

From Certification to Creativity: The Case for Alternative Assessment in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article reflects on the role of assessment in higher education, questioning whether the current culture of examinations and grading truly supports learning. Drawing from international debates and the Polish context, it argues that while assessment provides accountability and certification, its overuse risks undermining creativity, competence, and intrinsic motivation. Building on the critiques of (Mazur, 2013) and (Kohn, 1999), the article examines formative and ipsative assessment as alternatives that reframe evaluation as a tool for growth. Ipsative practices, which emphasize progress relative to a student's own prior performance, align with the concept of a growth mindset and highlight learning trajectories rather than peer comparison. A concrete example is provided in the context of mathematics teacher training, where portfolios can be used to track professional growth. The article also stresses the importance of professional development for high school teachers, who require preparation to implement alternative assessment approaches effectively. It concludes that summative examinations will remain necessary but should be complemented by more student-centered practices that support long-term learning and creativity.

Keywords: Assessment, Higher Education, Formative Assessment, Ipsative Assessment, Poland, Educational Reform.

Introduction

Assessment has long been regarded as a cornerstone of higher education. It certifies achievement, structures curricula, and provides a basis for academic progression. In Poland, as in many other countries, the culture of examinations and grading dominates both institutional practice and public discourse. The widespread emphasis on standardized testing, exemplified

internationally by large-scale studies such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), reinforces the idea that what matters most in education is what can be measured.

Yet this reliance on assessment raises a paradox. On the one hand, assessments serve legitimate purposes: they offer accountability to society, provide benchmarks for quality, and reassure students and employers that learning outcomes are achieved. On the other hand, an overemphasis on testing and grading risks reducing education to performance, narrowing the curriculum to what is assessed, and discouraging creativity and critical thinking. As (Mazur, 2013) provocatively suggests, assessment can even become the “silent killer of learning,” diverting students’ attention from deep understanding to short-term exam strategies.

In recent years, scholars and educators have begun to challenge traditional models of assessment, pointing towards alternatives that are more supportive of learning. Formative assessment, often described as *assessment for learning*, shifts the focus from ranking to feedback. More radically, **ipsative assessment** proposes that students should be measured against their own progress rather than against peers, emphasizing growth and personal bests. These approaches invite a re-examination of what assessment is for, and whether the current obsession with grades and comparisons truly aligns with the goals of higher education.

The purpose of this article is to critically examine the necessity and role of assessment in higher education. Using the Polish context as a starting point but situating the argument in a broader international debate, it considers both the limitations of current practices and the potential of alternative models.

Methods

This article adopts a reflective and critical approach rather than an empirical one. It draws on existing literature, key expert positions, and the author’s professional experience in higher education. The intention is to situate personal observations within established debates about the role of assessment.

Several influential works frame this discussion. (Mazur, 2013) has argued that traditional examinations may act as a “silent killer” of deep learning, redirecting student effort toward surface performance. Alfie Kohn (Kohn, 1999) similarly criticized reward- and grade-driven systems for undermining intrinsic motivation. At the same time, scholars such as (Boud, 2000)

and (Wiliam, 2011) have emphasized the potential of formative assessment to support learning when used as ongoing feedback rather than as a judgmental endpoint.

The article also incorporates perspectives on **ipsative assessment** (Hughes, 2011), which highlights the importance of progress relative to a learner's own previous performance, and connects to the concept of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). Broader analyses of diverse assessment approaches in higher education (Brown & Glasner, 2003) further inform the argument. By synthesizing these insights, the article positions itself as a contribution to the international debate on whether assessment, in its current form, is necessary or desirable in higher education.

Results

The central claim of this article is that while assessment is necessary for certification and accountability, its current dominance in higher education undermines the deeper goals of learning. Students often learn to perform for the exam rather than to develop competencies or creativity. This phenomenon is not unique to Poland; it reflects an international trend, where grades and standardized evaluations shape educational cultures in ways that discourage risk-taking and deeper inquiry.

Mazur (Mazur, 2013) warns that such practices turn learning into a performance, with students focusing on strategies to succeed in examinations rather than on genuine understanding. Kohn (Kohn, 1999) echoes this critique, arguing that grade-driven systems reward compliance over curiosity and weaken intrinsic motivation. In contrast, formative assessment offers a different orientation: Wiliam (Wiliam, 2011) shows how ongoing, feedback-rich processes can foster student engagement and improvement by making assessment part of the learning cycle rather than its endpoint.

