learning (ODL). Previously as part of the assessment students had to do two assignments, two Timed Tests and an annual examination for each course one had registered for. As students body continued to grow, this procedure of assessment proved to be problematic both academically and administratively. **Academically**, staff spent more time to mark large numbers of scripts and it was not easy to verify if assignments were original, plagiarized or copied work. **Administratively**, assessment became a very expensive venture. Large numbers of scripts necessitated the engagement of many part-time lecturers to assess. During the 2008/9 academic year, the OUT introduced innovations in its assessment procedures. This included the reduction of timed tests from two to one, and the replacement of assignments with the Student Progress Portfolio (SPP) to monitor student learning progress.

The Open University of Tanzania SPP is a folder which contains student's artifacts of what he/she has studied in a course. The folder consists of 32 pages in which, the first 9 pages contain instructions and spaces for student to fill in the details of the course studied in each academic year; also spaces for tutors to grant visa for each specific subject after student-tutor discussion. Page 9 up to 32, a student is supposed to describe each course listed earlier for a specific year by following the four items discussed below. The first item is course material used: all study materials including the Open University manuals, reference books, journals and websites that he/she used to access information and knowledge. Second item is Learning Outcomes under which lists of what are the most important elements of knowledge, practical skills, intellectual skills, transferable skills that a student gained from a specific course are presented. Third item is about difficult areas: parts of the course that are considered to be most difficult to understand. The fourth is suggestions for improvement in which the student is expected to write what he/she considers pertinent to be rectified in order to improve knowledge transfer in a specific course. Lastly is space for signatures which should be done before the portfolio is presented to the tutor. Below this there is a space for tutors' signature.

The four items that are highlighted above, guide student-tutor discussions during face to face sessions which are undertaken just before the annual examination. When the tutor is satisfied VISA is granted for each subject by signing the visa column for the respective subject on the registration page.

The authors of this paper aim at stimulating discussion on Students Progress Portfolio (SPP) Innovation in assessment. Potentials and challenges of SPP, and its contribution to quality education, as well as how it can be harnessed to improve assessment practices are analysed. The argument is that knowledge of SPP by both students and the tutors; effective tutor student discussions; and good and fruitful feedback are essential for the SPP innovation assessment. The discussion is based on a recent qualitative research entitled "Potentials and challenges of Students Progress Portfolio Innovation Assessment in an Open and Distance Learning Context: A Case of The Open University of Tanzania.

Objectives of the study

The aim of the study was to investigate the potentials and challenges of students' progress portfolio innovation assessment in higher learning institution in particular, OUT. The specific objectives were to: determine the knowledge of tutors and students about Student Progress Portfolio innovation assessment; explore the information that student needed to fill in the Student Progress Portfolio; to analyse the tutor-students discussions and the feedback of SPP assessment and to determine the students' and tutors views on the potentials of SPP.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Factors that influence innovations in Education

Literatures have indicated key factors that influence innovation in assessment in educational institutions to include: aspiration to encourage students to see learning as a collaborative one rather than a competitive one (Falchikov and Thompson, 2008); to develop students learning through embracing new perspective and engendering abilities to understand, analyse and interpret (Falchikov and Thompson, 2008); a need to produce graduates who have transferable skills that are valued by prospective employers (Falchikov and Thompson 2008); worries about declining standards of education (Byan and Clegg 2006); empowering learners and encouraging their attention and dialogue in the enhancement of learning and performance (Falchikov and Thompson, 2008).

Overview on inception of portfolio assessment worldwide

Portfolio assessment is a relatively new approach to assessment of students' progress. It was not until in the late 1980s that interest in using portfolios for assessment of progress in different educational setting grew (Belanoff and Dickson, 1991). Prior to 1980s the behavioral approach to education was used. In the behavioral approach assessment is based on testing basic knowledge and the proof of learning is seen as changing the behaviors. Thus, tests such as multiple choices, true false and matching item are used for assessment. However, the behavioral approach (tradition) exhibits weaknesses of promoting memorization rather than conceptual understanding and a focus on small, discrete components of the domain (Dochy, 2001). Portfolio assessment, on the other hand, is based on the constructivist approach. In constructivism the model of learning that is underpinning assessment is more student centred (Shepard 2000). Portfolio gives reliable and dynamic data about students' for teachers and the student himself/herself; it provides clear information about students potentials and their weaknesses and helps teachers in planning for students' progress (MONE, 2004).

