Assessment Criteria: Exploring the missing perspectives of management development programme participants as learners in South Africa

MacDonald Kanyangale

Rhodes Business School, Rhodes University, Grahamstown, P. O. Box 94, Grahamstown, 6140, South Africa.
Email: M.Kanyangale@ru.ac.za. Telephone: +27 46 603 7476; Fax: +27 46 603 8613.

Integral to the success of any post-apartheid management development programme in South Africa is principled assessment of acquired competencies or learning achieved by the learners. This study explores how prospective Junior Managers employed in a multinational firm with operations in South Africa, actually used or did not use the assessment criteria when trying to demonstrate mastery of assessment tasks in two of the eight modules on a Junior Management Development Programme (JMDP). This programme was outsourced to a business school. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 14 successful employees on this JMDP were audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed using an open coding and constant comparison technique. The results reflect that participants on the JMDP see the assessment criteria mainly as a tool for external use by an assessor, rather than as a pre-defined and precious basis to be internalized for use by them to judge the adequacy and quality of their own assignments prior to submission. While assessment criteria provide “cues” and “clues”, and also serve as a learning enabler, they fail to engender formative self-assessment by these participants. Assessment as learning in management development programmes inadvertently entrench threshold performance. Implications of the findings for learning and assessment in management development programmes are discussed.

Key words: Assessment criteria; Management Development; Management Education.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, some organizations are outsourcing the design and delivery of their management development programmes to business schools. In the domain of scholarship of assessment, this brings to the fore what higher education can potentially contribute towards meaningful and rigorous assessment of participants in management development programmes. This goes beyond the academy to satisfy unique needs of an organization on one hand, and the requirement for accreditation of learning on the other.

In the dynamic business world, managers are very critical as they try to bring a certain degree of order, consistency, and adaptability required for organizational achievement of goals, through joint or coordinated efforts with their subordinates. It is therefore less surprising that outside the academy, the ever-changing world of business is furiously demanding that employees possess not only appropriate subject knowledge, but also the ability to learn (e.g. being lifelong learners) and high levels of transferable generic skills (e.g. creativity and an entrepreneurial approach to problem solving, independence and self-reliance etc.) to cope with change and competition (Luckett and Sutherland, 2000). Inevitably, there is an increasing use of management development programmes in organizations to “bring about greater organizational efficiencies and effectiveness through more fully engaged and skilled employees whose performance and work outputs are congruently linked to goals of the organisation” (Erasmus et al., 2011:21). The offering of a management development programme by
the academy to an external organization with its own particular outcomes, provides challenges in itself not only in curriculum design, but also in negotiations of what remains critical in terms of assessment from an academic perspective.

Echoing the notion of lifelong learning, Boud and Falchikov (2006:399) cogently argue that “whatever else [Higher Education] achieves, it must equip students to learn beyond the academy once the infrastructure of teachers, courses and formal assessment is no longer available”. Interestingly, the scholarship of assessment is very important beyond the academy as well, especially in management development programmes. Firstly, it is unique that assessment helps assessors and also employers to develop a deep understanding of what the learners know, understand, and can do with their knowledge after the learning experience. Secondly, assessment criteria also provide a clear and transparent basis for learners to know the specific evidence required to demonstrate the quality of learning achieved at the end of their learning experience. In this respect, the quality of learning by students is impacted by the way they are assessed.

Existing research has investigated undergraduate students’ perspectives and evaluated the use and effectiveness of criteria referenced assessment (O’Donovan et al., 2001; Rust et al., 2003); undergraduate teacher education students’ responses to criteria-referenced self-assessment (Andrade and Du, 2007); understanding of undergraduate students’ experience of criterion-referenced assessment in a public relations course, and also the use of assessment criteria as learning criteria (Xavier and Mehta, 2004). O’Donovan et al. (2001) argue that research evidence does not support the notion that merely having explicit criteria helps students to create better quality work. Beyond the academy, research has not focused on how participants on management development programmes use and evaluate the assessment criteria. Rust (2002:151) posits that “if we acknowledge the research evidence that to learn and understand students [participants] need to actively engage in some way with what is being taught, why should this be any different if we want them to understand the assessment requirements?”.

