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**IMPLEMENTATION OF IPSATIVE METHOD FOR SUSTAINABLE  
ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK IN BUSINESS STUDIES HIGHER  
EDUCATION**

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**Abstract**

Assessment and feedback play a significant role in higher education as a process to assess the student's knowledge attainment against the programme's learning outcome. This paper intends to analyse the current assessment method practised in business studies programmes and the opportunity of impassive method - a student development focused, feedback and assessment method and its impact on student progress. In this paper, an evaluation of the current assessment and feedback practices of business schools are made based on the available literature. Assessment and feedback play a significant role in higher education as a process to assess the student's knowledge attainment against the programme's learning outcome. This paper intends to analyse the current assessment method practised in business studies programmes and the opportunity of impassive method - a student development focused, feedback and assessment method and its impact on student progress. In this paper, an evaluation of the current assessment and feedback practices of business schools are made based on the available literature.

**Keywords:** impassive feedback and assessment, business studies

**Introduction**

Whilst business studies being one of the most popular and growing disciplines (Bachan and Barrow, 2006) various studies (Nicol, 2010; Nixon, Scullion and Hearn, 2016) has revealed that there is increased student dissatisfaction and withdrawal from business courses, for which one of the primary reason being dissatisfaction in assessments and feedbacks. Lack of motivation on student progress through assessment and feedback leads to poor self-esteem and academic performance (Bennett, 2003) and withdrawal from the business studies programme. In my personal experience also, it is noted that the assessments are heavily objective/ criteria based and feedback given are general with least focus on the student progress and development (Bacon and Stewart, 2017), which leads to no significant boost on motivation to study except for improvement in grades (for high fliers). The increased need for reviewing student progress in attaining tangible business skills (Volkova and Jākobsone, 2016) and increased attrition rate in Business studies call for the need for a sustainable assessment and feedback. Ipsative method of assessment and feedback shows the evidence that an assessment based on comparative evaluation and feedback on performance overtime motivate learners by developing self-awareness on their progress and encourages them to take a longer-term approach in academic study (Hughes, Okumoto and Wood, 2011; Chapman, Luhanga and DeLuca, 2015). The

opportunity of ipsative method of feedback and assessment and its impact on the business student's progress will be the highlight of the paper.

### **ASSESSMENT STRATEGY PRACTICED IN BUSINESS STUDIES PROGRAMMES**

As in many other social studies programmes, business studies programmes all over the world (Martell, 2005, 2012; James and Casidy, 2018) follows the standards/criteria-based approach of assessment and feedback. In this method, formative and summative assessments validate the students' competence by measuring the level of achievement of certain explicit criteria, often with a cut or minimum score to show that he/she mastered a certain subject in the business programme. As per the AACSB<sup>1</sup> framework, accredited business schools follow a rubric (with a set of criteria or references) based approach in assessments. According to (AACSB International, 2017) "A rubric is a focused, documented set of guidelines, usually in matrix form, that faculty would use to evaluate student work and provide feedback". The assessment strategy followed under the different modules of the business studies programmes follow: 1.) setting of learning goals for the programme; 2.) aligning the curriculum with the set learning goals; 3.) develop measures of student learning related to learning goals; 4.) collect, analyse, and distribute results and e.) review curriculum based on faculty deliberation on assessment findings (AACSB International, 2017). Each module is explicitly framed based on the module learning outcomes which in turn depends on the programme learning outcomes (PLO). The modules follow a more or less equitable distribution of learning concepts under different business subjects, and greater importance is given to the objective grading of the competencies achieved in each module. The assessment rubric scaffold the objectives of the module, and by following the standard/criteria-referenced assessment, student's competence on the subject is measured against a set of criteria on rubrics relying on the PLO. Test life cycle (Appendix-1) of a business studies programme, therefore emphasise "constructive alignment" of the learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessments (Biggs, 2014)

### **CHALLENGES IN THE CURRENT BUSINESS STUDIES ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK**

Whilst business studies being one of the most popular and growing disciplines (Bachan and Barrow, 2006) various studies (Nicol, 2010; Nixon, Scullion and Hearn, 2016) has revealed that there is increased student dissatisfaction and withdrawal from business courses, for which one of the primary reason being dissatisfaction in assessments and feedbacks. The challenges of a standard/criteria based assessment regime in business studies are as follows:

#### ***Credit for summative performance than student development***

Assessment is vital to the student learning experience and is designed to be part of every module in the business studies. Therefore, greater importance is given to the student learning experience (Price, Carroll and Rust, 2011) through summative assessments and it is the basis of their progression and positive study advice to the next year. Performance in the module subject's

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1 The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business- AACSB International, founded in 1916, is a primary body that accredit schools of business.

summative assignment determines the feedback given, in a way to justify the points awarded in the evaluation rather than the student development in learning (O'Donovan, Rust and Price, 2016). The absence of any feedback on student development has also to do with the massive student number in each class which is the case of the almost every business school and the difficulty to give individual attention with low staff to student ratio (Page, 2013).