Effectiveness of Students Progress Portfolio (SPP) in Educational Assessment

Existing literature Nicol et al 2004) indicate that in order for the Student Progress Portfolio assessment to be effective a number of factors need to be considered. The factors include: *knowledge of SPP* by both the student and the tutor; effective tutor- student discussion; and fruitful feedback. It is argued (Wagner 1998; Nicol et al 2004) that being knowledgeable about SPP can lead into self-confidence for tutors and students during tutor – student discussions. It can also result into curiosity, inspire interest on the work done, motivate students to work on something they know, self-efficacy as well as reality and originality (Nicol et al 2004). *Effective tutor -student discussions* entail fair and reliable assessment. For the SPP to be reliable, it requires appropriate planning and construction, clear and detailed

assessment criteria; and appropriate student self-assessment in the portfolio process. This in turn creates critical, active thinkers who can take responsibility for their own learning. According to Nicol et al (2004). good feedback practice leads into facilitating the development of self-assessment in learning; encouraging tutors – students dialogue; helps in clarifying what good performance is; provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance; delivering high quality information about learning; as well as encouraging positive motivation, beliefs and self-esteem. The literatures highlighted above indicate the criteria for SPP to be effective. The authors intended to find out how was the SPP at The Open University of Tanzania effectively implemented?

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative methodology. Views of students and tutors on students' progress portfolio (SPP) procedure used by The OUT were obtained. Themes were created based on the views of respondents. Discussion of the results/findings evolved around these themes. The study area included Kinondoni, and Ilala Regional centres. Using convenience sampling strategy a total of 23 students in the 2nd year of study and above were sampled. All eleven (11) academic staff of Ilala Regional Centre were requested to participate in the study but only 6 academic staff were able to do so. Out of the 2 directors of respective regional centres only one director of a regional centre was available for the study.

Data were collected through interviews, focused group discussion and document analysis. Interviews with 8 students involved on issues such as knowledge of SPP and its usefulness in learning, knowledge on how to fill in the SPP items, who should be eligible for making an assessment and lastly how did they see the tutor – student discussions during assessment. Interview with tutors was meant to get their views on student-tutor discussions and the SPP assessment procedures in general. Interview with the Regional Director intended to get views on the preparations for SPP discussions at the level of regional centre. The focus group discussion included 15 students in second year of study and above. The focus of the discussion was on the prior knowledge students had on SPP; challenges students encountered during assessment and benefit of the SPP.

Already filled 10 SPP were also collected from students who were involved in the focused group discussion – equal numbers (5) of SPP from each participating regional centre were included in the study to identify similarities and/or differences in filling in the SPP items; also to observe the extent of students understanding and ability to fill in the SPP. Content and discourse analysis were employed in analyzing the data collected.

Research Findings

Knowledge about SPP and its Usefulness

Tutors and students were asked on whether they had information and knowledge before embarking on the SPP activity. Students who were interviewed said to have been given the information by their Director of Regional Centre (DRC) the first day of the face to face session.

One third year student (S2) said:

"My first day to hear about portfolio is 2010 during face to face which was done at the Headquarters; the DRCs stood up with a portfolio and showed it to the students. It was my first time to see the portfolio and to understand its usage in academics."(Student 2, personal communication, May 2012).

This was supported by the Director of the regional Centre (QI) who reported that:

"Last year (academic year 2010/2011) during face to face session I gave students a general introduction in which I emphasized that portfolio is a mode of assessment which replaced the assignments" (Regional Director, personal communication,, may 2012).

However, both students and tutors expressed that they did not get enough information and knowledge about SPP. As one tutor (T1) explained:

"...it is my second time to make an assessment on the already filled Student progress portfolio.....we were not given detailed knowledge on how to make an assessment..... what I remember in 2009 the DVC academic introduced it in the staff meeting and he said the SPP is going to be used soon; what I remember, copies were provided to academicians so as to see what is included in it (the spp)" (Tutor 1, personal communication, June 2012).

The same was reported by another tutor (T2) who said:

"I remember to have seen the guidelines on how to make an assessment in 2011/2012 academic year..... but we have not been given a seminar or a workshop on how to assess"(Tutor 2, personal communication, June 2012).

Among the 15 students in the group, three of them had heard about portfolio for the first time from their fellow students who were in the third year.

Knowledge on How to Fill the SPP

The findings show that students were not given enough information and knowledge on how to fill in the SPP especially the four items including material used, learning outcome, difficulty areas, and suggested improvement. The students explained that this made them feel inefficient in filling in the portfolio which lead some of the students to sometimes just copy what others have written.

