

On Student Assessment in Technical Distance Education

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Abstract

In order to make a more efficient assessment of students enrolled in technical distance education programmes, we believe that an alternative form of assessment is necessary. This would change the standard test-based assessment to a practical assessment, where students can exercise their abilities through project work and judgement can replace mechanical repetition of information.

Assessment techniques to be used in technical education must meet specific requirements in this field, such as:

- students have to prove the competences that they have acquired during a degree programme; they do not just have to choose an answer from a list of possible answers;
- competences have to be tested by project work where students can prove their learning abilities and their practical application skills;
- the assessment has to highlight the students' creativity, the extent to which they understand the knowledge they have acquired and how they use it in solving practical issues.

The assessment that best meets these requirements is based on a 'student's portfolio' that contains, in a logical structure, all the materials that a student uses during a cycle of education: abstracts, analyses, problem solving, diagrams, syntheses, reading notes, bibliographical lists etc. Some of these materials are mandatory work tasks, required by professors and others produced by students during their studies.

When studying, each student creates their own portfolio, even if some of the assignments require teamwork. Every student will add to their portfolio the documents containing the final results of the teamwork. Elaborated in this manner, portfolios create the possibility of a more complex and more correct assessment. The assessors can identify the students' practical abilities, when they have applicative work for which they have sufficient time and resources at their disposal.

Portfolio-based assessment raises several issues that can be formulated through the following questions: "What should a portfolio contain?", "What special techniques have to be used to make an objective assessment of a portfolio's content?", "What standards have to be applied in assessing the students' activity?"

The two assessment techniques, the test-based and the portfolio-based, have their own supporters. The partisans of portfolio-based assessment suggested that it should completely replace standard test-based assessment. However, there is the risk that the problem is approached by different procedures and standards, which leads to a decrease of the degree of objectivity for the assessment.

The paper shows the results of a pilot test applied to a group of students enrolled in 'Land Measurements and Cadastre,' a Bachelor's Degree programme of 'December 1st 1918' University of Alba Iulia.

The aim of the pilot test was to tackle two specific issues raised by portfolio-based assessment:

1. clarifying the aspects connected to the way in which this method of assessment is used and the manner in which it is applied, based on a survey applied to a group of professors;
2. the outcomes that this means of assessment have on the students' performances.

The conclusions of this test led to some interesting aspects:

- the portfolio-based assessment is rather used by the young professors, keen on teaching and aiming for self-improvement;
- the results of the assessment are sometimes contested by students;
- most students prefer portfolio-based assessment.

References

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