EXPLORING FEEDBACK PRACTICES IN FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT IN RWANDAN HIGHER EDUCATION: A MULTIFACETED APPROACH IS NEEDED

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Abstract:

Inspired by the current scholarship that indicates that, if used well, formative assessment and feedback can advance student's learning, this paper explores the practices of feedback in formative assessment in Rwandan higher education, specifically at the University of Rwanda. The study used a qualitative approach with the aim of gaining lecturers' and students' perspectives on formative assessment and feedback; and exploring different ways formative assessment and feedback were practiced. Using data collected through interviews, student focus group discussions, and document analysis; the paper shows that formative assessment and feedback were understood in the context of binding prescription within the boundaries of limited description in academic regulations. Feedback was in most cases reduced to marks, and lecturers – who portrayed themselves as information providers, mastery checkers, and performance appraisers - were in full charge of all formative assessment efforts. The paper also shows that lack of clarity and feed forward instructions in too-much-delayed lecturers' written feedback led students to just receive feedback and not use it to enhance their performance. Building on this study's findings and on the existing literature, the paper suggests three important moves whereby a collaborative research-based approach that will bring together different stakeholders will help to move away from a single-sided approach to a multifaceted approach in both perception and practice of formative assessment and feedback at the University of Rwanda.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction and theoretical background

Formative assessment has been described and debated by various authors from different perspectives. Fisher & Frey (2007) describe formative assessment as checking for understanding. For these authors, checking for understanding is a very important step in teaching and learning because (a) without checking for understanding, it would difficult to know what students are getting from the lesson (b) research studies have also indicated that one of the important steps of every learning process is to identify and confront misconceptions.

Brookhart's (2010) understanding of formative assessment emphasizes the learning goals. She describes it as an ongoing process in which students and teachers are engaged when they
- Focus on learning goals: What knowledge or skills do I have to develop?
- Take stock of the relationship between current work and the goal: How close am I now?
- Take action susceptible to help them move towards the goal: What do I need to do next?

Involvement of both students and teachers is one of the main characteristics of formative assessment and this is understood as something teachers do *with* and *for* students. This type of assessment involves teachers and students and thus both are considered as partners who share responsibility for learning (Heritage, 2007 and Black & Wiliam, 1998). Black & Wiliam (1998) explain formative assessment as a process and not a thing. It should not be construed as a final test administered to students to check the accumulated learning aimed at grading, placement, or classification. Before they are graded, notices Brookhart (2010), students need – and deserve – an opportunity to know how well they have learned. In the same vein, Fisher & Frey (2007) insist on the fact that checking for understanding (formative assessment) is not the final exam or achievement tests.

1.1 Specifics of formative assessment: assessment for learning

Many authors (Gardner, 2012; Sambell et al., 2012 ; William, 2011 ; Berry, 2008; Hargreaves, 2005; Black et al., 2004) describe formative assessment as assessment for learning. Assessment for learning aims to promote worthwhile, long-standing student learning, encouraging learners to take responsibility for, and exercise control over, their own learning (Sambell et al., 2012, p.8). A cornerstone of assessment of learning, argues Berry (2008 p. 1), is that in classroom students' decisions are very important and in order to come up with worthwhile decisions, they need to be given continuous information about their learning, how well they are succeeding, areas that need improvement, as well as strategies to take into account in order to move forward. William (2011) suggests that assessment for learning is a move from some views of assessment that prevailed for many years whereby the term "assessment" shifted from describing the processes of evaluating the effectiveness of a given complete instructional sequence to a more recent tendency that aims to understand activities that are purported to help and guide the student towards the learning goal, and that take place during the learning process. Hargreaves (2005) conducted a survey to explore the meanings of 'assessment for learning' from teachers' perspective and produced six groups of descriptions whereby assessment for learning is defined as:

- "Monitoring pupils' performance against targets or objectives" (p. 214);
- "Using assessment to inform next steps in teaching and learning" (p. 215);
- "Teachers giving feedback for improvement" (p. 215);
- "Teachers learning about learners' learning" (p.216);
- "Learners taking some control of their own learning and assessment"; and
- "Turning assessment into a learning event" (p.217)

Drawing on this brief review of the literature above on formative assessment, it is noticeable that formative assessment or assessment for learning foregrounds several features of modern

theories of learning that emphasize the active involvement of students in teaching, learning, and assessment processes.

1.2 Formative assessment and feedback

Feedback is considered as a core feature in formative assessment that influences greatly the process of teaching and learning (Rushton, 2005; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Sadler, 1998; Black & Wiliam, 1998). This view has been stressed in several research studies, and it states that formative assessment is seen as any task that provides feedback or feedforward to students and informs them about their learning achievements (Irons, 2008). Formative assessment is designed to give a sort of multi-level feedback to the teacher about the current status of student understanding and to inform the teacher about the next steps in learning (Heritage, 2007). Formative assessment, according to Black & Wiliam (1998), is concerned with any activities carried out by teachers and students, which yield information that can be used to review—and if necessary modify—the course of learning activities in which the students and teachers are engaged.

