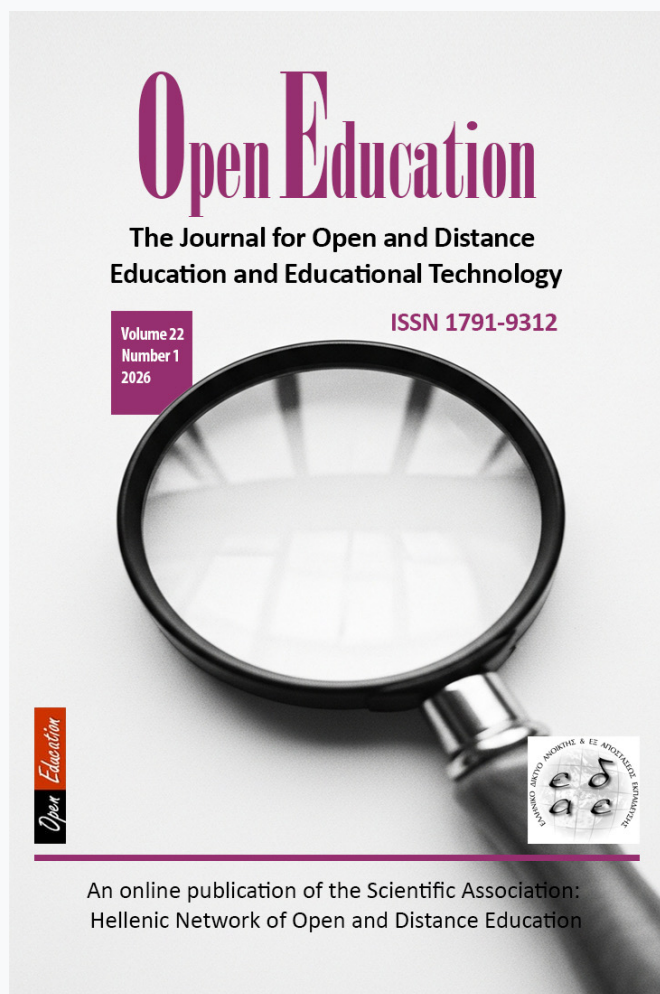


Ανοικτή Εκπαίδευση: το περιοδικό για την Ανοικτή και εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση και την Εκπαιδευτική Τεχνολογία

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Συγκριτική μελέτη των πρακτικών αξιολόγησης που γεφυρώνουν τη θεωρία με την πράξη στην Εκπαίδευση Ενηλίκων: Ευρωπαϊκά και Αυστραλιανά Ανοικτά Πανεπιστήμια

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Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

Comparative study of assessment practices bridging theory and practice in Adult Education: European and Australian Open Universities

Συγκριτική μελέτη των πρακτικών αξιολόγησης που γεφυρώνουν τη θεωρία με την πράξη στην Εκπαίδευση Ενηλίκων: Ευρωπαϊκά και Αυστραλιανά Ανοικτά Πανεπιστήμια

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Extended Summary

The article presents a comparative analysis of assessment practices in adult education across six major Open Universities in Europe and Australia. Drawing on an extensive literature review, it explores how assessment functions as both a mechanism for validating learning and enhancing learner engagement, particularly within distance education environments. Central to the analysis is Scriven's framework, which distinguishes formative and summative assessment based on their purpose—improvement or certification—rather than their timing. This distinction informs how various institutions structure their assessment systems to serve adult learners' needs. Adult education is characterized by autonomy, prior learning experience, and intrinsic motivation. These learner traits necessitate flexible and supportive assessment strategies. Theoretical insights from Knowles, Jarvis, and Rogers support a shift toward learner-centered evaluation practices, favoring qualitative methods such as self-assessment, case studies, and reflective journals over traditional testing. These approaches are seen as more aligned with adult learning theory and more effective in promoting critical thinking and learner empowerment.

