Assessment *for* Learning :
Supervisory Feedback Practice in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Assessment *for* learning is a term used to denote a continuous assessment of student's progress with accompanying feedback to improve learning. So, this paper aims to investigate the assessment feedback (AFB) practices among supervisors in one of Higher Education (HE) institutions in Malaysia on three specific dimensions; Timeliness, Meaningfulness and Specificity. It also examined the significant mean difference of perceived Supervisory AFB practices in relation to postgraduate (PG) students' gender, mode of study (MOS) and field of study (FOS) using cross-sectional survey design. A total of 306 PG students who were currently pursuing their research studies have been selected using multistage cluster sampling technique. A self-developed instrument known as Supervisory Assessment Feedback Questionnaire (reliability index .92) which consisted of 38 items was used to collect the data. Overall result shown that Supervisory AFB practices were at the highest level for Meaningfulness (M=4.35, SD = .69), followed by Timeliness (M=4.35, SD =.69) and finally Specificity (M=3.85, SD= .53). The AFB forms practiced among supervisors resulted in verbal form (M=2.87, SD= .69) higher compared to written (M=2.77, SD= .71) meanwhile the PG students' preferences were in both. Besides, the supervisory AFB practiced seems to be significantly differed on gender factor. In summary, these results revealed some insight to be considered in order to establish an effective Supervisory AFB practice in Malaysian HE.

Keywords: Assessment *for* Learning, Supervisory Assessment Feedback Practice, Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment *for* learning (formative assessment) is vital to ensure the quality of teaching and learning particularly in Higher Education (HE). The continuous/ regular mode of checking student's progress with accompanying feedback is to improve the student's performance. Basically, the aim of feedback is to enable the gap between the actual level of performance and the desired learning goal to be bridged (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). Within the socio-constructivist paradigm, feedback is seen as facilitative which involves provision of comments and suggestions to enable students to make their own revisions and through the dialogue which helps students to gain new understanding. According to Berry (2008), when assessment is for learning, it takes a bigger importance to include social communication between educator and students while Brown (2004) stated that assessment *for* learning is fundamental when the impacts of appraisal practices are based on progressiveness as opposed to being judgmental.

Much has been discussed about the principles of good assessment and feedback practice but there is no general agreement regarding what type of feedback is most helpful and why (Nelson and Schunn, 2009). A number of writers have argued that AFB is under-conceptualized in the theoretical literature in HE and that makes it difficult to design effective feedback practices (Yorke, 2003). Most approaches to feedback remained persistently focused on simple 'transmission perspectives' – *educators transmit feedback messages to students about strengths and weaknesses in their work assuming that these messages are easily decoded and turned into action* which underpinned by narrow conceptions of the purposes of feedback (Maringe, 2010).

Along with teaching the students what the lecturers/supervisors desired and what is emphasized to satisfy the requirements set by the courses, AFB is seen as a crucial way to facilitate students' development as independent learners who are able to monitor, evaluate and regulate their own learning, allowing them to feed-up and go beyond graduation into professional practice (Ferguson, 2011). Evans (2013) reviewed AFB as exchanges generated

within assessment design, occurring within and beyond the immediate learning context, being overt or covert (actively and/or passively sought and/or received), and importantly, drawing from a range of sources. While Berry (2008) recommended that the guiding principles for making effective assessment is to provide precise and constructive feedback to students learning. Furthermore, AFB is also viewed as a system for guidance which gave assurance and the importance of student-supervisor dialogue with available or approachable supervisor in the process. Most university tutors concurred that AFB is a consistent dialogue within a cyclical assessment (Beaumont et al., 2011). Within the context of this study, supervisors should play an important role in facilitating high-quality feedback to optimize learning. As for that, Brown (2004) pointed out that AFB given to student needs to be detailed, comprehensive, meaningful to the individual, fair, challenging and supportive, which is a tough task for busy academicians. Even though it is time-consuming, it is significant that effort must be invested in helping students to understand not only where they have gone wrong but also what they need to do to improve.