In his extensive work that was based on more than 800 meta-analyses and substantiated by several other empirical research studies, Hattie (2009) studied the effect sizes of various approaches to teaching and learning and identified feedback and knowing when students are or are not progressing as key components of a formative assessment system. In higher education, argue Juwah et al. (2004), the main purpose of assessment is to provide a platform for sharing learning objectives with students and to monitor their progress. However, assessment will only be considered to be formative if it can generate feedback that the students can use to improve their learning and achievement and used by teachers to relook into their teaching strategies in response to learners' needs (p.3). Another important aspect underlined by these authors is that 'feedback' and 'feed-forward' are the central features of formative assessment that should be "systematically embedded in curriculum practices." According to Irons (2008), for improving teaching and learning events in higher education, teaching and support staff should be encouraged to promote student learning through formative assessment activities and formative feedback should be provided as well. Although the provision of feedback to students is an important aspect of the teachers' role in higher education; for Irons (2008), there have always been many challenges for teachers in higher education and one of those challenges is about how to balance 'quality' and 'timeliness' of feedback in order for students to get the best possible learning benefits from that feedback.

It is worth to notice that from the previous references on formative assessment and feedback, the two processes are actually interlinked rather than being separated. This implies that feedback itself is central to formative assessment. Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick (2006) advance two central arguments underlying the two processes: (i) the use of formative assessment and feedback should promote self-regulated learning and (ii) the importance of feedback on learner's motivation and self-esteem should be taken into account.

1.3 Studies in formative assessment and feedback in higher education

A number of research studies have been conducted on assessment and feedback in higher education. One of the most recent research studies was aimed at developing awareness and understanding of the relationship that exist between the practices of formative assessment and feedback and learning at a UK University. In this study Wheatley, Mcinch & Fleming (2015) used focus group discussions with both students and teachers. Their study demonstrated that in order to sustain continuous learning through effective feedback and feedforward, and thus encouraging self-regulated learning, there is a need to provide students with opportunities to make the mistakes and learn from them before summative assessment.

Despite the fact that a number of researchers have suggested potential benefits of using

formative feedback in teaching and learning, discrepancies arise about how teachers and students perceive formative feedback practices. In a study that examined a teacher-student perception gap about feedback practices, Carless (2006) identified that (1) teachers believe that they give a more detailed feedback than students think, (2) teachers consider the feedback they give to be more helpful compared to what students think, and (3) teachers were convinced about fairness in their marking whilst students had varied perceptions about fairness of teachers' marking.

The perception gap is not the only differentiating feature between teachers and students as long as formative feedback is concerned. The impact of feedback on student learning will vary depending on 'who drives' it (students or teachers), as suggested by Boud & Molloy (2013) who developed and analysed two models of feedback in assessment in higher education by alternatively positioning teachers and students as the drivers of feedback. Their findings suggest that the student-based model equips learners beyond the immediate task and there is no risk of experiencing false expectations that are far from what the courses can deliver. The teacher-student perception gap about formative feedback is one of the reasons that lead some practitioners to consider teacher feedback as a waste of time because students are most of the time interested in grades only. However, based on the results of a student survey conducted at Aston University, Doan (2013) contradicts this claim and his study revealed that students are receptive to teacher feedback and use it.

Research studies on formative assessment and feedback also focused on the conditions and principles of effective feedback that will have most effect on student learning. Vardi (2013) studied how the use of written feedback from lecturers can improve student outcomes and grades from one assessment task to the next. The study suggests that relatedness and proximity of task requirements, consistency of assessment standards between tasks, and the specificity of the feedback given are the factors that may affect how feedback impacts on student performance in subsequent assessment tasks. Carless et al. (2011) studied a project on student assessment and feedback enhancement by interviewing, through in-depth semi-structured interviews, a purposive sample of award-winning teachers. From the data gathered from the interviews, they inferred a number of principles of effective feedback practice. Firstly, they argued that it is important to enhance students' self-evaluative abilities by using activities like promotion of self-directed learning and question-raising. Secondly, they emphasized the importance of dialogic interaction, which usually involves peer and lecturer critique. Thirdly, they promoted technology-assisted dialogue that aims to encourage students' reflective interaction and autonomy. Finally, in 2010, a group of researchers, academic development practitioners and managers sought to identify and understand the contemporary best ways of thinking about how assessment can address immediate and future higher education demands (Boud et al., 2010). A number of conditions under which assessment in higher education that would have most effect were advanced. One of those conditions is "the use of feedback to actively improve student learning" whereby (a) feedback should be considered to be informative and supportive in order to facilitate student's positive attitude towards future learning, (b) students should seek and act on a given feedback with the aim of improving the quality of their learning, and (c) students should be given, on regularly basis, specific information that guide them how to improve the quality of their work and this information should not just be limited to marks and grades.

In general, the studies and brief literature highlighted above show that formative assessment and feedback are well intentioned and, in practice, they could lead to improvements in teaching and learning process. However, as Gardner (2012) put it, in order to establish what contributes to further learning and what has got in the way of this, studies must take into account the cultural and learning context, the quality of classroom interactions and teachers' and learners' clarity of understanding the learning object. We agree with the view that contexts matter (A. Harris, 2006) and this has implications on the understanding of within-school practices and policy (Thomson, 2012). In the same vein, researchers should be aware that formative assessment and feedback

practices are influenced by a number of factors that include teachers' beliefs, their values and understandings as well as their knowledge, which are mediated by both cultural and institutional contexts (Lee, 2008b). In view of this, this study explored formative assessment and feedback practices in the context of the teaching and learning at the University of Rwanda and was guided by the following research questions:

- How do lecturers understand formative assessment and feedback?
- In which ways formative assessment and feedback are practiced?

2. Context of the study

Rwanda's tertiary education has recently undergone drastic changes that brought about the merger of various public universities into one University of Rwanda. This move aims to streamline Rwandan higher education and address the following three issues among several others:
- To bring about increased efficiency in the management of the university
- To raise the quality of the graduates, and
- To deal with the demand for higher education in Rwanda which is constantly increasing.