The article examines assessment models at the UK Open University (UKOU), Hellenic Open University (HOU) in Greece, CNED (France), FernUniversität in Germany, UNED (Spain), and Open Universities Australia (OUA). While European institutions tend to emphasize continuous feedback and formative assessment—such as tutor-marked assignments, interactive discussions, and group work—Australian universities are more focused on authentic assessments linked to professional contexts. Role-playing, oral presentations, clinical simulations, and reflective portfolios are among the tools used to evaluate practical competencies and employability skills.

A cross-cutting theme in all models is the integration of technology. E-assessment tools and online platforms increase accessibility, ensure timely feedback, and support diverse learning styles. Especially for adult learners balancing multiple responsibilities, these digital tools enable flexible assessment design and enhance learner engagement. Despite regional differences, all institutions share a commitment to fair, learner-centered assessment systems that integrate technological innovation.

In conclusion, the article emphasizes the importance of designing assessment practices that support both learning and validation. It calls for a redefinition of assessment as an active part of the learning process, tailored to the complex realities of adult learners. The study recommends further empirical research to deepen understanding of how assessment is experienced in practice and to inform future educational policy and design in open and distance learning contexts.

Keywords

Open University assessment, adult learners, formative and summative assessment, e-assessment, comparative analysis, lifelong learning

1. Introduction

Assessment plays a critical role in both monitoring learning outcomes and validating knowledge, making it an integral tool in the educational process. Assessments are essential for providing feedback that informs teaching practices and supports student learning. Through various methods, such as formative and summative assessments, educators can track learners' progress, identify areas needing improvement, and

adjust instructional strategies accordingly (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Additionally, assessments validate the knowledge acquired by students, ensuring they meet the required standards and competencies (Brown, 2004). This dual function of assessment not only enhances the teaching and learning process but also upholds academic standards, verifying that educational outcomes are effectively achieved.

Modern approaches emphasize the use of technology-enhanced assessments to collect real-time data, which help tailor educational experiences to individual needs (Quellmalz & Pellegrino, 2009). Furthermore, the framework for knowledge validation has expanded to include diverse forms of assessment, ranging from traditional exams to performance-based evaluations, ensuring a comprehensive assessment of students' competencies (Brookhart & Nitko, 2019). These developments highlight the evolving role of assessments in maintaining academic standards and enhancing the educational process through continuous improvement and adaptation.

Rather than aiming for an exhaustive mapping of Open Universities worldwide, this study adopts a focused comparative perspective that allows for an in-depth exploration of assessment practices within open and distance education. By examining institutions that share a strong commitment to adult learners, open access and distance learning, the study seeks to highlight how assessment practices are shaped within different educational and policy contexts. The inclusion of European Open Universities alongside an Australian case provides a comparative lens that supports analytical depth while maintaining coherence in terms of institutional mission and educational philosophy.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design based on systematic literature review and document analysis. The methodological approach aims to examine and compare assessment practices in adult education across six major Open Universities in Europe and Australia, focusing on how assessment frameworks bridge theory and practice in open and distance learning contexts.

The selection of institutions was guided by specific analytical criteria: all universities included are well-established, large-scale Open Universities with a long-standing

tradition in adult and distance education and a strong emphasis on adult learners. The European institutions represent diverse national contexts within a shared European higher education framework, while Open Universities Australia was selected as a comparative case due to its distinct institutional model and its strong orientation toward authentic and professionally relevant assessment practices.

Data was collected through the analysis of peer-reviewed academic literature, institutional documents, official university websites, and policy reports related to assessment methods and criteria in adult education. The sources were selected based on their relevance, academic credibility, and explicit focus on assessment practices within Open Universities. Particular attention was paid to descriptions of formative and summative assessment models, the use of digital assessment tools, and the alignment of assessment with adult learning principles.

The analytical framework of the study is informed by established theories of adult education and assessment, including Scriven's distinction between formative and summative assessment based on purpose, as well as theoretical contributions from Knowles, Jarvis, Rogers, and Brookfield. The comparison focuses on identifying common patterns, institutional similarities, and context-specific differences in assessment practices across the selected universities.

While the study does not involve empirical fieldwork or primary data collection, it offers a theoretically grounded and systematic comparative analysis that highlights prevailing trends and emerging practices in assessment within Open Universities. The findings are intended to contribute to ongoing discussions on effective assessment design in adult and distance education and to provide a foundation for future empirical research.