Higgins et al (2002) mentioned the challenges of AFB in today's HE. For example, students with workload may not have ample time to reflect on the feedback. Then, if the feedback is subject-specific, it might be hard for the students to develop further skills for their future learning. Furthermore, if the feedback is not timely, then it may be distanced from the given assignments. Some empirical evidence stated that students perceive AFB negatively if it is rendered in the form of personal critique, not specific and vague to any of formative uses (Higgins et al., 2002). As noted by Blair and McGinty (2010), students faced problems to understand feedback while the lecturers are having problems to provide good feedback to assist their students. On the supervisors' perspective, Beaumont et al (2011) found that most of the university lecturers agreed that AFB need to be specific and detailed. Supported by the study of Berry (2008), comprehensive and timely AFB is important for students to achieve their learning outcome. Timely AFB refers to the comments which should be returned to

students as soon as possible after the assignment is submitted (Higgins et al., 2002). In most cases, the incomprehensible/ignored feedback is caused by overdue AFB. Another scenario, study done by Tamby Subahan and Lilia (2011) indicated that lecturers at the university are often too occupied to provide AFB, total size of class and the assorted nature of their work have prevented them to write the AFB and return promptly. So, they elicited the use of peer to strategize AFB in learning and what kind of changes they would prefer. A similar report to this was a reflection done by Hattie (2009) where he realized that lecturers typically did not provide AFB to the students although they claimed they did all the time. Also, Carless et al (2011) argued that AFB is clearly a critical issue which need further investigation although the student evaluations of AFB reflect wider concerns on lecturers-student relationships rather that the nature of promoting learning in HE. Rosaitimah and Mohd Afiq (2013) in their study related to AFB among accounting students discovered that AFB is not given on the ideal time and beyond the way the students expected it being communicated to them. After a systematic reviewing, there is a dire need to revisit the AFB practice particularly among supervisors in HE since AFB is an inevitable part of assessment *for* learning.

In the context of this study, the term AFB conceptually refers to the information or the comments received by PG students from their supervisors from three dimensions; Meaningfulness, Timeliness, and Specificity to further improve their research work also for the purpose of research completion. Therefore, the aims of the study are; i) to examine the perceptions of PG students towards Supervisory AFB practice from three dimensions (Meaningfulness, Timeliness and Specificity), ii) to investigate the form of AFB practiced by PG students' supervisors (verbal, written, or both form), iii) to investigate the preference of AFB forms among PG students, and iv) to investigate the mean difference among PG students in relation to (i) gender, (ii) Mode of Study and (iii) Field of Study.

METHOD

This study utilized cross-sectional survey design. The target population is 9760 PG students on the enrollment list. The researchers employed multi-stage cluster sampling method with 5.0% margin of error. The population firstly narrowed down based on the norm of graduation, 1464 students enrolled for final semester for 2014/2015 academic year. The second stage was done based on fields of study; i) Social Science, ii) Engineering, and iii) Science and Technology. Based on Krejcie and Morgan Table (1970), finally, a representative sample of 306 PG students who were currently pursuing their research studies were randomly selected. A set of self-developed Supervisory Assessment Feedback Questionnaire (SAFBQ) is used with 38 items consists of five sections; 1) Section A: Perception on Supervisory AFB practice (6 point Likert-type Agreement Scale: Strongly Disagree – Strongly Agree), 2) Section B: Forms of AFB Practiced by Supervisors (5 point Likert-type Frequency Scale : Never - Always), 3) Section C: Preferences on AFB (3 Closed-ended Question : Written, Verbal, Both), and 4) Section D: Demographic : Gender, MOS and FOS. SAFBQ which was ensured its content validity by panel experts were then distributed to 37 respondents for pilot study. The data were analyzed for dimensionality based on Rasch Analysis which resulted reliability index at .92. Four items were determined to be inappropriate, thus, they were deleted and SAFBQ was improved for actual study. The SAFBQ were then both distributed manually and administered online upon request. The raw data obtained were processed and analyzed through SPSS software for descriptive and inferential statistics.

RESULTS

Perceptions on Supervisory Assessment Feedback Practice

SAFBQ was analyzed based on 306 PG students from three different fields of study with a 100% response rate. Table 1 illustrates the PG students' agreement on the AFB given by their supervisors were at the highest level for Meaningfulness (M=4.78, SD= .71), followed

by Timeliness (*M*=4.35, *SD*= 69) and finally by Specificity (*M*=3.85, *SD*= .53). Although Meaningfulness dimension has the highest mean but it has the largest dispersion of agreement. In contrast, Specificity has the lowest mean of all three dimensions yet it has the smallest dispersion of scores.

