LEGITIMISING CONTINUOUS ASSESSMENT (CASS) AS AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

LEGITIMISING CASS AS AN IMPORTANT COMPONENT OF ASSESSMENT

The introduction of outcomes-based approach in Further Education and Training Grades 10-12 (General) in 2006 has major implications for assessment in general and CASS in particular. CASS has been incrementally introduced into the schooling system (3 provinces in 1999, additional 4 in 2000) on trial basis and the rest in 2001. It amounts to 25% of the overall Senior Certificate mark. There are no common or specific criteria for CASS.

The tension between criterion-reference and norm-reference assessment has been raised in the public discourse. This is more evident in the debate around the use of Statistical Moderation and aggregate to determine pass or fail. If CASS is implemented well, a question might be asked: will there be a need for statistical moderation?

This paper discusses implications of using Statistical Moderation as a means to achieve both excellence and equity. There needs to be a balance in implementing Statistical Moderation and CASS marks will not be questioned.

Introduction

Education has always played a major role in the upliftment of societies. South African is no exception. The Senior Certificate is regarded by many as a key, which opens doors for opportunities. The public has always been interested in the performance of our learners at this level. This phenomenon is not unique to South Africa although internationally countries are judged by the quality rather than the quantity of learners who graduate from Grade 12 or an equivalent level. Therefore a lot is expected from our education system; hence the challenges facing the Department of Education are enormous.

The inequalities inherited from the apartheid system are apparent. Despite the introduction of new education system in 1994 and the collapse of nineteen education systems, the impact of this legacy lingers on. The assessment of the apartheid system was characterized by exclusion, unfairness, selection, irregularities and discrimination against the majority of disadvantaged South Africans. In transforming the examination system, five subjects were identified in 2000 and set nationally. This means the same papers are written as common examination papers by all provinces. This was a brave move taking into consideration the vast disparities that exist among provinces with regards to resources and infrastructure. This was the beginning of strengthening and improving the quality of education in South Africa.

Long into the democratic era, the South African education still relies heavily on summative examinations, which work solely on norm referencing to determine the performance and promotion of learners.

When in 1999 the Department of Education mooted and introduced the concept of continuous assessment (CASS), the underpinning purpose was to improve performance of learning and teaching, improve the quality of the Senior Certificate and increase the number of learners who obtain a meaningful qualitative pass at matric.

My paper calls for legitimising continuous assessment as an important component of assessment. Legitimising continuous assessment in this paper means "when the learners continuous assessment marks are not tampered with by means of statistical moderation and reflect a true marks of learners".

Phasing in continuous assessment

There is perhaps a case for arguments that the Senior Certificate examination performs a symbolic and social selection rather than an assessment function. Criticisms are leveled at its statistical credibility and reliability. Questions raised are whether it provides a benchmark for assessing academic achievement or whether it performs a summative role rather than formative assessment. In order to accept and improve the credibility of Senior Certificate, introducing continuous assessment (CASS) as argued by Motala and Perry (2000) would produce "a more comprehensive learner assessment and in general would improve the examination results" and thus lend more credibility to the Senior Certificate.

In 2001, the Minister of Education mandated all examination bodies to include CASS marks into their grade twelve learners at the end of 2001. SAFCERT, in terms of its mandate, was expected to quality assure school-based assessment as it does with the external examinations.

The pilot study that was undertaken in June/July 2001 was based on the four Examining Bodies that piloted CASS, namely Northern Cape, Western Cape, Gauteng and IEB, had a lot of implications for the full implementation. The study evaluated the readiness current systems and processes to implement CASS, at all levels against a set of indicators of quality that relate to assessment. These indicators are:

- Management systems for assessment;
- Development of CASS instruments;
- Moderation systems;
- Competency of assessors and moderators;
- Degree of interaction between assessors and moderators; and
- Appeal procedures against unfair assessment decisions.

The key findings include the following:

- Examination bodies differed in their capacities and their readiness to implement CASS;
- The private system were at a higher level of readiness than the public system;

- The systems and processes to implement CASS were established by all Examination bodies;
- Weaknesses were identified with regard to CASS implementation, for example the amount of resources available, inadequate financial resources to maintain or supply the needed facilities such as office equipment, transport, infra-structure, shortage of staff and vacant posts, etc.;
- Development of assessment instruments for CASS happened mainly at the upper levels of the public system due to limited expertise among educators. CASS is moderated mostly at cluster level during the year and at district level for the final round;
- Internal moderation occurs at site and verification at the cluster meetings.
- There were criteria developed by Examination bodies for the appointing assessors and moderators but none of them evaluated the performance of these officials on a regular basis;
- There appeared to be confusion on who should be regarded as assessors, because educators are not generally regarded as assessors except those who are appointed to mark grade twelve examination scripts. This also applies to subject advisors who play a key role in the moderation of CASS are regarded as moderators;
- Different directorates thus indicating that CASS and examinations are portrait as separate entities;
- CASS policy guidelines are being developed in the public system but none of the Examination bodies has included procedures for appealing against unfair assessment decisions; and
- All Examination bodies will be ready to present their CASS marks for 2001 (SAFCERT, September 2001).