The following sections build on this methodological framework by situating assessment practices within the broader theoretical context of adult education and Open and Distance Learning.

3. Assessment in Adult Education

Assessment is essential in adult education programs as it not only evaluates learners' and instructors' performance but also plays a crucial role in designing new strategies, making informed decisions, setting priorities, and ultimately improving the learning

process (Rogers, 1996). It is a key element in enhancing learning experience and promoting lifelong learning. The theoretical framework of assessment in this field is based on principles that take into consideration the unique characteristics of adult learners, such as autonomy, experience, and learning motivation.

According to Knowles (1990), the founder of andragogy theory, adults learn best when learning is self-directed and connected to their personal experiences. This suggests that assessment should be formative, providing continuous feedback that enhances learners' autonomy and active participation. Jarvis (2004), a contemporary scholar in adult education, emphasizes the importance of experiential learning, where adults transform their experiences into knowledge through critical thinking. In this context, assessment should encourage reflective practice, allowing learners to evaluate their progress and identify areas for further development. Rogers (1996), another significant figure in adult education, focuses on the learner-centered approach, stating that learning is more effective when learners feel accepted and supported. This implies that assessment should be supportive and non-threatening, creating an environment where learners feel comfortable expressing their views and taking risks in learning.

Adult education undoubtedly differs from conventional education (primary, secondary) as it targets individuals who bring diverse experiences and expectations to the learning environment. As a result, comprehensive assessment mechanisms are essential to effectively address these unique needs and ensure the fulfillment of educational objectives. Noyé and Pivetau (1997) emphasize that assessment in adult education serves as a continuous feedback mechanism. Adult educators use assessment to verify whether the goals set at the beginning of a program are being met throughout the course. This continuous evaluation allows educators to make necessary real-time adjustments, ensuring that teaching methods remain effective and relevant. By analyzing assessment data, educators can refine their instructional practices, thereby enhancing the overall learning experience for adult learners. This iterative process of assessment and adaptation is crucial in adult education, where learners' needs may change rapidly, and flexibility is of utmost importance.

Recent research supports the significance of assessment in adult education, highlighting its role in promoting lifelong learning. As society and the labor market

evolve, adult education programs must adapt to provide relevant skills and knowledge. Assessment enables these programs to remain dynamic and responsive to external changes (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). It ensures that curricula stay aligned with current industry standards and learners' professional aspirations, thereby enhancing employability and personal growth.

A key question that concerns researchers is whether qualitative or quantitative assessment is generally preferred. Clarifying the distinction between the two is essential, as the choice of method is a fundamental factor in defining the evaluation process. According to Knowles (1990), the most challenging phase of adult learning is assessment. Over the years, researchers in adult education have realized that measuring learning outcomes based only on quantitative data is no longer a valid approach. Quantitative measurements failed to satisfy adult educators. This perspective has shifted in recent years, with greater emphasis now placed on qualitative analysis.

Knowles asserts that to truly understand the impact of training, one must engage directly with those involved (learners, educators, clients) and explore their feelings and actions based on their emotions. This requires a completely different approach in terms of data collection techniques and methods. Quantitative methods include tests (diagnostic, pre- and post-training evaluations, statistical analysis). In contrast, qualitative techniques involve participatory observation, in-depth interviews, case studies, personal journals, and behavioral change analyses, among others.

Clearly, assessment in adult education is not only about measuring outcomes but also about understanding the learning process itself. By delving into how adults learn and what motivates them, educators can design more effective learning environments. This comprehensive approach to assessment helps create a supportive and engaging learning atmosphere that encourages active participation and fosters a culture of continuous improvement (Brookfield, 2013).

In conclusion, assessment is a cornerstone of adult education, serving as a crucial mechanism for evaluating and enhancing the performance of both learners and educators. By facilitating the design of effective strategies, informed decision-making, and the setting of appropriate priorities, assessment contributes to the overall

improvement of the learning experience. It ensures that adult education programs remain relevant, effective, and aligned with the evolving needs of learners and society.