This study was conducted in one of the colleges of the UR, the College of Education, and focused on undergraduate programme. A programme of study at the University of Rwanda consists of a set of modules, which have well-defined learning outcomes and which the student must complete in order to be eligible for a qualification.

3. Assessment Policy at the UR

Basing on the UR Undergraduate General Academic Regulations (2014), the assessment policy can be summed up into the following:

- **Purpose**: "To measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes"
- **Types of assessment**: (1) coursework (assignments, tests, quizzes, and practicals carried out during the teaching weeks) and (2) Final assignment or examination which is administered at the completion of the module.
- **Grading**: All course works and final examinations have to be graded and present the marks as percentage scores. Continuous assessments make up 50% of the module overall score while the final examination makes up 50% of the module overall score.
- **Feedback**: Students should be given feedback about their performance in coursework before the subsequent assessment on the same module and coursework grades are provided to students before the final examination.

4. Research Approach

Following the guidelines of Creswell (2014), a qualitative research approach was used in this study to explore and obtain a thorough and in-depth understanding of the meaning that lecturers and students ascribe to formative assessment and feedback through interviews, focus group interview and document analysis. This study was exploratory by nature. Researchers explored issues related to formative assessment and feedback in detail and the findings form the basis of more future conclusive research (Stebbins, 2001).

4.1 Methods and procedure

Interview data were collected through semi-structured interviews that were conducted with 8 lecturers (4 heads of department and 4 subject leaders). Sampling was done as intensity sampling, and the heads of departments and subject leaders were chosen as interviewees

because they were in proper position to provide accurate and detailed information about the teaching and learning process in general and assessment practices in particular. The interviews focused on how they understood formative assessment and feedback and how feedback was being practiced in formative assessment activities. As formative assessment is used not just by teachers but by both teachers and students to provide feedback that will inform both teachers and students (Popham, 2008), students were also part of this study and participated in a focus group interview that included 8 students (2 students from each department). To avoid language barriers that would have prevented students from expressing their thoughts easily and comfortably, the focus group interview was conducted in the students' native language and later translated into English. The focus group discussions focused on the perception, types, and use of feedback in teaching and learning activities. As the focus group discussions were progressing, it was noticed that there was a growing concern expressed buy the students with regard to the lecturers' written feedback on the students' course works. To verify the students' perception of lecturers' written feedback, 75 student marked assignments were randomly collected and and analysed.

The interviews and focus group discussions were audio taped and later transcribed and the transcripts were used as the primary sources of data. In accordance with a naturalistic approach, the interview and focus group data were done in a way that did not compromise the original meaning expressed by lecturers and students (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

4.2 Data analysis: from codes to categories

The analysis process used both deductive and inductive approaches whereby (1) reference was made to the existing literature in order to set some sub-categories and categories which were gradually established by (2) using the codes that were derived from a systematic reading of interview and focus group data (Martin & Hanington, 2012). The coding of the text data was carried out by using qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA12 and upon completion of the third coding trial, the following codes were retained:

Table1. MAXQDA 12 Code Matrix Browser

| Code System |
| --- |
| A two way process |
| Academic regulations |
| Appreciation |
| Student self regulation |
| CAT |
| Confusion |
| constraints |
| Criticism |
| Justification |
| Marks |
| Monitoring progress |
| Oral feedback |
| Permanent and continuous |
| Prelude to final exam |
| Realisation of learning objectives |
| Student performance |
| Student progress |
| The lecturer does it all |
| Written feedback |

CAT: Continuous Assessment Tests

The first step was to go through the transcribed data and analyse it closely in order to spot any similarities and discrepancies. Throughout this process, each piece of important information was labelled or given a code by using a word or short phrase taken from the data (in vivo coding) (King & Given, 2008). Additional codes were either created by the researchers or taken from the existing literature. As shown on the MAXQDA 12 Code Matrix Browser, after three coding

trials, 19 codes (see Table 1) were retained.

The second step was that the retained codes were organized into 6 emerging sub-categories (see Figure 1) based on their common properties or commonalities. The sub-categories that emerged pointed at characterization of formative assessment and feedback; purpose of using formative assessment and and feedback; justification of using formative assessment and feedback; confusion and constraints; criticism and appreciation; and types of feedback.