***Measures of “competence” than “advancement.”***

According to (Price, Carroll and Rust, 2011) assessment should inspire and challenge the student to encourage learning. In the learning process, the business students' “competence” is measured against set external criteria or the rubrics, which hardly motivates the students to see themselves in terms of how they performed against their previous module or their “advancement” (Bronstein *et al.*, 2015). Neither the learner nor the assessor can gauge the progress or level of expertise a student achieves over the years. Little does this method of standard/criteria-based assessment & feedback focus on the journey of student progress and motivate them in their development.

***Objective feedback than subjective***

Even though grading is an accurate measure, the subjective element of progress is of foremost importance to students. At present, in business studies, subjective understanding of the student progress is made as an outcome of the measured competence in the assessment, which is not comparable to the previous performance. Lack of inspiration on student progress through evaluation and feedback leads to low self-esteem and academic achievement and withdrawal from the business studies programme (Bennett, 2003). Lack of constructive feedback to students on their progress and development disengage the students in the learning process (J Coolahan *et al.*, 2017)

***No incentive for student progress achieved :***

Student satisfaction could be improved through assessments that inspire evaluation of “transformational learning” (Bannan, Cook and Pachler, 2016). In business studies criteria-based assessment regime, there is no incentive in getting a higher score as both a border pass and a high grade get the same credit. Given the above scenario, it is prevalent that the students work minimally or do not put their best effort to score much in exams as there is no incentive in achieving more or improving the grade. (Lent *et al.*, 2007) advocates that student satisfaction critically depends on their understanding of their progress towards attainment of their degree (goal progress), progress of skills in their preferred expertise (self-efficacy) and aptitude to access suitable sustenance towards their development.

***Industry's requirement on the quality of graduates and available business graduates employability***

Industry's growing expectation of the university graduates (Tout, Pancini and McCormack, 2014; Oliver, 2015) has provided greater importance on the topic of authentic assessment. Recent studies (Maxwell, 2012; James and Casidy, 2018) proved that there is broadening gap between the expectation/requirements of the industry on the resource required and human

resources offered at entry level, straight from business school. Student incompetence, unsuitable business curriculum and unproductive assessments (Jackson and Chapman, 2012; Natarajan and Kumar, 2014; Brunstein *et al.*, 2015) are assessed to be the reasons of this widening gap. Criteria based assessment fail to assess the industry desired skill requirement and development of the business students.

***Theoretical knowledge attainment focus than skill achievement***

Business, being a multifaceted skilled needed environment, with a high level of knowledge integration from various social sciences, business studies courses focus on student attainment of tangible business skills to be in the industry (Barnett, 2000)(Herger, 2009). (Tout, Pancini and McCormack, 2014, p.597)emphasised that ‘theory is no longer able to govern practice; practice, while drawing on theory, now lights its own path based on precedent, analogy, experience, imagination and in practical judgement’. This comment has the highest relevance in business studies where an understanding of business theories is measured in criteria-based assessment instead of how student progress over the year in its practical application.

***Feedback is delivered as an unwanted gift***

Through standard/criteria based regime business studies assessments are heavilycriteria-basedandfeedback given are general with least focus on the student progress and development (Bacon and Stewart, 2017), which leads to no significant boost on motivation to study except for improvement in grades (for high fliers). Evidence to porve that feedback is used effectively in the business studies is limited, as it is often there to justify the grades only. Hence feedback is hardly acted upon by a passive recipient (low flier).