Table 1 : Level of Perception towards AFB on Three Dimensions (N=306)

Dimensions	M	SD
Meaningfulness	4.78	.71
Timeliness	4.35	.69
Specificity	3.85	.53

*Based on a 6-point Likert-type scale

Assessment Feedback Forms Practiced by Supervisors

Overall mean score showed that AFB practiced by the supervisors are at the level of 'sometimes' (M=2.82; SD= .64). In terms of forms of AFB, the verbal form (M=2.87; SD= .69) practiced is slightly higher than the written form (M=2.77; SD= .71) as the result shown in Table 2.

Table 2 : Form of AFB Practiced by the Supervisors (N=306)

Form	M	SD
AFB Practice	2.82	.64
Verbal	2.87	.69
Written	2.77	.71

*Based on a 5-point frequency scale

Preferences on Assessment Feedback

Analysis on Table 3 showed that a total of 88.9% (272/306) of the PG students prefer to have both verbal and written form of AFB from their supervisors. Only 8.5% (26/306) and 2.6% (8/306) would like to have AFB by their supervisors in the form of only written and only verbal respectively.

Table 3 : AFB Form Preference (N=306)

AFB Form	*f*	Percentage
Verbal	8	2.6%
Written	26	8.5%
Verbal and Written	272	88.9%

Perceptions Towards AFB Based on Demographic Factors

A statistical test was conducted to determine any significant mean differences on three demographic factors - independent t-test for gender, ANOVA one-way for mode of study (MOS) and field of study (FOS). It was found that only gender factor resulted in a significant mean difference of Supervisory AFB practice. The results were generated after a few tests on normality and homogeneity assumptions were met. Firstly, the data was tested for normality. The original mean for male (4.21) had minimal difference with the new 5% trimmed mean (4.23). The result shown for the mean of female, the original mean (4.38) had very minimal difference with the new trimmed mean (4.39). Hence, the assumption for normality is not violated. The study further conducted Levene's Test for Equality of Variances. The t-test resulted as $F=2.635$, $p > 0.05$, which suggest equal variances assumed and assumption for homogeneity is fulfilled.

Table 4 : Independent T-test of Perception towards AFB Based on Gender

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means				
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
AFB	Equal variances assumed	2.635	.106	-2.868	304	.004*	-.17989	.06271
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.763	202.001	.006*	-.17989	.06510

p=0.05

The result in Table 4 clearly shown that there was a significant mean difference in perception towards Supervisory AFB practice due to gender factor - Male (*M=4.21, SD=* .57); Female, (*M=4.38, SD=* .49); *t* (304) = -2.86, p = .004(two-tailed). In conclusion, gender influences the perceptions of Supervisory AFB practice in PG students' current research work.

DISCUSSIONS

As to address the objectives of the study, Supervisory AFB was looked from three dimensions; Meaningfulness, Timeliness and Specificity. These three dimensions were highlighted by several researches to be investigated since students have perceived it as unclear, lack of guidance, hardly understandable, not timely, and not specific enough to make improvement (Higgins, Hartley & Skelton 2001; Spiller, 2009; Duncan, 2007; Hounsell, 2007). However, the findings in this study shown an agreement on Supervisory AFB highly on meaningfulness and timeliness. Meanwhile, Specificity seems to be the lowest agreement in AFB given by the supervisors. Meaningfulness achieved the highest perceived AFB could be related to the practices of the AFB itself. This is agreed by Rust et al (2005) who stated that a social constructivist approach to attain significant comprehension of assessment obliges a dynamic engagement with the criteria by both lecturers and students. Timeliness was perceived the second next due to the understanding that timely AFB helps them to make improvements (Higgins et al., 2002). However, if the feedback is not timely, then it may be distanced from the given assignments. On the other hand, Specificity is the least agreed AFB could be caused by supervisors who are too focused on judging the grades and marks-focused feedback. In this context, the PG students might understand why they have to improve on yet not so much on what/where to progress. This will hinder the PG students from making further improvements. This is in agreement with what Glover & Brown (2006) mentioned that most feedback only shows what are the expected answers but lacking to explain why. This is also agreed by Higgins et al (2001) that some feedback given were just lack of specific advice on how to improve. The lack of specificity in providing AFB could cause the students to misunderstood the AFB. Hence, supervisors should take the initiative to give specific comments to improve AFB provided to the students as this motivates them to make further improvements. In fact, supervisors must comprehend how the students perceive feedback and how they actually construct the AFB. This is due to the potential impact of feedback on

future practice and development of students' identity as learners as highlighted by Eraut (2006);