This study is tolerant to multiple and subjective perspectives on the research question: “How do prospective Junior Managers actually use or not use the assessment criteria provided to them for their use?” This study is limited to two chosen modules:

1. Introduction to marketing management, and (2). Business Operations and Information Management, which are of interest in this study. This one year JMDP constituted a total of eight different modules, namely: Leadership and Management; Project Management; Basic Economics; Introduction to Marketing Management; People Management; Introduction to Strategic Management; Business Operations Management and Information Management; and Financial Management. These modules were “designed down” from the programme purpose. The value chain and principles of management formed the gist in thinking about the content and structure of the JMDP. Furthermore, principles of constructive alignment were followed in each of the modules to align:

1) learning outcomes,
2) teaching/learning activities,
3) assessment tasks, and
4) assessment criteria as components of a unified JMDP teaching and learning system.

Drawing from the principles of competence-based assessment, the assessment criteria were used to make judgment about student performance against achievement at a minimum level rather than through comparison with pre-defined scales. The assessment criteria comprised three aspects, namely: (a) criterion, (b) evidence and (c) judgment. The assessment criteria enabled an assessor to judge the degree of learning performance, starting with “not yet competent”, “barely competent”, “competent” and worked up to “very competent”.

Mindful of the growing number of articles exploring the perspectives of various students on assessment criteria within the academy, it is generally notable that the perspectives of assessment criteria by participants on management development programmes have not yet been explored. The aim of this paper is to explore these perspectives held by participants on a JMDP in South Africa. In this regard, the point of departure is the exploration of the contested concept of assessment criteria. Subsequently, the paper discusses the research method, before progressing to focus on the presentation and discussion of the results of the study. Lastly, implications of these results on assessment in management development are highlighted to conclude the paper.

Assessment Criteria

As a robust way of unpacking the elusive concept of assessment criteria, it is logical to firstly tease out what is “assessment” and to describe its roots. It would also be enlightening to review the meaning of “criteria” in order to add value to our understanding of assessment criteria. In a nutshell, the term assessment originates from the Latin verb “assidere” which means “to sit beside” (Maree and Fraser, 2004:32). In educational discourse, there are many definitions of assessment. For example, assessment is: the process of gathering and discussing information from multiple and diverse sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand, and can do with their knowledge as a result of their educational experiences; the process culminates
when assessment results are used to improve subsequent learning (University of Delaware website).

Drawing from the South African Qualifications Authority also known as SAQA (2001:16), assessment in education and training institution refers to “a structured process of collecting evidence and making judgments about an individual’s performance in relation to registered national standards and qualification”. Four common threads of assessment inherent in these two definitions can be delineated as (a) the notion of measurement or making judgment; (b) the use of a range of methods to measure, and also use of multiple sources of evidence of learning; (c) gauging a student’s ability (how well an individual can perform an activity or demonstrate knowledge); and (d) the use of pre-set criteria. It can be discerned that assessment links learning with two aspects, namely assessed and the standard of achievement which must be met to receive a particular grade or mark” (University of Ulster, 2012:7).

Theoretically, assessment criteria should provide an explicit and transparent basis for informing the learner about the specific evidence of learning that is required at the end of the learning experience to demonstrate learning achievement. In this way, assessment criteria are at “the heart of student learning experience” and the level of achievement, thereby linking to learning outcomes on one side, and assessment tasks on the other (Brown and Knight, 1994:1). It is informative to note that assessment criteria sometimes grow out of the intended learning outcomes or from an assessment task.

Assessment criteria which are based on the intended learning outcomes identify the knowledge, understanding and skills the assessor expects a student to display in the assessment task. On the other hand, assessment criteria may also be derived from the item of work that learners are asked to undertake, which is also termed the assessment task.

In outcomes based learning, assessment criteria helps to ensure that the learner is assessed as competent or not competent on the basis of his own performance against specific, transparent and pre-set assessment criteria. This resonates with what is termed “criteria referenced assessment”, characterized by (a) assessment of the individual, (b) making judgments about the learners by measuring their work against a pre-determined criteria, (c) criteria being objective and as clear as possible, and (d) in cases where grading is used, this is done against a set criteria of assessment (SAQA, 2001:24-26).