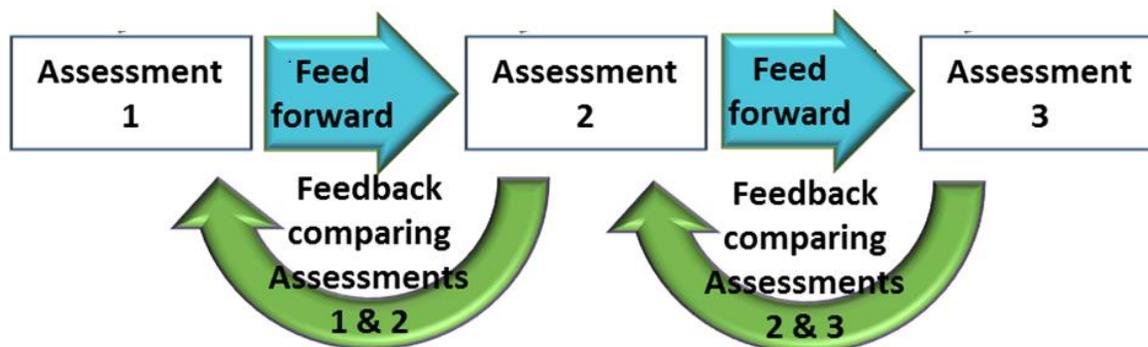
**OPPORTUNITY FOR IPSATIVE METHOD IN BUSINESS STUDIES**

(Gibbs, 2010, p. 3) “Assessment brings much difference in student engagement- the way they spend their time, focus their effort, perform and if the educators want to make their coursework better, then there is more influence through changing aspects of assessment than elsewhere”. A criteria-based approach followed in business studies has less student engagement and development due to criteria-oriented assessments, objective and limited feedback with no active participation between student and the teacher. This has led to widespread dissatisfaction withassessment, disengagement in learning and increased dropouts from business programmes(Kingston, 2008; Bennett, 2010; Martell, 2012). According to (Jones, 2005)the primary feature of assessments for learning is effective feedback provided to the students on their progress, which depends on two factors- the quality of feedback and how students receive and ultimately uses it.

Student engagement through constructive feedback and active participation in student developmentand impassive feedback can provide it as a consistent solution to Business studies programmes. Impassive method of assessment and feedback compare the student’s present performance with earlier performance to assess the progress and give feedback on improvement (Hughes, 2011b; Hughes, Okumoto and Wood, 2011a; Chapman, Luhanga and DeLuca, 2015).

Through Impassive assessment and feedback, a comparison of student’s prior performance linking it to his/her long run progress is possible.

Figure 1 Assessment and Feedback process in the Impassive method



Source: *Impassive Method illustrated* (Hughes, 2011a)

In this method, an active learning and highly engaged relationship are created between teacher and the student in the business school. With the ‘**feed up**’ in the process, the student and teacher agree on the goals and enable the student to answer questions about goals. ‘**Feedback**’ after an assessment will help the student to evaluate their present status on a particular business skill. In between two assessments, ‘**feed forward**’ helps the student to see a comparison between assessment and answer questions about they still need to do to achieve the goal.

### IMPLEMENTATION OF IPSATIVE METHOD IN BUSINESS STUDIES

With the new paradigm of sustainable assessment and feedback through impassive method, active participation and involvement of the student in feedback are critical (Carless *et al.*, 2011). Student engagement with an open dialogue with the business teacher (Winstone and Pitt, 2017; Nicol, 2009) and action on the feedback creates improvement in student development and progress (Ellison, Steinfeld and Lampe, 2007).

#### Impassive feedback on student progress

As student progress is an essential aspect of this method, impassive feedback gives a clear view of the student standing in a particular business skill and the need for improvement. For example, business studies summative assessment can reflect the student’s progress in a specific skill rather than the level of achievement, which in turn might also motivate the students to act on feedback. In a business studies set up, the ipsative method can be linked with the general feedback across the module. In this way, the assessor also acts as a coach to give feedback on the student progress (Hughes, 2011b; Hughes, Okumoto and Wood, 2011b) rather than on the module summative work alone. Any feedforward can be considered as input to improve the grade in the

future. In this way, impassive feedback is a dynamic way of approaching student development through active participation of the learner in the assessment process. Iterative dialogic feedback cycles ((Beaumont, O 'Doherty and Shannon, 2008)) will effect in an interactive exchange between the assessors and assesses on the interpretations, meaning and expectations (Carless *et al.*, 2011). It can guide the student on what a good performance is in terms of quality and can enhance ownership of assessment. To have a productive incentive for feedback, it should be more than information transmission (Nicol and Milligan, 2006). High quality constructive feedback enables the student to appreciate the performance gap between present performance and the essential performance (Jones, 2005; Nicol, 2010).