A Resume of Instructional Programmes in Schools Report 550 (2001/08) stipulates that continuous assessment must be a compulsory component of promotion marks. A continuous assessment component of 25 percent should be included in the final senior certificate examination at Grade 12. (DoE, Report 550).

The intention of this report was to assist examination bodies to put together strategies for improving their processes on the implementation of CASS since the report revealed that the examination bodies overall were at different levels of readiness to implement site-based assessment. The results revealed that only Western Cape was able to do "face moderation" of CASS and as such SAFCERT put in place a statistical model whereby all CASS scores were moderated up to 5% above that of the standardized examination scores (Motala & Perry 2001). The conclusion reached by the project was that statistical moderation would be used until such time all shortcomings have been addressed in order to ensure that the integrity of the Senior Certificate is maintained.

A critique of statistical moderation of CASS

The arguments for the introduction of statistical moderation of CASS are appealing based on the findings of the project, which indicated the uneven readiness of examination bodies and other factors. However, the question that arises is whether the system should be satisfied with the notion that until such time that the shortcomings are addressed, the statistical moderation of CASS will be used despite its own shortcomings and the formulae currently employed. For the fact that there is no timeframe stipulated on this transitional arrangement on statistical moderation, some learners' performance will be unfairly disadvantaged when their CASS marks are standardized to meet the "required standard". The shortcomings of statistical moderation of CASS are raised in the April 2003 IPEC Task Team proposal to Umalusi and these should be taken seriously, they are the following:

1. **Tolerance factor of 5% is too low**. In the current system the CASS and Creative Writing marks are adjusted so that the mean of the CASS and Creative Writing marks are 5% above the mean of the examination mark for every subject at every schools.
2. **Unrealistic adjustments**. The CASS moderation formulae used creates discrepancies with the marks of some candidates. It happens that a candidate who obtains a zero ends up with a mark, while a candidate who obtains marks ends up with a zero.
3. **Incorrect ranking**. The fact that a candidate who writes the exam at schools A together with a certain group of candidates, can get a better or worse mark than is the case where he or she writes the same exam at another school.
4. **Using soft margins for scaling of school assessments**. There are various conditions under which the CASS marks are adjusted differently. This means the soft margins are not practical in the case of CASS or Creative writing.
5. **Unacceptable marks**. The formulae applied is unacceptable, where the standard deviation of the CASS or Creative writing marks of a subject is less than 5% and the less than the standard deviation of the standardized examination mark, the CASS or Creative are ignored.
6. **Abandoning the adjustment due to a very low CASS or Creative Writing mark**. The marks of candidates in particular those who have obtained low CASS marks are tampered in order to bring the marks within the range below the adjusted examination mark.
7. **The minimum marks required to be captured for statistical moderation**. Only marks of a particular center are only processed if the number of candidates is at least 10 or 60% of the "potential" for bigger classes.
8. **Deviation from norms during examination standardization**.
9. **Inadequate verification of computer programs.**

In summary the Grade 12 Examination: Statistical Moderation report (2001) stipulates guidelines for Educators, which are:

- CASS marks must be compiled using a number of evaluation methods that determine the learner's progress continuously;
- CASS marks must be determined accurately in accordance with the learner's performance and the provincial standard required for the specific subject; and

- Class tests that cover only a small part of the syllabus and where learners obtain high marks cannot be used for the CASS mark because this will increase the CASS mark unrealistically and bring the learner under the false impression as to the standard expected for the subject. Class tests covering larger parts of the syllabus, must be used for the calculation of CASS.

The introduction of CASS in the South African education system marked a period of progress and trust in the system. CASS attempts to improve the fairness and reliability of the assessment system by taking into account on-site evaluation. Reliability is a major priority area given the fact that CASS was recently introduced in the system (Report on the quality assurance of the 2002 senior certificate and ABET assessment). There is evidence internationally that continuous assessment where the final result is based on the assessment of learners' performance throughout the year, produces a more comprehensive learner assessment and this would improve the examination results.