Figure 1. Sub-categories and Main categories
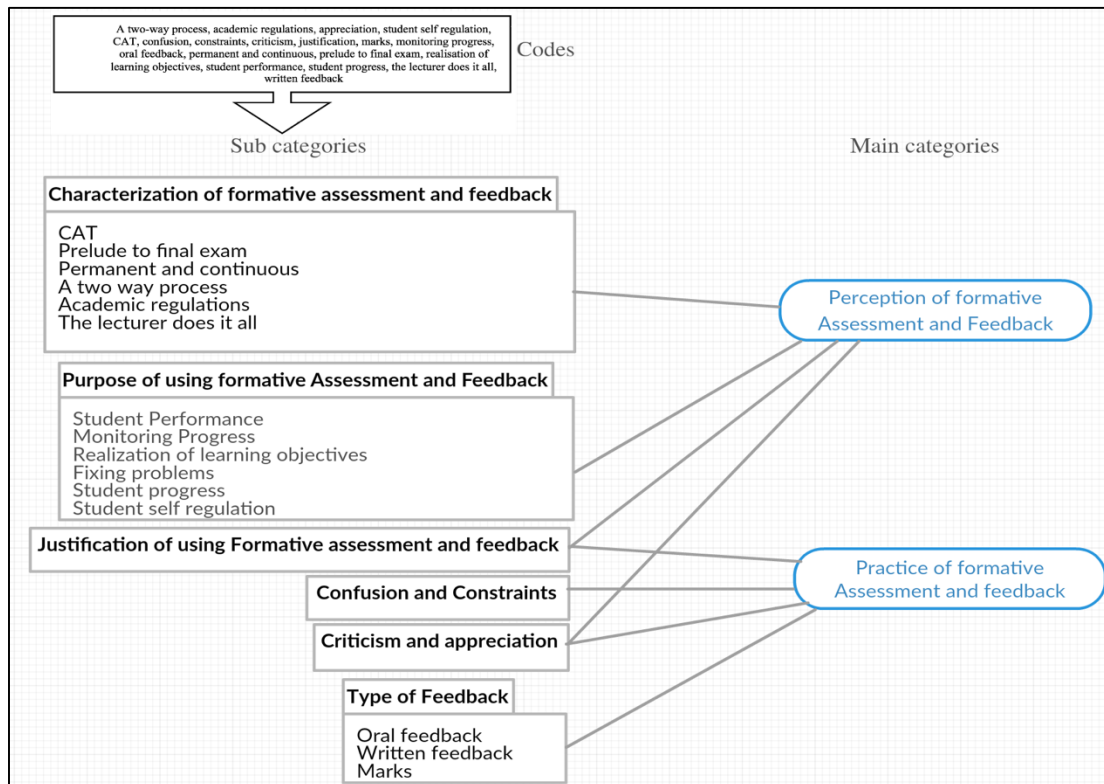
In the third analysis step, the close analysis of the sub-categories led the researchers to group them into two main categories (see Figure 1): (a) perception of formative assessment and feedback; and (b) practice of formative assessment and feedback.

5. Findings and discussion

5.1 Perception of Formative Assessment and feedback

Formative assessment and feedback: binding prescription and limited understanding

Lecturers were asked to describe how they understood formative assessment and feedback, and most of them referred in their answers to the undergraduate general academic regulations—some of them put it as follows:

"*The current practice here is that formative assessment has to be done continuously throughout the module delivery*" (HoD[1]1);

"*this is prescribed in academic regulations*" (SL[2]3)

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[1] HoD: Head of Department
[2] SL: Subject Leader

"*Here, everything follows the University General Academic Regulations (…). It is mandatory (and all lecturers are aware of that) to assess students continuously*" (HoD3)

"*This is the prevailing practice not only here at the College but also at the University level*" (HoD4)

While academic regulations should guide each and every faculty member, teachers do not like to be touched by commands, rules or systems (Zajda, 2010). Formative assessment and feedback are provided for in the UR academic regulations but lecturers maybe putting the policy into practices no matter how unrealistic the policy may look (Tang, 2011). The lecturers' understanding is confined within the boundaries of limited description of formative assessment and feedback in academic regulations. As a matter of fact, formative assessment refers to course works (assignments, tests, quizzes, and practicals carried out during the teaching weeks) and feedback denotes the performance (scored marks) in course works that students should receive before the next assessment on the same module and course work grades are provided to students before the final examination (UR, 2015). This was even reflected in the following lecturers' and HoD's comments:

"(…) *assess students continuously by means of different course works, assignments and tests and publish the students' marks well before the final examination*" (HoD3) and continued: "*the publications of continuous assessment results before final exam enables students to position themselves in terms of the module pass requirements and prepare for the final exam accordingly*"

"*The assessment pattern makes room for both CAT (Continuous Assessment Tests) and final exam and as far as I am concerned, I cannot afford waiting until the final examination for me to check for students' understanding*" (SL3)

"*We do it by administering CAT (Continuous Assessment Tests) to students and students should be given feedback about their CAT marks well before the final examination*" (SL4)

The comments presented above and excerpt from the University academic regulations show that HoD and Lecturers use summative assessment tasks in lieu of what is postulated in academic regulations as formative assessment. In this way, there is a conflation of summative and formative tasks, and formative assessment is represented as parts, units, or aspects of learning (CAT and course works) that must precede, prelude and leads to summative assessment (Taras, 2008). Lecturers and HoD misconceived formative assessment as a special kind of test or a number of tests that teachers have to use to find out what their students have learned whereby the terms *assessment* and *test* (see CAT) are used interchangeably (Moss & Brookhart, 2009).

Monitoring student performance and progress: the lecturer does it all.

In general, student's performance and progress are undoubtedly some of the core attributes teachers refer to when describing formative assessment and feedback (Karim, 2015; Evans, 2013; Nash, 2008; Poppitt & Iqbal, 2009; and Hargreaves, 2005) and this was reflected in lecturers' and HoD's comments that were focused on:

Providing information about students' performance:

"*I think students need to be given information about their performance*" (SL3)
"*It is very important to provide them with information about how well they are studying*" (SL2)
"*This information refers to what students are doing well*" (HoD2)
"*Showing students how well they have performed on a given activity*" (HoD1)

Mastery check:

"*Generally, the students need to know whether they have mastered the taught material or not*" (SL3)
"*With formative assessment, a teacher can get a glimpse of students' level of mastery of different issues*

concerning the teaching and learning topic at hand" (SL1)
"*I cannot afford waiting until the final examination for me to check for students' understanding*" (SL3)
"*The aim of formative assessment is checking the status of students' attainment of learning objectives and the level of mastery of my lesson*" (SL4)