### **Impassive grades awarded for student progress**

Criteria based assessment can be demotivating for business students who are not high fliers as the grades are awarded based on how much a specific criterion is met. While the ipsative method of assessment and feedback evidence that an assessment based on comparative evaluation and feedback on performance over time, motivate learners by developing self-awareness on their progress. Student's efforts are rewarded, thereby students with poor self-esteem may produce constructive impression about their learning. An impassive summative assessment reward would be based on the progress towards a business skill criterion, rather than how far the criteria have been met. Impassive assessment correlates with effort, to encourage effort-based ascriptions of success and to augment motivation to learn (Bennett, 2003; Linnenbrink-Garcia, Patall and Pekrun, 2016). In effect, Impassive assessment feedback and assessment can also help the high fliers in the business programmes to achieve more.

### **Self-referential assessment**

Impassive assessment helps students self-assess and become more self-reliant. The ipsative assessment gives tutor and student a longitudinal view of the assessment and encourages them to take a longer-term approach in academic study (Hughes, Okumoto and Wood, 2011a; Chapman, Luhanga and DeLuca, 2015). Impassive assessment measures, the student progress their prior attainment or even their personal best. Students are only compared with their previous performance and not against their peers, which will develop a healthy environment by scoring high and improve self-esteem as well. In the feedback process, they take effort in understanding the performance against the goals set. In the feed forward process, the student takes effort in understanding of where to go next. The feedback loop is closed through supporting and encouraging sustained dialogue between the student and the teacher. Hence in a sustainable feedback approach, the student produces, construes, and involve in feedback and develop congruence through self-regulation and ownership in progress.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

It cannot be criticised that the criteria-based approach is entirely wrong and entire grades for an awarded business programme cannot be impassive based. Therefore, adoption of an wholesome impassive regime can be unrealistic for the business schools, which are driven by the external criteria and standards to estimate the achievement of the award. Hence, a blended impassive and

criteria-based assessment regime is recommended to solve many of the challenges the business studies assessment dilemmas.

Following a mixed regime with passive impassive assessment adoption, where the impassive grades do not count, but for motivation is not a reasonably good idea. For example, an impassive grade on a business skill, which is created to motivate the students but does not contribute to a final award will be viewed as low stakes. Therefore, impassive grading should be formally recorded and can be taken as a threshold or progression to the next semester.

From the context of usual teacher/ assessor centred model to a student-focused model, impassive assessment in business schools can support the more self-driven and engaged students. Business studies programmes can incorporate, students assessing their own development through the teaching portfolio and integrated (criteria-based and impassive) assessment structure of the program, to continuously improve the skills required by the industry.

As in the business schools, the students may be considered as trainees/interns/junior employees working in an organisation and an appraisal of the general business skills required. Through the ipsative method, the progress in the attainment of these business skills can be monitored through assessments. It improves the self-esteem of the students as rewarding the development improving on the feedbacks; the feedback loops are closed.

Business schools with the help of the industry partners should take the effort to learn the industry expectation on the future human resources. The references developed from the expectations should be made as the transformers/transformation required for the skills needed in the industry and should be developed in the business schools. By linking it in various levels in the study years, the student can take serious efforts in developing those skills and using impassive assessment the university business coach and the student can actively evaluate the progression in the skill achievement. In this way, Impassive feedback will help the students to develop by highlighting where there is more work to do.

By adopting impassive feedback, business schools can enable the students to re-activate, consolidate pre-requisite skills or knowledge. Active participation and relationship between business teacher/ coach and the student should be maintained to have proper knowledge of the results and corrective feedback.

## **CONCLUSION**

The increased attrition rate in Business studies and increased need for reviewing student progress in attaining tangible business skills (Volkova and Jākobsone, 2016) call for the need of a sustainable assessment and feedback method. Impassive method of assessment focuses on student's progress rather than a performance or competence gap, providing a drive towards the encouragement of business assessment for learning and advancement in business skills required in the industry. In a more involved, dialogic and sustainable feedback approach in the Business studies, the student will play the role of proactive recipients (Winston *et al.*, 2015). By following a blended approach (impassive and criteria based) (Hughes, 2011b), the student is actively involved in the feedback loop. In the initial stages, the students are fed with an understanding of the goals of the assessment, which can be derived from the industry expectation of a business graduate. Constructive alignment of business studies assessment integrating skill development

and real work environment requirements is highly required. This calls for a continuous evaluation of student progress and feedback for improvement during their studies. Assessment and feedback focussed on student progress and development, fulfilling the growing industry expectations improve graduates employability in the industry (Mulhouse and Rahschulte, 2010).

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