The rationale for the introduction of CASS at Grade 12 is based on the following:

- Learners will be assessed using different and appropriate assessment methodologies and this will provide a more valid assessment of learner's performance;
- Assessment will now take place in an authentic context i.e. the learner will be assessed in a realistic situation which is integral to the learning process;
- Assessment will feed back immediately into the learning process, thus promoting the formative role of assessment;
- Provides opportunities that are impossible in a once-off external examination;
- A variety of skills are able to be assessed by internal assessment which otherwise could not be considered for assessment purposes;
- Assessment is ongoing and therefore learners are compelled to work consistently and this will contribute to reinstating the culture of teaching and learning; and
- Judgment of learner's performance (summative assessment) will now be carried out by the teacher who works intimately with the learner. (G.D.E. Guidelines For Outcomes Based Assessment in the GET and FET Bands August 2000).

The fact that no clear norms and formulae utilised raises the question of legitimacy of CASS. Although the April 2001 Report by Phambili stipulates, " the process of statistical moderation was developed under the auspices of the South African Certification (SAFCERT) and is based on sound statistical principles" there is dissatisfaction with the results obtained after the process hence the legitimacy of the use of statistical moderation for CASS.

CASS an international phenomenon

The most remarkable development in assessment towards the end of the 20th century has probably been the growth in the use to measure the achievement outcomes of national systems of education; either considered uniquely (in national assessment) or in the context of performance of other education systems (in international comparative studies of achievement). Assessment is seen as having a major role to play in ensuring that the

outcomes of education and training are those that the economy needs (Kellaghan & Greaney, 2001.

In Australia, for example, "school assessment is an important part of the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). In many studies it counts for 50% of students' assessments. The VCAA use statistical moderation to ensure that the coursework assessment given in different schools are comparable throughout the State." It further states that " moderation is needed to ensure that schools' assessment are comparable, and thus fair for all students throughout the State, which ever school they attend."

Any assessment system that wishes to enjoy credibility within a society must accept that the following issues in assessment cannot be ignored:

- Validity: the assurance that the skills and knowledge which are considered important are the ones that have been assessed;
- Reliability: the assurance that a learner's result is an accurate and consistent reflection of his/her mastery of the skills and knowledge;
- Comparability: assurance that the learners, who achieve the same result, reflect similar degree of mastery of the skills and knowledge.

The role of teacher in CASS

Singh, (2002) states that " examinations as a device of quality control in education can better be appreciated when evaluation becomes an integral part of the teaching learning process. This can be possible if Continuous and Comprehension Evaluation (CEE) by teachers becomes an integral part of their evaluation". In his paper Singh argues that school-based assessment is important and should be carried out by teachers. Unless we believe in the integrity of teachers the results of CASS or site based assessment will questioned. According to Singh 2002, site based assessment is aimed at using assessment:

- As an integral part of teaching and learning
- For diagnostic purpose to improve teaching and learning strategies and pupils' learning
- For intensive school-evaluation;
- To maintain desired performance standards;
- For making more sound judgments about learners' attainment; and
- For taking timely decisions to improve pupils' learning, instruction and learning environment of the school.

Yecke, 2001, defines assessment as "an indispensable tool to help educators identify areas of weakness so they can help target intense instruction at these areas, thus helping children to succeed-with the goal of leaving no child behind." This can only be achieved if continuous assessment is part and parcel of teaching and learning.

Problems identified with implementation of CASS

For CASS to be considered fair, reliable and valid, certain conditions should be met otherwise its legitimacy will be questioned. There is no doubt that introducing CASS is correct, but then learners should not be prejudiced because conditions in some schools are not conducive for CASS marks to be considered valid and reliable. The 2001 composite report on verification of Site Based Assessment raises fundamental questions, which need urgent attention.

The 2001 report on Statistical Moderation of the Year Marks indicates 10 different scenarios each with its own conditions and recommendations for implementing statistical moderation adjustment. The report indicated discrepancies with the marks of some candidates. Some candidates who have obtained very low marks end up with a good mark while the reverse might happen with a candidate with a good mark ending up with a low mark.

In 2002 another consolidated report on the Quality Assurance of the 2002 Senior Certificate Assessment was compiled and the following are the findings:

- CASS guidelines are available in provinces in the majority of schools although they lacked school CASS policy. This contributed to CASS being seen as an add on instead of being integrated into teaching and learning;
- Training of teachers on the implementation of CASS is inadequate;
- Provincial assessment bodies have plans for moderation, training, and improvement regarding CASS, however they are unable to implement these plans;
- The standard and suitability of assessment tasks varies amongst, and within various assessment bodies;
- The quality of educator portfolios were varied, for example, there lack of internal uniformity within provinces as shown by variations within regions and districts;
- Quality learner portfolios were presented although some portfolios indicated lack of detail in educators' marking, and an inability to indicate errors;
- Various assessment bodies approach moderation differently, lack of sufficient personnel in provinces has had a negative impact on the implementation of moderation at all four levels;
- The standard of moderation differs across assessment and examining bodies in terms of rigor and intensity;
- The availability and quality of moderation reports varied across examining bodies; and
- Examining bodies use different processes to adjust marks.