As one student (S3) explained:

"...in filling in the portfolio, I'm waiting outside for a person who has been assessed. I copy the way he has written..... The tutor won't identify it if is tired"(Student 3, Personal communication, may 2012).

Students found some of the four items hard to comprehend:

"I am supposed to write references on course material used,... I am in the second year I never saw a study manual in the department I am using course outlines that guides us". The student (S3) stated. (Student 3, Personal communication, may 2012).

Furthermore when students were asked on the items that are difficult to fill, majority of the students in focused group discussion indicated that learning outcomes was the most difficult item to complete. As one third year student (S5) stated;

"I don't understand what to fill in the learning outcome; I also don't know the meaning of the learning outcome" (Student 5, Personal communication, may 2012).

From the 10 already filled Students Progress Portfolio that were collected it was found that all the SPP had been filled differently. For instance in the learning outcome, some students had listed the subtopics from their course outlines, others had written the knowledge that they gained from the course.

On the suggested improvements item, a year three student (S6) stated:

"I don't know when it is said to provide the suggested improvement, do I suggest from what I see as difficult areas above, or I suggest on the improvement of the course or I give my opinion on a certain thing I feel necessary".(Student 6, Personal communication may 2012).

Similarly the tutors reported that they were facing some problems in assessing the four items in the SPP. Among 6 tutors who were interviewed only 1 reported to have no problems in assessing the four Items. However, 3 reported to have problem in assessing the learning outcome item; 1 in assessing suggested improvement, while 1 had problems in assessing the material used item.

Usefulness of the SPP in Academic Progress

Students who were involved in the FGD were of the view that the portfolio motivates students to study hard. One student stated as follows:

"By introducing the portfolio OUT encourages us students to study hard and do better in our final examination (Annual Examination)" The student continued: "By the time face to face approaches I try at least to pass through the manuals I have so that I can be able to answer questions asked by the tutor".(FGD, Personal communication, May 2012).

Similar views were expressed during interviews. One interviewee (S1). for example explained:

“Portfolio has allowed me to build the steps in pushing on my own learning and now I see those steps yielding results” (Student 1, Personal communication, May 2012)

The focused group discussion also revealed that at the faculty/ institute level portfolio assessment can be helpful in identifying shortage of study material and references; leading to plans for rectifying the deficit.

“if you take my portfolio you will find sentences of lack of study material under suggested improvement, because I want it to be improved since I am studying by using course outline” (FGD, Personal communication, may 2012). One member of the group argued.

Tutors also indicated that SPP was useful in encouraging students to learn.

“Students who are using the SPP properly are consulting more learning materials including those online” (Tutor 3, personal communication, May 2012) Said one tutor.

“If you get time to probe the students on what they have learnt, it is very impressive. They tell you some of the things you had not even thought of. I wish portfolios are graded...” (Tutor 3, Personal communication, May 2012) another tutor stated.

Levels of Assessment of the Students Progress Portfolio

Regarding the level of assessment, students in the FGD were asked whether they were assessed by the respective course tutors. Majority of the students indicated to have been assessed by a tutor from other faculties.

The above finding was in line with the tutors’ responses regarding the courses they had assessed. Majority of them indicated that they assessed courses not in their area of specialization.

Students in the FGD also revealed that sometimes students were not allowed to ask questions.

“In the last assessment I entered in a room, I gave my portfolio to the tutor, the portfolio was taken; from there, the tutor did not speak anything. Some information in the portfolio were cancelled and tutor put question mark where there is a mistake and told me to go and make corrections..... it is boring..... there is no dialogue” (FGD, personal communication, June 2012) .

Another student went on stressing the ineffectiveness of tutor–student discussion by pointing out:

“I can take my example; in few minutes before I entered the room for assessment I roughly fill in the content in the SPP, the way I did I expected not to be given VISA for that day, but when I entered in a room it took me less than three minutes”.(FGD, Personal communication, June 2012)

Students gave reasons which they think affect tutor – students discussion and assessment in general to include the fact that sometimes a tutor has many students waiting outside especially towards the end of face to face session.. In order to assess all students, a tutor has to do rushed work.

“If you want to get things easy go in the evening hours when the assessor is tired of assessing and many students are outside the door then won’t ask you even a question rather than giving you a visa.....sometimes there is under assessment”(Student 7, Personal communication, June 2012)..

Another student (S8) said;

“Sometimes no time is given for discussion.....time to tell tutors what we know from what we have written in the SPP.”(Student 8, Personal communication, June 2012).