> *When the students enter HE, the type of feedback they receive intentionally / unintentionally will play an important part in shaping their learning futures. Hence, we need to know much more about how their learning, indeed their very sense of professional identity is shaped by the nature of the feedback they receive. We need more feedback on feedback.*

AFB can be given in the form of verbal or written comment. Referring to the results, the written form and verbal is practiced almost equally. This could be caused by the consultation sessions whereby the lecturers provided both forms of feedback simultaneously and not in isolation. However, when the items were analyzed separately, it was made apparent that verbal form was practised most by the supervisors. This is due to discussions via meetings was the nature of AFB practiced for the current population. Another reason for this result is that various supervisors practiced different form of AFB which is more practical between them and their students. Perhaps, the PG students' perceptions towards AFB practice should also take into consideration of the supervisors' point of view. In addition, supervisors are advisable to utilize various medium such as reaching the students virtually through social media other than merely practicing the traditional supervisor-students meetings. This will add on the frequency as well as the impact of the supervisory AFB on students' progress.

The AFB form preferred by the respondents is useful to determine whether what is desired by the PG students is practiced by the supervisors. The PG students prefer to have both verbal and written form of AFB, but this is not what actually practiced among supervisors of PG students. Supervisors tend to provide verbal AFB more compared to written AFB. This further justifies the low specificity mean of scores on the PG students' perception towards AFB. Blair and McGinty (2010) found that in the PG students' perspective, they are facing a hard time to refer back to the given oral feedback. Additionally, Hattie and Timperley (2007) found that AFB is more effective when it is provided in written form. In order to close the

gap between the intended goal of learning and their current state, specificity has to be addressed in both forms.

The result also showed a significant mean difference of AFB perceptions based on genders, but not for mode of study (MOS) and field of study (FOS). It shows that male and female has different view of how they perceived AFB provided by their supervisors. Female depicted significant mean difference compared to male as female tends to be more emotional. This is opined by Higgins et al (2001) that students make an emotional effort on their work progress so they expect a "return" on the investment. So, the females tend to have an emotional state of mind when perceiving AFB. Hence, it is recommended for the supervisors to employ a balanced practice of the form of AFB to their PG students. It is best for supervisors to improve their duration on giving assessment feedback to the supervisee. Supervisors should make time to provide AFB since students have the tendency to get emotional on the feedback of their research progress. A well-balanced and well-practiced AFB encourages students to continuously construct their own learning and to counter the dissatisfaction of students on AFB practice in HE.

Finally, it is recommended that the faculty/university to have a dialogue between the supervisors and the PG students as to what they comprehend on the purpose of supervisory AFB. This will serves the purpose of nurturing a mutual understanding of AFB among them. On top of that, an effective design of supervisory AFB is recommended to improve the implementation of AFB in HE.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has given an account of PG students' perceptions towards AFB which is vital in HE as the students are engaged in the learning process. Therefore, there is a need to develop a comprehensive mechanism to cater the Outcome-Based Education (OBE) since the assessment is created to support the intended outcome. OBE proposes that students are expected to be able to do more challenging tasks other than regurgitate and reproduce what

was taught. Therefore, the standard of students in HE can be achieved through a comprehensive practice of AFB. The academic and the social experience incorporated in completing research work assist students' development and AFB contributes part of that experience. Intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and physically fit student can be the product of HE for a better human capital development. AFB has to be aligned to its theoretical ground with respect to what is preferred and practiced in the teaching and learning process. This is to ensure an upright assessment is implemented for an effective learning progress. AFB supposed to be meaningful, timely and specific enough for students to move on to the next stage of the learning process. Consequently, a good practice of AFB is designated to provide PG students with the best opportunities in improving as well as completing their research works successfully within the time frame.

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