Ultimately, assessment criteria need to be designed in ways that integrate “assessment of learning” which focuses on evidence of achievement, and “assessment for learning” which involves and helps students (Dreyer, 2002). Concisely, assessment procedures and practices that are detailed, clear, and transparent are at the heart of assessment for learning, in order to buttress and underpin learning, instead of eroding student confidence to learn (Dreyer, 2002:12; Torrance, 2007:281). Torrance (2007:282) explains that assessment as learning occurs when:

“...The clearer the task of how to achieve a grade or award becomes, and the more detailed the assistance given by tutors, supervisors and assessors, the more likely the learners are to succeed. (Own emphasis)".

Types of Assessment Criteria

There are three different types of assessment criteria that can be identified from literature. These are the (1) threshold assessment criteria (University of Ulster, 2012:6-8); (2) grading assessment criteria (Sadler, 2005); and (3) generic assessment criteria (Canterbury Christ
Church University, 2012).

Firstly, a threshold assessment criterion reflects a standard of performance that a learner must reach in order to reflect minimum achievement or barely pass in a specified element of learning (University of Ulster, 2012:8).

Secondly, a grade assessment criterion provides a scaling of how well learners achieve above the threshold such that it provides an incentive for learners to achieve at a higher standard than the minimum. The threshold and grade assessment criteria indicate what is to be learned, influences the approaches to learning that students take, and also indicate the levels of achievement that are required for any given unit of study.

Thirdly, generic assessment criteria are not directly linked to learning outcomes as they are more generalised in terms of what they cover so that they can be adapted to specific disciplinary needs or used as they are (Canterbury Christ Church University, 2012).

Assessors on this JMDP used the assessment criteria to respond to two fundamental questions. These are firstly: do participants know what they need to do to achieve the learning outcomes? Secondly, how will participants (and others) know what needs to be demonstrated to achieve a particular grade, mark or competence? If these are the views of the assessor, then what are the views of participants concerning how they used or did not use the assessment criteria?

RESEARCH METHOD

This is a phenomenological study to explore and privilege the subjective meanings of the lived experience of using or not using assessment criteria by prospective Junior Managers on a JMDP.

Sampling

The total number of JMDP participants was 19, comprising 12 female and 7 male, all full time employees, working at the administrative level. Each had a minimum qualification of matric and a first degree was the highest qualification. While three years of work experience in the organization was the minimum, the longest serving employee had 15 years with the organisation. The participants were between the ages of 25 to 36 years. These employees were identified through the organization’s talent management process. Purposively, the study involved only 14 of the 19 participants because they were competent in each of the modules in the JMDP. Every successful participant was involved as the number was relatively small in order to exclude others and still get rich and multiple perspectives of the phenomenon under study. All the employees interviewed in this study attended all the eight modules and therefore had the opportunity to experience the use of the assessment criteria. The assessment criteria were explained to participants during the programme launch and were also discussed by each lecturer with participants in each module. This study focuses on two modules only, namely Introduction to marketing management, and Business operations and information management. These two modules were chosen because participants considered them as the easiest and most difficult respectively.

Data collection

As participants were from three geographically spread offices within South Africa, telephone interviews were considered as being most cost-effective. The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with each of the 14 successful participants on the JMDP to (a) explore their understanding of the assessment criteria given to them in each of the two modules, (b) determine whether or not they used the assessment criteria; (c) how they used or did not use the assessment criteria; and (d) upon reflecting on their experience or opportunity to use an assessment criteria, what the participants as learners thought the reasons were for the assignments to have the allocated assessment criteria. It took one week to interview all the 14 participants. Semi structured interviews allowed for flexibility in the participants’ responses. These interviews captured accounts of participants in their own words as they reflected on the opportunity to use, or on the actual use of the assessment criteria. On average, each interview took between fifteen and twenty minutes. The interviews were conducted a month after the end of teaching and learning on the last module. Limitations of telephone interviews included the researcher (a) not being able to observe and interpret respondents’ non-verbal cues and (b) difficulty in completely ascertaining that respondents were not saying what they thought the researcher wanted to hear. However, the findings were subjected to member checks to mitigate this.

Data analysis

The collected qualitative data was transcribed before analysis. The open coding and constant comparison technique was adopted to induce key emerging categories, which were then developed into themes.

RESULTS

Overarching themes show that prospective Junior Managers understood and used the assessment criteria in diverse ways, in different circumstances and also for varied purposes, all of which can be broadly grouped into five, namely: (1) learning enabler, (2) external assessment, (3) cues and clues, (4) standard, and (5) hope and help. Table 1 reflects the various perspectives of JMDP regarding assessment criteria.