4. Assessment in Open Universities

Assessment in open universities is characterized by adaptability and innovation, tailoring evaluation methods to the diverse needs of adult learners. Institutions such as The Open University in the United Kingdom, the Open University of Catalonia, and FernUniversität in Germany utilize technology to facilitate flexible and inclusive assessment methods. According to Brown and Glasner (1999), open universities employ a combination of formative and summative assessments to ensure a comprehensive evaluation of student learning. This distinction between formative and summative assessment merits further elaboration to clarify how purpose, rather than timing, defines their pedagogical function across different institutional contexts.

Assessment practices in Open Universities are shaped by flexibility and pedagogical innovation, particularly in the field of adult education, where learners' autonomy and the diverse contexts of their lives demand adaptable assessment approaches (Beetham & Sharpe, 2019). Institutions such as the Open University (UK), the Open University of Catalonia, and the FernUniversität in Hagen employ a combination of formative and summative assessment strategies. However, it is crucial to distinguish between these two types of assessment not based on their timing within a course, but rather on their purpose—a distinction originally introduced by Scriven (1967), which remains widely accepted in educational assessment theory.

Formative assessment, in Scriven's framework, refers to any evaluative activity whose primary aim is to improve learning or instruction — regardless of when it occurs. This includes tools such as online quizzes, self-assessment activities, and peer feedback systems, all of which are widely used in open universities to support continuous learner engagement and academic development. Summative assessment, by contrast, serves as a judgmental or certification function, aiming to determine whether learning objectives have been achieved. These include written exams, final projects, and oral presentations — often adapted into digital formats to accommodate remote learners (Boud & Soler, 2016). Therefore, what defines the assessment type is

not its chronological placement, but the intended use of the results — improvement (formative) or judgment (summative).

The comparative landscape across Open Universities in Europe and Australia reveals both common trends and differences shaped by institutional and cultural contexts. For instance, while FernUniversität and the Hellenic Open University integrate formative activities throughout their online courses, their implementation strategies vary. FernUniversität emphasizes student progress through self-directed learning and automated feedback systems, whereas HOU relies more on tutor-guided assignments and asynchronous communication. In Australia, the Open Universities model often features authentic assessment activities linked to professional contexts, reflecting a strong focus on career readiness (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). These differences highlight the importance of examining not only which tools are used, but also how they function pedagogically within each institutional and cultural setting.

As Boud and Soler (2016) emphasize, the integration of digital assessment tools enhances the reliability and efficiency of assessments, ensuring equitable access for all students. Moreover, these tools facilitate the use of multimedia and interactive content, enriching the assessment experience and increasing its relevance to real-life and work-related situations.

The focus on flexible assessment practices is vital in Open Universities, as their students often balance studies with professional and personal responsibilities. Institutions such as the Open University of the Netherlands and the Hellenic Open University offer personalized learning pathways and flexible assessment schedules, allowing learners to progress at their own pace. This approach not only accommodates diverse learning styles and rhythms but also supports lifelong learning—one of the core objectives of adult education (Beetham & Sharpe, 2019).

Formative assessments, including online quizzes, peer evaluations, and interactive assignments, provide continuous feedback and support students' progress throughout their academic journey. These methods align with the principles of adult education, which emphasize engagement, reflection, and self-directed learning (Knowles et al., 2015; Brookfield, 2013).

In Open Universities, summative assessments aim to measure students' overall competence and readiness for real-world applications. These assessments include oral

presentations, written exams, and assignments, often conducted online to accommodate remote learners. The integration of e-assessment tools, as highlighted by Boud and Soler (2016), enhances the reliability and effectiveness of these evaluations, ensuring they are accessible and fair for all students. These tools also enable the use of multimedia and interactive content, enriching the assessment experience and making it more relevant to real-world contexts.