Measuring students' performance:

"*In my opinion, formative assessment is about gauging the current status of students' performance before moving on*" (HoD1)
"*I see formative assessment as an instructional strategy a teacher can use to gauge the extent to which the students have mastered instructional material at hand*" (HoD3)

The comments above show that by portraying themselves as information providers, mastery checkers, and performance appraisers; lecturers are in full charge of formative assessment efforts and their focus is mainly put on auditing student learning in such way that they (lecturers) serve as auditors while students assume the role of the audited (Moss & Brookhart, 2009). As a result, assessment is carried out by the lecturers for the students although students have also to be given opportunity to measure themselves or each other with reference to a marking scheme or a set of predetermined criteria (Hargreaves, 2005). As a matter of fact, most of lecturers' comments were pointing to the fact that they were designating themselves as the main – or even the sole – actors that were involved in the process they were describing as formative assessment. The recurrent appearance of the "I" or "a teacher" in the following comments is revealing:

"*I can solicit students' answers… and I can provide some clarifications, explanations and guidance*" (SL1)
"*I always have to make sure that my students get some information…*" (SL3)
"*A teacher can get an overall picture of the taught material and get a glimpse of students' level of mastery* (SL1)
"*The feedback I give to students on their different course works that are part of continuous assessment*" (SL4)
"*The teacher has to always know what s/he is moving towards to*" (HoD1)
"*It is through this permanent dialogue the lecturer can identify…*" (HoD2)
"*By means of formative assessment tools a teacher is able to continually monitor and guide students*" (HoD3).

It is worth mentioning however, that some of the lecturers' comments convey a quite different understanding of formative assessment, in which even though the teacher may serve as the main actor, s/he considers students as partners and they are both engaged in this continuous process of monitoring, learning, and informing future instruction (Wylie Caroline et al., 2012). In this way, formative assessment was theoretically described by lecturers as a permanent and continuous two-way process that can promote student self-regulated learning. They described it as a process of "*keeping open the communication flow*" (SL1) "*keeping an open eye and ear…*" (HoD1), and ensuring "*a permanent dialogue*" (HoD2) to yield feedback "*to and from students*" (SL1), to create "*a kind of interplay between myself and my students*" (HoD3) and help "*students to position themselves with regard to what is expected of them*" (HoD4)

Marks are feedback and feedback is about marks

"*When we talk about Lecturers' feedback, we actually mean marks. You will even hear some students who ask lecturers "when will the marks on assignment X be published? No reference is made to feedback in any other forms a part from marks*" (student 5)

This student's comment generally summarizes the students' and some lecturer's understanding of feedback. The interview and focus group discussion data illustrated how marks constituted a dominant feature of feedback. It seems like teachers are programmed to give marks and pupils are programmed to receive them (Smith, 2014).

Marks-based feedback was the type of feedback students stated they were mostly familiar with, the only one that was meaningful to them, and hence the only feedback they pay attention to (Sambell et al., 2013, Black, 2014) as reflected in the following comments:

"*It all depends on the marks you have scored. If the score is satisfying. I do not even waste my time trying to read or understand the written comments"* (Student 7)

Another student added:

"*In my case when I get the work back, I first of all look at the scored marks. When I have passed. That's fine. End of the story. I may or may not be interested in reading the written feedback*" (student 4)

In their discussion, the students revealed that most of the time, lecturers give feedback in form of marks only, and that comments are very few or even absent. Sometimes, due to lack of comments on scored marks, some students tend to question the lecturers' marking practices. It is as if they needed some additional comments that show how well the task has been achieved (Whalley, 2010). One student put it:

"*Sometimes they give back a so called marked assignment with only scored marks. And we wonder whether the work was really read or not*" (student 5)

The students' emphasis on marks as the only prevailing form of feedback they receive and value was also reflected in some of the lecturers' views who in most cases, referred their comments to the university general academic regulations. In fact, as per 2015 revised academic regulations, modules are assessed by coursework and by a final exam or assignment. Assessment by coursework can include assignments, tests, quizzes, and practicals that are done during the teaching weeks. The assignment marks and grades have to be published before the final examination (article 86) and students must receive feedback on their coursework performance before the next time the same module is assessed (article 87). Continuous assessment must make up 50% of the overall score. The following sample of these lecturers' comments shows how, for them, feedback is mostly about marks:

"*Students should be given feedback about their CAT marks well before the final examination*" (SL4)
"*The teacher has to provide feedback by publishing the students' marks well before the final examination*" (HoD3)
"*Formative assessment results refer to different scores students obtain from different course works and assignments*" (HoD4)

There is no doubt that marks-based feedback constitutes an important source of information for student about their progress, a primary reward system used by teachers to guide and motivate students (OECD, 2012), and can provide formative feedback to students (Carey & Carifio, 2012). However, research studies have shown that when only marks or grades are given as feedback students might not benefit from them in order improve their work (Black et al., 2004), and grades and marks may only confuse students (Weeden et al., 1999). Some research studies went even further and controversially suggested that the only written feedback that leads reliably to improvement is where teachers give comments only and leave off a mark or a grade (Black & Wiliam, 1998; Butler, 1988)

At this point, it can be noticed that, in general, lecturers' understanding of formative assessment and feedback converge towards two commonalities: (1) Lecturers understood formative assessment as tests, coursework, and assignments given to students throughout the module teaching delivery. These tests, coursework, and assignments – that are perceived by both lecturers and students as the necessary prelude to final exam - have to be marked and students are given (2) feedback in form of scored marks.