Learning enabler

Three of the fourteen Junior Managers concurred that assessment criteria enabled them to learn more on their own. One participant, recognizing the enabling capacity of assessment criteria, described how he felt empowered to independently and proactively explore more literature, an exercise which was perceived as fruitful:

“We were asked to interview three managers.... The managers were not available.....remember the submission date for marketing assignment was extended because managers in the marketing department were attending an annual event with customers...Time was running out. I first read the assignment...and then the
assessment criteria. I realized I had to read on my own... read books... company literature and brochures to familiarize myself with the topic. When the managers became available ... it was easy and quick for me to get a lot of focused information which I needed from these managers. (JMDP 10)

As notable exceptions, two of these three participants revealed how assessment criteria induced them to step up efforts to provide comprehensive and balanced coverage of various aspects of assessment criteria during preparations for assignments when aiming for higher achievement. This was what one of them had to say:

"I did not focus just on few aspects, but covered all the aspects in a comprehensive way. It helped to be comprehensive...... above what was expected. To me the assessment criteria were a starting point ...a systematic way of going forward... so I had to do more. For example, if I had to interview managers, I made sure I did that... interviewed more and chose which managers gave me relevant and great answers. (JMDP 7)"

There was unique evidence that assessment criteria influenced the orientation of participants towards more constant reflection on the assessment criteria throughout the preparation of the assignment. Uniquely, these three participants invested extra effort and personal resources, as one of them recollected this educational and assessment episode:

"After the first rough draft, I thought I had enough.... had done a lot of work and was comfortable. I did not go back to the copy of the assessment criteria. Yaa ..... I put the questions and the relevant criteria in sections of my work... The first draft was just to meet the criteria. Subsequent rough drafts were to simply improve the quality... the criteria was now part of my work. I looked at it time and again. I read more to provide as much as I could. (JMDP14)"

Conspicuously, there were three participants who did not use the assessment criteria. One of these participants confessed that "I was under work and time pressure, and also had a toothache...... many things were happening at the same time... I did not use it [assessment criteria]" (JMDP 5). Time taken up by family commitments, company social events, and an urge to avoid details were characteristic reasons by participants who did not use the assessment criteria. In retrospect, one participant lamented about the adverse consequences arising from failure to appropriately use detailed evidence in an assignment. The result of downplaying the formative priority of assessment criteria subsequently altered not only the way some participants were dealing with the assignment but also cleared some misconceptions of the processes leading to learning achievement. From the point of view of development and change in practices, this is how one of the participants realized the importance of doing more detailed work and working differently to avoid failure:

"I did not verify or compare any aspect of my work with the assessment criteria. I was avoiding the details. I simply wanted to submit and hoped to just make it... sneak in. If I had used it, I was going to do well. The criteria were clear... Frankly, my assignment was disorderly... not exhaustive... Yet I had collected lots of information. I should not have failed.... I learnt my lesson and vowed never ever to do this. I just did not have time because I had gone home for family meetings... home is far away from here. (JMDP 7)"

**External assessment**

Eight of the fourteen JMDP participants did not use the assessment criteria themselves to understand and evaluate their own learning. Instead, these participants described how they used the assessment criteria to get external and formative feedback, sometimes from more than one person, and also from different hierarchical levels. This type of dependence on others such as authoritative peers was illustrated as follows:

"After writing my marketing assignment, I gave it to two of my colleagues on this programme [names of people withheld] to look at it. They gave me feedback on what I was lacking... gaps... differences in my understanding. After their comments, then I made corrections before submitting it with some confidence. (JMDP 2)"

The external evaluations or support which participants sought, served different purposes with varied usefulness

### Table 1. JMDP Learners’ Perspectives of Assessment criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perspectives on Assessment criteria</th>
<th>No. of Learners out of 14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learning enabler</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Assessment</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standard</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cues and clues</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hope and help</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
at different times. Instrumentally, two of the eight participants used the assessment criteria to get opinions. Other participants used the assessment criteria to engage in critical and structured discussions on the assignment with peers. The external support also served an educational purpose through feedback on the progress of participants, which resulted in valuable perspectives on how to address the assessment task. However, three of the eight participants were developing into capable learners, ultimately able to decipher and make final decisions from external input on key aspects regarding the quality of their own work, as concisely illustrated below:

“A friend who is more experienced than me gave me her opinion on my assignment based on the criteria. I emailed her both my assignment and the assessment criteria. In the marketing assignment, we had a discussion over lunch about the progress on interviews I had with managers. She suggested to me the key points from the interview for me to consider but always insisted that the final decision was mine. (JMDP 8)”.