The emphasis on flexible assessment practices is vital in open universities, where students often balance their studies with professional and personal commitments. Institutions such as the Open University of the Netherlands and the Hellenic Open University offer personalized learning paths and flexible assessment schedules, allowing students to progress at their own pace. This approach not only accommodates different learning styles and paces but also supports lifelong learning, one of the fundamental goals of adult education (Beetham & Sharpe, 2019). As Boud and Soler (2016) emphasize, the integration of e-assessment tools strengthens the reliability and efficiency of these evaluations, ensuring accessibility and fairness for all learners. These tools also facilitate the use of multimedia and interactive content, enriching assessment experience and making it more relevant to real-world scenarios.

5. Assessment methods in Open Universities

Open universities employ various methods to assess their students, focusing on both formative and summative assessments to ensure a holistic and fair evaluation, as previously discussed. These methods consider different learning styles and ensure that students receive the necessary support to succeed. The key assessment methods include:

Formative Assessments: Continuous assessments are crucial in providing students with feedback throughout their learning process. For example, The Open University in the United Kingdom regularly uses online quizzes, assignments, and interactive activities to track student progress and provide timely feedback. These assessments are designed to help students identify their strengths and weaknesses and improve before final evaluations (Brookhart, 2018).

Summative Assessments: Conducted at the end of a course, summative assessments comprehensively evaluate student learning. Common methods include final exams,

which can be either online or in-person, comprehensive assignments, and research papers. FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany, emphasizes final written exams and thesis projects to assess overall understanding and application of course material (Jekel et al., 2020).

Peer and Self-Assessment: To promote reflective learning, some institutions integrate peer and self-assessment strategies. These methods encourage students to criticize their own work and that of their peers, fostering critical thinking and self-awareness. For example, the University of Vigo in Spain has piloted such assessments, allowing students to reflect on their learning pathways (Iglesias Pérez et al., 2022).

Portfolios: Digital portfolios collect and present students' work overtime, offering a comprehensive view of their progress and achievements. They are increasingly used in innovative ways, especially in higher education, where they have the potential to transform teaching, learning, and assessment (Saeed et al., 2020; Scully et al., 2018).

Project-Based Learning (PBL): Project-based assessments are common, especially in courses requiring practical application of knowledge. This method has a strong professional orientation and a clear objective (Hugerat, 2016), contributing to independent activity, goal-oriented learning, socially guided interaction within the educational process, and the implementation of interdisciplinarity in the learning experience (Demirkol et al., 2021). For example, Open University (UK) has embedded Pirate robotic telescope in its curriculum. This remotely operable telescope allows distance learning STEM students to conduct collaborative observational experiments as part of modules in astronomy, creating genuine data in group projects (Kolb et. al., 2018).

Standardized Tests and Exams: Some open universities continue to rely on traditional examinations, both online and offline, to ensure academic standards. These standardized tests are designed to objectively measure the knowledge, and skills students have acquired throughout the course (Yorke, 2010).

Feedback Mechanisms: Feedback plays a crucial role in student assessment (Shute, 2008). Institutions like The Open University in the United Kingdom ensure that detailed feedback is provided for all assessments, helping students understand their mistakes and learn from them. In distance learning, feedback is even more essential, as it is one of the few processes that connect learners with each other and with their

instructors. It is often provided through online platforms, making it accessible and timely (Jensen et al., 2021).

6. Assessment methods and criteria in Adult Education at Open Universities

This research explores the assessment methods and criteria applied in adult education across the Open Universities. The study considers the unique needs and expectations of adult learners, focusing on practices that facilitate learning and enhance the effectiveness of educational programs.

A review of the literature and practical applications revealed that assessment methods vary depending on the type of course or academic program. At the same time, students' specific needs are taken into account to create a flexible and supportive learning environment aligned with the principles of adult education.

6.1 Formative Evaluation

One of the primary assessment methods used in Open Universities is *formative evaluation*. This approach aims to provide continuous feedback to students, facilitating learning and improving their performance throughout their studies.

Students are assessed based on:

Active participation in online or in-person discussions, which enhance interaction and promote collaborative learning.

Individual or group assignments, allowing students to apply their knowledge in practice and develop critical thinking skills.

The quality of research papers, which may be conducted individually or in collaboration with other students, fostering independent learning.

Participation in activities and case studies, which aim to solve problems related to their field of study.