Clearly it is impossible to sing praises of the success of CASS if the above problems are cited in its implementation. However there is hope as the recommendations suggest what should be done in relation to monitoring and verification of continuous assessment.

The recommendations are classified into the following categories: policy, training, implementation, moderation and reports and will be briefly discussed.

Policy

- The national CASS policy needs to be simplified and reviewed and make them realistic and accessible to educators in schools;

- Provincial CASS policy documents should be reviewed to ensure that hey meet minimal national requirements to ensure consistency across assessment bodies; and
- Clear detail and guidelines needs to be provided to educators in the form of exemplars on continuous basis.

Training

- Examining bodies should provide intensive training workshops to provincial officials, district officials, subject advisors and educators in CASS implementation;
- Examination bodies should appoint personnel whose task will be to provide support and training on the implementation of CASS; and
- Districts and regions should establish subjects support groups or committees that will be used for information sharing and dissemination of good practice.

Implementation

- There should be clearly articulated policy requirements accompanied by ongoing training;
- Provision of exemplars of good practice should enlighten educators regarding the national and provincial requirements, standards and quality;
- Regions should identify lead educators who provide mentorship to educators in clusters of schools with regard to CASS implementation;
- Assessment bodies should provide training to educators on the use of valid and well-designed rubrics; and
- Assessment bodies should submit their CASS implementation and moderation plans to UMALUSI by the end February each year. A second submission should be made in June, which should focus on progress made in the implementation of CASS and in moderation. This will assist UMALUSI in monitoring the provinces and thus being able to provide timely support and guidance where necessary.

Moderation

- Examination bodies should set up effective moderation systems;
- Development of a sound knowledge moderation and common understanding of the role and importance of moderation as a mechanism for ensuring validity and reliability of assessment;
- Assessment bodies should develop a moderation approach which is applied across the province and the is implemented at all levels, i.e. school, cluster, district/region and provincial level; and
- Systems and capacity should be developed for school level moderation.

Reports

- Examination bodies should develop templates for moderation reports which could be used at all levels;

- Effective communication structures should be put in place by Examining bodies to ensure a flow of information between educators and officials so that improvement measures are put in place immediately; and
- Moderation reports must be available for scrutiny by UMALUSI, at all levels.

Conclusion

In short, in order to legitimise CASS, the factors highlighted by Singh 2002 are critical. The phasing in of outcomes-based education will assist the system to find ways of legitimizing CASS. The draft Qualifications and Assessment Policy Framework Grades 10-12 (General) stipulates "assessment is a critical element of the National Curriculum Statement Grades 10-12 (General)…before a teacher assesses learners, it is crucial that the purposes of the assessment be clearly and unambiguously established" (DOE 2003)

This is important because one of the principles underpinning the National Curriculum Statement is the principle of inclusivity. As the system deal with assessment of learners, the issues surrounding barriers to learning should be considered when we develop strategies for the implementation of continuous assessment. Therefore, the system can no-longer afford to make use of statistical moderation in assessing CASS because learner-experiencing barriers to learning would suffer the most.

There are various ways to ascertain that all schools and learners meet the required standards without resorting to statistical moderation. According to Singh 2002, it is possible for all schools to introduce School Based Assessment and comparison of their students by adopting the following:

- Mention and define the aspects to be assessed;
- Decide the weightage to be given to each aspect;
- Develop the nature of evidences to be collected in terms of competencies developed;
- Decide the mode of assessment in terms of testing and non-testing techniques;
- Decide the mode of recording and summarization of evidences; and
- Decide the mode of reporting, and feedback for remedial instruction.

The above mechanisms should assist the system in developing and presenting a common blueprint of expected common assessment tasks from the various schools and this should simplify the manner in which continuous assessment is monitored and verified. It is important to note that school based assessment is the prerogative of teachers only. Therefore, it is necessary that they should be depended upon. Faith in their competence and belief in the right to assess their wards are basic premises for school-based assessment (Singh, 2002).

The challenges that were alluded in the two reports of 2001 and 2002 regarding implementation of CASS in the provinces should be addressed before outcomes-based education is implemented in 2006 as envisaged to avoid complications in the system.

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