Focusing on structuring of feedback to reveal the existence or non-existence of gaps in knowledge, one participant described how she thought assessment criteria was a framework for peers, colleagues, managers and lecturers to use in order to give formative and also retrospective feedback to participants. The dominance of the lecturer-led model of assessment and the usefulness of assessment criteria in framing the lecturer’s feedback to participants was conceived as useful for examination preparation:

“I think the assessment criteria were given to us as a framework of what feedback we will get. Feedback from the lecturer after the assignment boosted my self-belief that I had understood the course. This was good and useful for me as I prepared for exam. However, I was worried when I did not get feedback in time for Business operations exam. (JMDP 3)”.

A range of negative self-beliefs entrenched low self-efficacy of participants in terms of how they used the assessment criteria. It was common that all these eight participants expressed (a) a lack of self confidence in their own ability to criticize their own work; (b) a belief that others were better placed to assess their work and (c) the belief that one can competently assess one’s work was incongruent with their common belief that an assessor is external, more experienced and knowledgeable than oneself. One of these participants described tersely how she perceived her own lack of abilities to apply the criteria to her own work, and thereby depended on external evaluators:

“I gave the assessment criteria to other people to check if what I was doing was right or wrong. I am not good at finding my own mistakes really. If I try to do it… it just makes me feel hopeless… sometime I under or over criticize myself. I just do not want to deceive myself so, I let others do it. (JMDP 11)”.

Standards

Six of the fourteen participants described how they used the assessment criteria as standards or formulae. There were perceptions of assessment criteria as depictions of “defined level” or “a bar” of what to do, a style of how to do, and the amount of what to do to attain a certain level of achievement. Assessment criteria as a formula to pass influenced how participants perceived success or attainable goals. As such, it was rife among six participants who expressed faith in assessment criteria as a very valuable filter or yardstick in terms of highlighting right or wrong or any deviations from expectations or formulae. One participant had this to say:

“…..without the assessment criteria I could have difficulties to be within the parameters of what I was expected to write. The criteria gave me…… necessary limits to observe to be ok……to adhere and not be off limits. (JMDP 1)”.

In corroboration with this enduring perspective, the other participants pronounced non-adherence to criteria and an absence or inadequate characteristics to meet minimum requirements as central in the negative outcome of their performance, as succinctly revealed in this interview text:

“…..I have used the marking criteria before…..but not in the business operations assignment. I had gone for company sports games in [name of town withheld]. I travelled the day before the deadline. I was tired and did not have time. I just wrote the assignment and submitted it. I did not even check or stick to the marking guide. I had pressure to submit….last minute work. There was no spare time to check what I had written against the criteria. It was disaster, really. (JMDP 4)”.

Cues and Clues

It was prevalent that eight of fourteen participants perceived assessment criteria as signals or clues by the lecturers to them during the assessment experience. In particular, the following quotation illustrates how assessment criteria were perceived by four participants as instrumental in giving clear or transparent hints of what to focus on when doing the assignment:

“…..I realized that the assessment criteria came from the assignment. Is it not the case …? The hints were in the
assessment criteria...There was nothing that was hidden really. I just looked at the criteria as what I should do. That’s how I used it; it actually reduced my effort by helping me not to beat about the bush. (JMDP 6)

Spotting clues about setting-up, structuring or outlining the assignment, clues about expected depth and quality of content, and also cues about changes in the line of argument also reflects how two of these participants used the assessment criteria:

“The criteria gave me an idea of how to set-up my assignment. What must be in it….put it in order….Change the argument and ensure that I got everything….and that I was on track. Once I spotted this…this helped me with the first rough draft. In the business operations assignment I had five rough drafts….. I had to polish up my work. (JMDP 12)

In some instances, two participants were persistent in underscoring that clues in the assessment criteria were complemented by what lecturers in classroom had said was important.