At the same time, Boud (Boud, 2000) insists that assessment must be sustainable, preparing students not only to meet immediate course objectives but also to continue learning independently throughout their lives. This broader vision contrasts sharply with summative practices that emphasize short-term recall over long-term competence.

A further dimension is offered by ipsative assessment, which Hughes (Hughes, 2011) describes as an opportunity to reframe evaluation around personal progress. Rather than comparing students to external standards or peer performance, ipsative models align with Dweck's (Dweck, 2006) growth mindset framework, encouraging learners to focus on their own trajectory. Brown

and Glasner (Brown and Glasner, 2003) similarly emphasize the value of diverse assessment strategies, underscoring that no single model can address the complexities of higher education. Together, these perspectives point to a clear imbalance in current practice: higher education has prioritized summative assessment for certification and accountability, while underutilizing approaches that foster genuine learning and development.

Discussion

The critique of traditional assessment practices has given rise to a range of alternatives that seek to place learning, rather than measurement, at the center of higher education. Formative assessment, as emphasized by Wiliam (Wiliam, 2011), is one such alternative. By embedding feedback into the learning process, it enables students to identify gaps in understanding and to take corrective action before final evaluations. Boud (Boud, 2000) extends this argument, stressing that assessment should be sustainable, equipping students with the capacity to assess their own learning beyond formal education.

Another promising development is **ipsative assessment**, which evaluates learners against their own prior performance rather than against external standards or peer benchmarks. Hughes (Hughes, 2011) highlights its potential to promote motivation by encouraging students to pursue their “personal best.” This model resonates with Dweck’s (Dweck, 2006) theory of the growth mindset, which positions errors not as failures but as opportunities for growth. By framing progress as individual improvement, ipsative assessment can help reduce the anxiety often associated with peer comparison and grading. Brown and Glasner (Brown and Glasner, 2003) argue that such diversification of assessment strategies is essential if higher education is to meet the needs of varied learners.

A concrete example of ipsative assessment can be imagined in the context of **mathematics teacher training**. Prospective teachers might keep digital portfolios documenting their evolving lesson plans, teaching experiments, and reflections on student engagement. Rather than being graded against their peers’ work, each student teacher would be assessed on the extent to which their current lesson designs and reflections show progress compared to earlier versions. Such a system would highlight individual growth in pedagogical reasoning, classroom creativity, and responsiveness to student needs, competencies that cannot be captured by standardized examinations.

Implementing such approaches in secondary education would, however, require substantial **professional development for in-service teachers**. Many high school teachers have been trained in systems that prioritize summative, exam-driven assessment. To apply ipsative or formative models effectively, they would need opportunities to learn how to design growth-oriented tasks, provide constructive feedback, and use portfolios or digital tools for tracking progress. Without adequate preparation, there is a risk that alternative assessment practices could be misunderstood or misapplied, leading to confusion rather than improved learning outcomes. Nevertheless, both formative and ipsative practices offer valuable pathways for rethinking how assessment functions in higher education and beyond. While summative examinations remain deeply entrenched, innovative approaches can be introduced as complements, helping to rebalance the system. By incorporating formative and ipsative elements, universities can ensure that assessment becomes not merely a gatekeeping mechanism but also a driver of learning, creativity, and self-reflection.

Conclusion

Assessment in higher education is both indispensable and deeply problematic. It provides certification and accountability, but its overemphasis, visible in Poland and globally, has narrowed education to measurable outcomes, often at the expense of creativity, competence, and intrinsic motivation. As Mazur (Mazur, 2013) cautions, the current culture of examinations risks becoming a “silent killer of learning.”

The analysis presented here suggests that assessment should not be abolished, but reimagined. Formative approaches demonstrate how evaluation can serve learning rather than terminate it, while ipsative assessment offers a powerful way to recognize personal growth. Together, these models shift the focus from ranking and comparison to progress and development.

A key implication is that future mathematics teachers, and indeed all educators, need to be prepared to implement such alternative strategies effectively. This requires structured professional development that equips teachers to design tasks, monitor progress, and provide feedback in ways that prioritize learning. Without such preparation, alternative models risk remaining theoretical ideals rather than practical realities.

Ultimately, the challenge for higher education is to strike a new balance. Summative assessment will remain necessary for certification and external trust, but it must be complemented with practices that honor the complexity of learning. By embracing formative and ipsative models,

universities can move beyond an obsession with grades and rankings toward an assessment culture that genuinely enhances education.

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