Formative evaluation helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses while also providing educators with valuable insights to improve the learning process.

6.2 Summative Evaluation

In addition to formative evaluation, Open Universities implement various forms of *summative evaluation*, which aim to assess students' overall performance at the end of a learning unit or academic program.

The main methods of summative evaluation include:

Written exams conducted either in person or remotely via online platforms. These exams may include multiple-choice questions, essay-based questions, or case analysis.

Oral exams, which may be conducted via teleconference or in person, allow students to present and defend their knowledge in real-time.

Laboratory work and practical assessments primarily applied in programs that require hands-on training or specialized laboratory skills.

Research or final projects, requiring students to apply their knowledge to a specific topic, analyze data, and present well-founded conclusions.

The choice of assessment method is determined by the learning objectives of each course, with a strong emphasis on creating a fair and reliable evaluation process that meets the needs of adult learners.

7. Comparative Research Study

This study aims to explore the efficiency of assessment methods and criteria in the context of adult education, considering the needs and expectations of this specific learner demographic. The research focuses on the forms and implementation methods of assessment in the curricula of six distance learning Open Universities. Institutional information regarding assessment practices was drawn primarily from official university websites, assessment regulations, and quality assurance documents, ensuring the reliability and validity of the data presented.

On this basis, the following section presents a comparative overview of assessment practices across the selected Open Universities, highlighting both shared approaches and institution-specific characteristics.

7.1 Open University (UKOU) of Great Britain

In 1969, the Open University UK (UKOU) was established by the Royal Charter in Great Britain. It is considered a pioneer in distance education for over 50 years, providing teaching and support to students in the United Kingdom and around the world.

The need for adult education and training had been expressed in Britain throughout the 20th century by official bodies such as the British Institute of Adult Education and the Adult Education Committee of the Board of Education. These two institutions had collaborated in the past to promote their common goal, which was precisely the provision of post-school educational and training opportunities for adult British citizens (Shelton, 2001). To this day, it remains a point of reference for similar educational institutions.

The Open University of the United Kingdom (UKOU) uses a variety of assessment methods to evaluate its students (The Open University, n.d.). The assessment methods include:

Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMAs): A number of these assignments are conducted in each module. They can take the form of an essay, a report, a set of questions, a skills test, a speech assessment, or any other format that allows students to demonstrate their acquired knowledge. There is always a submission deadline. When the tutor returns the assignment, they provide personalized, detailed comments, feedback, and suggestions for improvement. These assignments may also take the form of *Group Projects*, where students collaborate with peers to solve problems or develop programs.

Interactive Computer-Marked Assignments (iCMAs): These are conducted online and are usually automatically assessed by a computer, though tutor evaluation may also be included. This category includes online quizzes as well as self-assessment activities. The latter helps students develop awareness of their own learning progress.

End-of-Module Assessments (EMAs) / End-of-Module Tutor-Marked Assignments (emTMAs): These are the final assessments in certain modules. They may be similar to the TMAs completed earlier in the course, but they are typically longer and cover the entire module rather than just a part of it. Submission deadlines are always set in advance. In most cases, no further exams follow these assessments.

Exams: Exams serve as the final assessed work in certain modules. The exam date is fixed and is announced at least 12 weeks in advance to allow students sufficient time to prepare. Exams are typically conducted remotely and can be completed either at home or at university facilities. If a module requires an in-person exam, this is communicated from the beginning. Students may take exams in various formats, including written exams, oral exams, and laboratory exams, depending on the nature of the course and its requirements. If personal circumstances or disabilities make it difficult for students to participate in remote exams, the university may offer alternative arrangements or reasonable adjustments. The student support team plays a supportive role in facilitating these accommodations.

7.2 Hellenic Open University (HOU)

The Hellenic Open University is the only public university in Greece dedicated exclusively to distance education, offering flexible study pathways and assessment practices tailored to adult learners balancing studies with professional and personal commitments (Hellenic Open University, n.d.). It was founded in 1992 and began operating in 1998. Its aim is to offer higher education through the method of open and distance learning. HOU offers undergraduate, postgraduate, and doctoral study programs. These programs cover various fields such as Humanities, Social Sciences, Engineering Sciences, Health Sciences, and Information Technology.