“It...indirectly informed me on how to plan my assignment...get an outline....and deliver on expectations. I knew that the lecturer expected something to come from me from the lecture. The criteria showed me this something. I also checked my notes of what the lectures said was important on the topic. (JMDP 6)

Additionally, all eight participants also worked out some clues and cues from details in criteria-driven feedback by lecturers regarding assignment. These types of evaluative clues were useful for examination as they reflected participants’ strengths and weakness, thereby signalling them on what to study, and where mitigation strategies could be adopted in order to succeed.

“….feedback from the lecturer on the assignment was important. It gave me assurance, …confirmation of what I understood or not ...and what I did not know. It was motivating when feedback showed I knew something. When preparing for examination, I knew where to focus much when studying...with time pressure.... the focus was on what I did not understand. (JMDP 11)

Hope and help

Only two of fourteen participants expressed how lack of support from anyone within the organization was helpful to renew their efforts when doing their assignment, instead of debilitating them. In these instances, the assessment criteria served to give participants optimism or a stimulus to set realistic goals, feel in charge of how well they were doing on the programme, and adopt effective learning strategies:

“Well…I remember the assessment criteria which I used to help me to know what I needed to do. Detailed assessment criteria really gave me hope that I would do it. Without support from the manager…or anyone at work, it’s like one is hanging in the air. I spent time...Immersed myself in the details... of the assessment criteria to bail myself out. (JMDP 13)

In these circumstances, participants concurred that assessment criteria were psychologically valuable as an alternative and a great window into the mind of the lecturer. In underpinning how the assessment criteria were perceived as indispensable support, another participant passionately said this:

“Our Manager was busy trying to get customers. He said he had no time to support us. We literary had no support from anyone in the company. The criteria were the only help...window into the lecturer`s mind on what I must do…. It clearly opened and pointed the key points. If there is one thing that should not be changed, it’s this one. (JMDP 9)

DISCUSSION

It is a well-rehearsed assertion that lecturers or trainers invest a great deal of time in designing assessment criteria to support learning and also as learning for students. Norton (2004:690) argues that while assessment task may be construed as performance of students’ learning, assessment criteria which support actual learning become the learning criteria. However, the potential of assessment criteria to enable learning was not fully exploited by most of the participants themselves in this management development programme. Few participants used the assessment criteria as a learning enabler. In this respect, assessment criteria stimulated a few participants to step up their efforts or use more resources (in-put) to produce a comprehensive and balanced response to the assessment task (output). They generated a sense of empowerment that made participants learn more independently, and also constantly reflected on their assessment tasks during the preparatory period. It has been argued that assessors also learn through their exposure to new material from peers or students (Ross, 2006; Spiller, 2012). In this collaborative way, it is possible that those participants who were consulted to give feedback on the work of their peers based on the assessment criteria also not only learnt and became more critically aware of what to look for in their colleagues’ work, but also how to develop and present their own work. In other words, it is possible that the act of judging the quality of the work of a peer based on evidence and explicit assessment criteria caused the students to consider exactly what is it that would make a competent response to the assessment task. The use of peers in various ways (e.g. making
judgment, giving qualitative feedback on gaps, getting a more accurate and fair view of progress or self) demonstrates the potential for a more collaborative and participatory learning and assessment environment which may suit the communal or ubunto values in Africa.

Focusing on self-assessment, Rolheiser and Ross (1996:1) assert that “when we teach students how to assess their own progress, and when they do so against known and challenging quality standards, we find that there is a lot to gain”. While Boud and Falchikov (1989) analyses of studies from 1932-1988 cautions that “good students tended to underrate themselves and that weaker students overrated themselves”, they also agree that self-assessment increases the role of students as active participants reflecting on their own learning processes and results.

Another aspect of assessment criteria as an enabler of learning was evident through the facilitation of change in the ways in which some participants on this JMDP understood, experienced and conceptualized assessment criteria. Negative consequences of not using the assessment criteria had the educational effect of making participants reflecting on their own learning processes.

Focusing on self-assessment, Rolheiser and Ross (1996:1) assert that “when we teach students how to assess their own progress, and when they do so against known and challenging quality standards, we find that there is a lot to gain”. While Boud and Falchikov (1989) analyses of studies from 1932-1988 cautions that “good students tended to underrate themselves and that weaker students overrated themselves”, they also agree that self-assessment increases the role of students as active participants reflecting on their own learning processes and results.