5. 2 Feedback practices in formative assessment

Despite the fact that most lecturers considered feedback in form of marks (as shown earlier), the interview and focus group interview data revealed other forms of feedback. Lecturers were asked to describe in detail other forms of feedback (other than marks) they were using, as well as the purpose they served. Students were asked to describe in general other forms of feedback that were being practiced at the college and how they perceived and used them.

In-class oral feedback and its limitations

Almost all lecturers and students unquestionably recognized that, apart from marks, oral feedback practiced during face-to-face lesson activities as the type of feedback that was most frequently used. One teacher described it as the only right way feedback can be given to and received from student when he said:

"*The only effective and reliable means by which I can give and receive feedback to and from students is through face-to-face classroom teaching and learning sessions*" (SL2)

Consistent with other studies, in-class oral feedback was practiced by means of instantaneous in-class question-answer sequences that are central to classroom interactions (Maclure & French, 2012), teacher's probing questions (Ma, 2009) and through casual classroom conversation (Ngwenya, 2010) and classroom discourse (Smart & Marshall, 2013).

Lecturers perceived in-class oral feedback as very important because it,

"*allows instructional events to continue moving smoothly and effectively*" (SL3),
"*is live, immediate and highly interactive*" (SL2),
"*allows an immediate and efficient reaction to students' queries*" (SL4),
"*allows a quick and immediate remediation*" (HoD1),
"*helps learners to immediately address the mistakes they have been making*" (HoD1),
"*helps to get students to a sustained attention and focus on the task*" (HoD2)
"*helps students to get clarifications from the teacher without delay*" (HoD4)

On the students' side, although all of them recognized in-class oral feedback as the type of feedback that was most frequently used, only two students appreciated it as "*effective*" (student 7) and "*useful*" (student 1). The analysis of the focus group interview shows that other students were rather critical vis-à-vis in-class oral feedback and their comments were generally pointing to some practical constraints related to limited class time and large class size (Gleason, 1986; Cochrane, 2009; Anderson, 2011; Roy, 2015), for example, referring to large class size student 1 said:

"*There are too many students in our class and the lecturer cannot attend to all students' queries in just 1 or 2 hours*"

Students 6 and 3 added respectively:

"*There are too many students in the class and I sometimes withhold my comments or questions when there are many students who want to intervene*"
"*Because the lecture hall is too big and full of students, they (lecturers) interact with only those students seating at the front side of the classroom and sometimes certain students seating at the back side take a nap*"

For students, the limited class time leads lecturers to always speeding up and advance with those fast learners at the expense of slow learners (Gaonkar & Patil, 2005) as student 4 put it:

"*Lecturers always seem in a hurry and do not want to welcome students 'interventions and comments. Some lecturers intentionally ignore students' queries and refer them to queries and interventions*

advanced previously by other students"

In the same vein, student 5 took it even further when he said:

"*Most of lecturers think that if 3 to 5 students are getting things right, they assume they (*the entire class: our addition*) have understood and there is one lecturer who, after realizing that a number of students have understood, turn it into a joke and says in French: "ils ont compris*"

These students' concerns were also shared by some lecturers who, in general, expressed their dissatisfaction with the way in-class verbal feedback was practiced due to limited time allocated to face-to-face lecture sessions and overcrowded classes. One HoD expressed it as follows:

"*I wish I could do more, but looking at the available resources and time constraints I do not have any choices. Sometimes, you enter an overcrowded classroom and you have only around 50 minutes. It is not very easy to explain, and make room for ample exchanges with students and give/get feedback to and from them*" (HoD 1)

Lecturers' written comments and feedback

In-class oral feedback and marks emerged from interviews and focus group discussion data as the two forms of feedback that were most frequently practiced. However, lecturers' feedback was also given in written form as lecturers' written comments on students' works and assignments. The teachers' written feedback can be beneficial to student learning since it is tailored to justify an assessment judgement that go with it and students can refer to it again and again, and continue to learn from it (Race, 2001); it is more permanent than oral feedback (Brookhart, 2008); it is explicit, tangible and and easily traceable (Jolly & Boud, 2013); and it leads to a substantive student revision (Razali & Jupri, 2014; Goldstein, 2004; Ferris, 1997). However, research has demonstrated that in order to advance student learning, the teacher's written feedback has to be effective in terms of format and focus (Dekker et al., 2013), timely (Hulst et al., 2014; Nicol, 2010; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Marzano, 2003) and clearly understandable (Nicol, 2010; Brookhart, 2008)

The analysis of focus group discussions revealed that, in general, students tended to call attention to the ineffectiveness of lecturers' written feedback. When asked to characterize the relevance of lecturers' written feedback on their assignments and different course works, the students' answers revealed a rather negative perception and pointed to a number of issues that relate to (1) clarity, (2) timeliness, and (3) focus of the lecturers' written feedback.

Consistent with other research studies (Ghazal et al, 2014; Nordin et al, 2010; Murphy & Cornell, 2010; Lee, 2008a; Carless, 2006; Straub, 1997), the focus group interview data showed that students had difficulties to capture the real meaning behind lecturers' written comments. According to students, in some instances, written feedback and comments were unclear because lecturers used indecipherable marking symbols as student 2 put it:

"(…) *Other lecturers use punctuation marks such as question and exclamation marks and nothing else. Is the lecturer really expecting students to guess the meaning behind these punctuation marks? I think we, as students, need a little more elaborated comments because punctuation marks are meaningless.*"

And student 4 added:

"*I always have problems with some lecturers' marking tricks (may I call them tricks?) I mean these signs they use when they are marking). Many of them use tick boxes, crossed lines, and many other symbols and signs*"

This student's comment is corroborated by the results of the analysis of 75 student marked assignments which shows that these marking symbols were actually used in most (52 out of 75)

of student marked assignments that were analysed. In fact, the analysis of the student marked assignments shows that marks (only) were given as feedback in 23 assignments, marks and marking symbols were used as feedback in 6 assignments and in the remaining 46 assignments, lecturers used a combination of marks, marking symbols, and written comments.