Student assessment at the Hellenic Open University is carried out through various methods to ensure comprehensive understanding and the achievement of educational goals. The main assessment methods include:

Written assignments: Students are required to submit written assignments during the academic year or semester. These assignments:

- a. aim to deepen understanding of the course material and apply knowledge to practical issues,
- b. usually require analysis, synthesis, and critical thinking,

are assessed and returned to students with comments and corrections by instructors, helping them to improve their performance.

This assessment approach reflects the emphasis placed on continuous feedback, learner support, and the development of critical and analytical skills in adult distance education contexts (Ismyrli, 2022).

End-of-semester examinations: At the end of each academic year or semester, students take exams either online (remotely) or in person at examination centers:

- a. The exams are usually written but may also be oral and cover the entire course content.
- b. They aim to assess the understanding and assimilation of the knowledge acquired during the course.
- c. The exam score is combined with the written assignment scores to determine the final grade.

Participation in workshops and practical exercises

In some study programs, students must participate in workshops or practical exercises:

- a. These activities are assessed through students' performance in hands-on tests and exercises.
- b. They contribute to the development of practical skills and the application of theoretical knowledge.

Participation in lectures and seminars

Students' participation in lectures, seminars, and group discussions (forums) may also be evaluated in the following ways:

- a. Active participation and contributions to discussions may be considered in the final assessment.
- b. In some courses, students may be required to present assignments or take part in group projects.

Mid-semester assignments

In addition to the main written assignments, smaller-scale assignments may be given during the semester.

- a. These may include article analyses, brief reports, or other activities related to the course content.
- b. They are assessed and considered in the final grade.

Final grade

The most common practice for calculating the final grade of each module is based on a combination of scores from written assignments (usually contributing 30% to the final grade, provided the student passes the final or resit exam) and the score from the final written or oral exam, which contributes 70% to the final grade (EAP, 2024).

Assessment monitoring

Students have access to their assessment results through the HOU's educational platform. Feedback from instructors helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses and improve their performance in future assignments and exams. Through these assessment methods, HOU ensures that students not only understand the material but are also able to apply it in practical scenarios and develop critical thinking and analytical skills.

7.3 CNED, Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance – France

The Centre National d'Enseignement à Distance (CNED) is France's national organization for distance education. CNED was founded in 1939 and has, over its academic history, employed a variety of media such as printed materials, telephone, television, Minitel, and the Internet. CNED has experimented and gradually evolved, integrating new educational technologies (Marty, 2012) to adapt to modern needs. It currently has nearly 20,000 registered students worldwide and is the leading provider of lifelong learning in Europe and the French-speaking world. It is accessible to everyone, whether residing in France or abroad, regardless of nationality. CNED offers the possibility to pursue both secondary and higher education as well as initial or professional training remotely and online, providing flexible learning pathways for diverse learner profiles (CNED, n.d.).

As explained by Soazig Gros (Équipe éditoriale CNED, 2023), general representative of the Digital Academies Network, collaboration with CNED emerged from the desire to combat the disengagement of the most vulnerable students after high school graduation and to find an innovative solution for young people who are isolated from higher education institutions and unable to relocate for financial reasons (housing, food, transport, healthcare, etc.).

In terms of higher education, CNED, in collaboration with universities, prepares students for certain distance education programs, mainly through courses and online mentoring. Specifically, regarding learner assessment, the CNED uses various methods, which vary depending on the type of program, the level of education, and the course objectives. Some of the assessment methods used by CNED include:

Examinations: Students may be required to take exams at a designated examination center or online, depending on the course and program requirements.

Assignments: Students may be asked to submit written reports or assignments either in physical or digital form, which are then evaluated by their instructors.

Oral examinations: In some cases, students may be asked to undergo oral examinations with their instructors, either remotely or in person.

Self-Assessment: Students may be asked to assess their own progress and performance through self-assessment tools, which may include evaluations, performance criteria, and self-assessment questionnaires.