Conversely, a large number of the participants on this JMDP perceived assessment criteria as cues and clues by the lecturers to participants during the assessment experience. Assessment criteria was used to spot different clues which guided the participant’s approach regarding content and quality, argumentation, and also informed them of strengths and weaknesses as reflected in criteria-driven feedback. Ramsden (1974) labeled this approach “strategic” as students may actually achieve good grades without a personal commitment to learning. In a similar vein, Biggs (1987) elaborated that a strategic approach is motivated by an “achievement orientation” and not a learning orientation. In some cases, participants on this JMDP asserted that clues and cues in assessment criteria were not always adequate, because they were complemented by clues based on what lecturers uttered in class. This finding resonates with the old study by Miller and Parklet (1974:60) which investigated the extent to which students were conscious of cues about what was rewarded in the assessment system. This study categorized and characterized students into three, namely, (1) cue seekers - “those who went out of their way to get out of the lecturer what was going to come up in an exam and what their personal preferences were”; (2) cue conscious - “those students who heard and paid attention to tips given out by their lecturers about what was important”; and lastly (3) cue deaf - “for whom any such guidance passed straight over their heads”. The current study goes beyond mere categorization and characterization of students by highlighting the link between “assessment criteria” and “clues and cues”, and also focusing on the nature and purposes of the cues and clues.

A different view of clues and cues emerges when one focuses on assessment as learning. Torrance (2007:282) posits that (a) explicit task assessment and (b) detailed assistance to learners increases the chances of learner success. This way of transferring skills and knowledge may be appealing particularly if participants need functional knowledge. However, there is a need to guard against instrumentalism and surface learning, the promotion of an over-dependence of participants on cues and clues from the lecturer and enhancement of the mechanics of assessment task, rather than meaningful engagement with the learning process (Norton, 2004). Assessment criteria are not available for passive participants to use. The participant is expected to be active and work towards achieving or exceeding the assessment criteria perceived as a definition of a “level” (Bloxham, 2012). Nonetheless, assessment criteria predominantly promoted threshold rather than excellent performance among the JMDP participants. In this way, assessment criteria inadvertently reinforced “criteria compliance” rather than “active learning” (Torrance, 2007:282).

Most of the participants also described how they used the assessment criteria to get external and formative feedback from external evaluators or verifiers (e.g. peers, a manager prior to submission, and lecturer after submission of the assignment). As such, assessment criteria were largely used for external assessment which is both peer and tutor assessment. Feedback and assessment are construed as central to the tutor identity and power. This is opposite to an internal perspective on personal learning and performance which requires a student to take an honest and self-critical reflection on his/her own work (e.g. how well did I apply myself to the task, what do I need to improve my performance). In this regard, students look at their work and judge the degree to which it reflects the goals of the assignment and the assessment criteria the teacher will be using to evaluate the work. It is different from grading their own work as the focus is on improving their work. In a nutshell, “self-assessment is feedback for oneself from oneself” (Andrade and Du, 2007:160). As such, self-assessment may be defined as “a process of formative assessment during which students reflect on and evaluate the quality of their work and their learning, judge the degree to which they reflect explicitly stated goals or criteria; identify own strength and weaknesses in their own work, and revise accordingly” (Andrade and Du, 2007:160). The theoretical model of self-evaluation by Rolheiser and Ross (2003:2) suggests that “when students evaluate their performance positively, self-evaluations encourage students to (1) set higher goals and (2) commit more personal resources or effort to them. The combination of goals (1) and effort (2)
equals achievement”. In doing self-evaluation, learners deliberately (a) “focus on specific aspects of their performance related to subjective standards of success”; (b) while self-judgment is about determining how well their general and specific goals were met; and (c) self-reactions refers to “interpretations of the degree of goal achievement that expresses how satisfied students are with results of their actions and processes that students use to observe and interpret their behavior” (Rolhesier and Ross, 2003). Thus, a combination of goals, effort, self-judgment and self-reaction brings a positive impact on the self-confidence of learners and on what is termed an “upward cycle of learning”. Conversely, “a downward cycle” may arise from self-evaluation which makes learners perceive themselves as unsuccessful. This is characterized by negative orientations of learners towards learning such as unrealistic goals, low effort, ineffective learning styles or even giving up in hopelessness (Rolhesier & Ross, 2003). In this study, some learners upheld negative self-beliefs which perpetuated low self-efficacy and discouraged them from using assessment criteria for discovering gaps in their own analysis, thereby highlighting points that were missed and their failure to plan for improvement prior to submission of their assignments.