In addition to the use of undecipherable symbols, students affirmed that some of the lecturers' written comments conveyed unclear messages. When they were asked to give some examples, student 1 said:

"*Um…let me see if I can recall some. Ah right, here we are: when a lecturer write: "do you really understand what you wrote here?" How is s/he expecting you to guess what s/he really wants to mean? There are others like: "You went too much astray, you are totally out of the context, etc.*"

Student 7 was in agreement with student 1 and continued:

"Lecturers' comments are most of the time not clearly understandable. I do my best to understand them but in vain and sometimes this can lead to frustration"

The analysis of lecturers' written comments on students' assignments indicates that the lack of clarity and understanding is manifested in both negative and positive lecturers' comments whereby a set of categories can apply, as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Examples of categories of misunderstandings in lecturers' written feedback/comments

Positive		Negative	
Incomplete	Unclear	Incomplete	Unclear
Good introduction	Honorable!	Punctuation errors!	This is not English
Excellent!	Okay!	This section is vague	This is flawed
Good!	Wow! What a	and unclear	Weak ideas
Very good!	capturing piece of	Beware, plagiarism!	Do you really
Well done!	work!	This is not true	understand what you
Good ideas		This is not correct	wrote here?
Well stated		It is not clear	You are wasting your
		Are you reflecting or	time for nothing
		accusing?	Meaningless
		Your language skills	Nonsense
		are very poor!	This is rubbish
		I cannot get the real	Faint!
		meaning conveyed in	Confused!
		this paragraph	Poor work
		Your work is	
		awkwardly presented	

While effective teachers should provide feedback on whether the student got it right or not (Danforth & Smith, 2004), this study's findings show that lecturers' written feedback were just conveying a "you are wrong" or "you are right" message and this cannot help students to understand the real meaning behind these types of feedback, and where they went wrong (Kihlstrom, 2013). Learning whether the answer is right or wrong has a limited effect on learning and performance (Stringfield et al, 1992). Thus, "*excellent!*", "*good*", "*very good*" "*this is not true*", "*it is not clear*", "*poor work", "okay*" and the like are not feedback at all because they do not provide 'actionable information' (Wiggins, 2012) that incorporates (a) high degree of specificity with explicit reference to the standard or objective to be achieved; (b) an information about accuracy, or the results achieved in meeting the standard; and (c) recommendation about alternate methods for meeting the objective (Kindsvatter et al., cited by Edmund et al., 2013). They can, however, be considered affective support, important for motivation.

In addition to the lack of clarity and understanding, the analysis of lecturers' written feedback

on students' assignments revealed that the emphasis was mostly put on *feed back* at the expense of the two other important attributes of *feed up* and *feed forward* that characterize an effective feedback (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). In fact, only a few of lecturers' written comments were identified as more or less effective since they were providing answers to the three main questions that characterize an effective feedback as depicted in the following examples:

"*You opted to talk about issues that are not part of the work. The core features of the work are missing. I would like to remind you that your own reflection is different from copying and pasting other authors' ideas. You should have built on them and come up with your own stand*"

"*You are not stating any concrete argument here. What you've done is a simple summary of the ideas of these three authors. Where are your ideas in all these*?"

Analysed through the lens of Hattie & Timperley (2007)'s notion of effective feedback, this lecturer's written comment reminds the student of *where s/he is going*: come up with one's own reflection and concrete argument on matters at hand; shows the student *how s/he is going*: inventory and summary of other author's ideas, but also gives the student the clue to *where to next*: building on other's authors' ideas, go beyond them (authors) and take a stand.

The most recurrent feature that emerged from the analysis of lecturers' written feedback was only about showing the students *how they were going (what progress is being made toward the goal?)* without pointing to the goals nor instructing on the way forward as it is illustrated in the following figure:

Figure 2. Written feedback: the ideal (Hattie & Timperley, 2007) and the practice (study results)
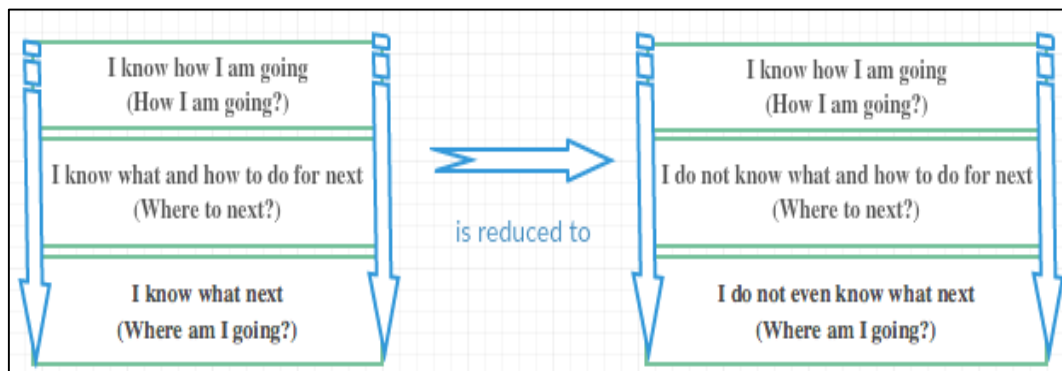
In Figure 2, "I" stands for any student who tries to make sense of the lecture's written feedback. On one hand, effective feedback should convey information that shows to student the progress and step forwards her/him toward the attainment of pre-defined goals. On the other hand, this study's results show that lecturer's written feedback was mostly focusing on informing the student about progress with no reference to goals or forward-looking strategies as demonstrated in the following sample of lecturer's written comments on students' assignments:

"This part is well researched but incomplete!"
"This section is vague and unclear"
"This piece of work was plagiarized"
"This is not necessary"
"You should have used more than one illustrative examples"
"It is not clear whether you understood what you were supposed to do"
"I am wondering whether you actually took your time and do research. There are many examples out there"
"How are you going to implement what you are saying here?"
"Your work is well documented but your own reflection is missing"
"Your work is too summarized and could not cover all the elements under investigation"

"You are advancing good ideas but there are ill stated"
"It's disappointing that your work is superficial, it seems you did it hurriedly"
"Your work is awkwardly presented"
"As I was reading your essay, I could not identify/hear your "own voice"
"I cannot understand well your stand point. It is not clearly stated. Ideas are mixed up and there is no transition between them"

While feedback is effective when students use it to improve their performance (Connolly, 2012; Brookhart, 2008; Dweck, 2006), these examples of lecturers' written feedback do not invite the students to take action and use them: they lack a "feed forward" aspect.

On one hand, the lack of feed forward instructions can be considered as one explanation of the fact that students were not using lecturers' feedback to improve their performance. On the other hand, the focus group data showed that lecturers' feedback on students' works was too delayed to allow students to take further actions as some students lamented. The students have to wait for the feedback for several months and most of the time towards the end of semester exam period; they do several assignments at different periods but they receive feedback for all the assignments at almost the same time or they get feedback for one assignment while they have already started doing the subsequent one. The following students' comments are much more revealing:

"*it takes quite a long time before we get lecturers' feedback. And by the time the lecturer gives the feedback some of the students say things like…uh…Did s/he* (the lecturer: our addition) *mark it? I thought s/he had cancelled it from assessment activities*" (student 1)
"*I do not know why almost all lecturers bring back our marked works and give feedback towards the end of the semester exam period?*" (student 5)

6. Conclusion and implications

This exploratory study examined—through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, and document analysis—the feedback practices in formative assessment at the University of Rwanda. The findings suggest that formative assessment and feedback were taken as binding prescription whereby the lecturers' understanding was confined within the boundaries of limited description of formative assessment and feedback in academic regulations. In fact, in most cases, formative assessment referred to course works (assignments, tests, quizzes, and practicals carried out during the teaching weeks) and feedback denoted the performance (scored marks). The results also show that monitoring students' performance was the main purpose of using formative assessment and feedback, and this was done by means of mastery check, measuring student's performance, and providing information about student's performance. However, it was established that, by designating themselves as information providers, mastery checkers, and performance appraisers, lecturers were in full charge of formative assessment efforts and were portraying themselves as the main – or even the sole – actors that were involved in the process they were describing as formative assessment.

The study establishes that, to some extent, oral and written feedback was used as other forms of feedback in addition to marks. While lecturers perceived in-class oral feedback to be very important to advance student learning, students were generally critical vis-à-vis in-class oral feedback and their comments were generally pointing to some practical constraints related to limited class time and large class size. In general, the students perceived lecturers' written feedback and comments as unclear. The students affirmed that they had difficult to capture the real meaning behind lecturers' written comments. This was due to the use of indecipherable marking symbols on one hand and the lack of clarity observed in messages conveyed by lecturers' written comments on another hand. Finally, this study reveals that the lack of feed forward instructions in too-much-delayed lecturers' written feedback lead students to just receive feedback and not use it as one student said: "*we just read them and uh…maybe go through them and that is all.*"

Practical implications

The premise underlying most of the research studies that are conducted in the area of formative assessment and feedback, argues Shute (2008), is that feedback can bring about learning gains and improve learning processes and outcomes only if it is delivered correctly. The results of this study show that formative assessment and feedback were not understood nor delivered correctly and there is a need to move away from a single-sided approach to a multifaceted approach in both perception and practice of formative assessment and feedback at the UR. Firstly, moving from perceiving formative assessment and feedback as it is only prescribed in academic regulations to a more divergent view that include teachers' creativity, which will be possible when teachers will go beyond and think out of the academic regulations box and adopt a new self-actualized, more autonomous and responsible role for themselves'' (Hamp-Lyons, 2006). Secondary, there is a need to move from using course works and CAT - that compromise the efficacy of formative assessment (Andrade & Cizek, 2010) - as the only formative assessment tools and explore other venues such as self-assessment and peer assessment and discussion that promote self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The third move is about abandoning a teacher-does-it-all approach and try formative assessment activities that will involve learners since learning process can only be changed or modified if the student are involved in their own learning progress (Nash, 2008) and use technology (by both lecturers and students) to produce, publish and engage with feedback (Hepplestone et al., 2011) to mitigate time and large class constraints (K.-L. Harris et al., 2007) that were identified in this study as impeding factors when it comes to in-class oral feedback.

Future research

In line with this study's practical implications, future research may focus on the aforementioned three moves whereby a collaborative research-based approach will bring together different stakeholders including researchers, lecturers, students and decision makers.

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