However, it was indicated that tutor – students discussion varied in relation to respective students. Explaining the time variation the Tutor (T3) said that it could take 10-50 minutes. The tutor stated:

“I don’t have fixed time in assessing the SPP, students do vary in abilities; some are good in filing in the portfolio others are not. Also assessing a first year student portfolio is different from assessing a second year or third year student. More time is used for first year like one hour, while for continuing students I can take 10-50 minutes assessing one SPP”(Tutor3, personal communication June 2012).

Discussion of Findings

Information and Knowledge of portfolio

The findings presented above indicate that before embarking on the SPP activity students, tutors as well as DRCs had limited understanding on what information to include in the portfolio, assessment procedures, and the implications of the SPP. Limited or lack of knowledge on portfolio and portfolio assessment affect the students filling in the portfolio.

However, students and tutors not knowing why they are discussing and what type of feedback students need is not unique to OUT. Studies conducted elsewhere (Birgin and Tutaki 2006; Cakan, 2004; Ozsevgec et al. Al, 2004; Baki and Birgin, 2007) have shown that tutors do not have enough knowledge and experience about the alternative methods of assessment especially about portfolio. It is also important to note that being knowledgeable about SPP can lead into self-confidence for tutors and students during tutor – student discussions. It can result into curiosity, inspire interest on the work done, motivate students to work on something they know, self-efficacy as well as reality and originality (Nicol et al 2004).

Tutor- student discussion during portfolio assessment

The findings indicate that discussions on the portfolio assessment between tutors and students are all based on content rather than learning process. The tutor is just looking at what has been filled in the portfolio, if not properly filled the tutor put the cross without giving feedback contrary to the expectations (Carnell, Klenowsik and Sue 2007) that in the tutor- students discussion, tutors should clarify perceptions. Consequently, the exercise makes the learners less empowered to take charge of the learning process. As Carnell, Klenowsik and Sue (2007) contend learning is not just collection of works but is a way of understanding so as to monitor progress in learning. In the portfolio students have to make judgments of their learning (Julius, 2000) and plan how to progress. Thus, OUT need to encourage more tutors – students dialogue especially during student tutor discussion.

Usefulness of SPP in learning

The results show that if filled properly SPP can help in assessing learning at the course, programme, department and the institution levels. Information filled in by students under fourth item on suggested improvements, if well analyzed can result into improving the course. A well filled portfolio can also enable students to enhance their learning by giving students a better understanding of their skills as well as how and where they need to improve in order to achieve their learning goals. Portfolio use in education keeps students busy in studying because student are afraid of not having anything to say to the tutor during face to face session. Therefore Portfolio is better than other types of assessment which as Gipps (1994) and Shepard (2001) observe, encourage short term learning.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study it was concluded that despite challenges faced in the implementation processes Student Progress Portfolio has great potentials for improving education and learning.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations by the researchers were that SPP assessment should focus more on developing and improving students' skills and capacities for learning to learn; there should be portfolio assessment before main test and before annual examination for the purpose of monitoring learning and making it more meaningful; also SPP should be graded to clearly indicate to what extent the student is ready to do the test or examination. Teaching on how to use the portfolios and discussion on the experiences of tutors and students with SPP should be continuous and conducted on regular basis.

SPP is an innovative initiative that can improve the role of assessment in the processes of teaching and learning hence contribute significantly in the quality of education. SPP encourages independent learning and learner centredness in teaching. It has the potential of creating critical thinkers and sorting out some of the problems of assessment in higher education especially plagiarising and copying. However, harnessing the potentials of SPP requires all involved to work diligently. SPP should not be taken as a simplistic or cheap alternative. Investment in terms of developing a comprehensive SPP document, capacity building to ensure that tutors/lecturers understand not only how to assess whether the portfolio is duly filled but also the essence of the SPP and what it intends to achieve. Students also should understand the essence and develop skills on how to fill in the portfolio

before using it as a tool for assessment. The main factors including tutor-student discussions should be well prepared and conducted in a professional manner. The importance of a good feedback should not be undermined.

SPP is an important innovation in assessment which we would encourage institutions of higher learning to use. The Open University of Tanzania SPP document is thorough and worth adopting or adapting by other institution of higher learning. Special attention need to be paid to ensure that the SPP innovation in assessment is appropriately implemented and contributes to quality learning and teaching practices.

Recommendations for further research

Wish to recommend the following areas for further studies:

- (i) Comparative research on use of student portfolio assessment in other institutions.
- (ii) Impact study on the influence of SPP on students' performance in tests and examinations.

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