The successful adoption of assessment criteria by participants will have to overcome their basic assumptions of tutor-led assessments, characterized as (a) hierarchical approach in which the expert considers the work of a novice; and (b) the predominant assessment model in which the lecturer holds all the power. This view is reinforced by the participants’ negative beliefs about their own ability in the light of self-assessment and therefore affirms the external perspective of assessment. While teacher and participant dialogue (criteria applications) focusing on evidence for judgment is critical, it is not sufficient without engaging participants in the making of decisions about standards of performance expected (criteria development). In other words, learners need to be engaged in the development and also trained in the application of assessment criteria if they are to be persuaded of its developmental value to them. Furthermore, a study of self-assessment at a new UK University by Fallows and Chandramohan (2001:236) focused on the positive effects of four stages of training learners how to assess their work which embraced (1) learners’ involvement in defining assessment criteria; (2) teaching students how to apply the criteria; (3) giving students feedback on their self-assessment; and (4) helping students to use assessment data to develop action plans. This study concluded that students trained in these processes outperformed control samples. Woolf (2004: 488) surmises that “it is the active engagement in the discussions and the application of criteria that can help students acquire a (deep) insight into the meaning of criteria in particular and more generally”. One form of such active engagement is self-assessment - which contributes to higher student achievement. Learners’ failure to internalize self-assessment reduces their own opportunities for genuine developmental feedback and “development of transferable skills deemed to be a positive foundation for lifelong learning and employment” (Fallows and Chandramohan, 2001:230). Andrade and Du (2007:162) echoes the view that more investigation into “issues related to student’s responses to self-assessment” is needed as one form of active engagement of learners in assessment.

**Implications**

Three key implications are highlighted. Firstly, although this study supports the notion that assessment procedures, practices and criteria that are articulated too precisely lead to learner compliance with criteria, the practical difficulty is to determine clearly the point “where assessment procedures and practices come completely to dominate the learning experience” (Torrance, 2007:282). As long as this remains fuzzy, clear and well-articulated assessment criteria which promote active engagement will be useful to build the functional knowledge of participants.

Secondly, there is evidence that while some participants benefited from the opportunity to use assessment criteria (such as a better understanding of expectations, the development of evaluative skills, motivation to do better work), there were others who experienced difficulties (not able to self-assess, self-defeating beliefs creating low self-efficacy, time constraints, grappling with beliefs such as the tutor is the assessor and not self or peer). Such difficulties were further compounded by the assessment innovation which reflects the changing role of assessor as self, peer, tutor, or co-assessor. Inevitably, this is shaking the traditionally dominant philosophy of lecturer-led or lecturer-controlled assessment upheld by both the assessor and the learner, not just in management development programmes but also the academy. Subsequently, the different ways in which participants used the assessment criteria calls for lecturers to give up some “teacher control”, and use multiple approaches to assessment of participants on JMDP. This implies the lecturers’ need for more tools in the assessment tool box as part of their repertoire of skills. The active participation of learners at every stage of assessment process (e.g. pre-assessment practice of marking and discussions) may help them to make judgments about the quality of their own work and also that of others in relation to the criteria.

Thus, learners become partners rather than passive recipients of judgment in the assessment. Furthermore, the learners’ use of criteria may be improved by paying attention to their response to criteria or their history of
working with criteria. In this pursuit, assessment literacy of the trainer or educator needs to recognize and also address the possibility of damage to the learner’s self-efficacy, self-worth or self-esteem arising from ill-use of assessment criteria for self-evaluation.

Therefore, to develop the skills and competencies demanded in professional organizations, future management talent development programmes need to actively promote assessment criteria as a valuable tool for use not just by lecturers or others such as peers or experienced others, as propagated by the notion of external view of assessment. This implies that participants as learners should internalize and use assessment criteria more fruitfully to evaluate, revise and accordingly improve their own work before submitting it.

Lastly, future studies need to delve into the participants’ interpretation of each criterion and its articulation in the set of assessment criteria to balance “instrumentalism” and “learning”. Such research would have clear practical value to both the university and organizations pursuing management development programmes that seek to develop managers who are lifelong learners as well as independent reflective practitioners.

REFERENCES