Projects or Research Papers: Certain courses may require the submission of projects or research papers, where students develop and demonstrate their skills in a specific topic area.

7.4 FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany

FernUniversität in Hagen, Germany's only public Open and Distance Learning University, began operating in 1974 in the state of North Rhine-Westphalia. It provided an opportunity for individuals who could not or did not wish to complete in-person studies due to personal, professional, or other reasons to obtain a university degree. In its first year, the university enrolled 1,330 students. Today, it has grown into Germany's largest university in terms of student numbers, featuring an impressive campus in Hagen. FernUniversität provides structured assessment regulations and digitally supported evaluation processes aimed at ensuring academic standards in open and distance higher education (FernUniversität in Hagen, n.d.).

FernUniversität in Hagen offers a flexible and supportive learning environment tailored to the needs of distance learning students, with clearly defined assessment procedures that ensure the quality and credibility of academic studies.

Before the start of their studies, FernUniversität in Hagen recommends that prospective students complete a free, optional, anonymous, and non-binding self-assessment tool developed by the university, called Study NAVI. This 45-minute assessment is designed to help students evaluate their readiness for distance learning. In the first part, it compares their expectations regarding their studies at FernUniversität. The second part assesses their skills in communication and technology, as well as their time management abilities. After completing the assessment, participants receive feedback and additional information about their future studies. During their studies at FernUniversität in Hagen, acquired knowledge is tested in the same way as in traditional universities, but in a manner adapted to the principles, needs, and capabilities of distance education.

Students participate in (online) exams, write term papers, and complete oral examinations. Exams are conducted across Germany in collaboration with partner universities or at the university's own facilities. Oral examinations are typically held in Hagen. The assessment methods applied at FernUniversität in Hagen include:

Written Assignments: Students may be required to submit written essays or reports on topics related to their coursework. These assignments are typically evaluated by their instructors.

Participation in online seminars or Discussions: The university may offer online seminars or discussion forums, where students can engage and exchange ideas. Participation and contribution to these activities may be assessed.

Self-Assessment: Students may be asked to evaluate their own progress and performance at various stages of their learning process or academic program.

Participation in Group Projects: In some cases, students may be required to work on group projects, which are assessed based on collaborative work and the quality of the final outcome.

Examinations: In certain courses, students may take synchronous or asynchronous exams to assess their level of knowledge. Final exams are typically conducted during the last two months of each semester:

Winter Semester (WS): February/March

Summer Semester (SS): August/September

7.5 The Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) of Spain

The Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) is a public open university and the largest in Spain in terms of both student numbers and academic programs. UNED is also one of the largest distance education universities in Europe, with a well-developed institutional framework for assessment quality assurance and alignment between learning outcomes and assessment methods in adult and distance education contexts (UNED, n.d.). With over 200,000 students from Spain and around the world enrolled annually in its various programs, it has adopted an innovative learning system that combines online instruction with on-site support. In this way, it offers programs tailored to the individual needs of each student through a model of e-learning and blended learning.

As an open university, UNED uses various forms of assessment for its students. Some of the main forms of assessment that may be used by UNED include:

End-of-semester or end-of-course examinations: Students are often required to pass examinations at the end of each semester or course to be assessed on specific subjects or topics.

Deliverable assignments: Students may be required to submit deliverables such as research papers, project reports, presentations, etc.

Participation in discussions/seminars: Some courses may assess students' participation in discussions or seminars.

Final theses or examinations: Students may be required to submit final theses or pass examinations at the end of their programs.

Continuous assessment: In certain courses or programs, assessment may be based on continuous evaluation throughout the semester, considering the student's participation in departmental activities, submitted assignments, etc.

UNED, aiming to improve the instructional design within the context of a large-scale distance education university, regularly conducts studies to monitor the quality of the assessment methods used across its academic programs. In one such study, a set of 10 courses was analyzed according to the Bologna Process framework and the course evaluation cycle proposed by Evans et al. (2018), based on learning outcomes. The analysis in this research was supported by the TALOE tool, an online and freely accessible tool developed based on the outcomes of the TALOE project (Dima et al.,

2014), *"Time to Assess Learning Outcomes in E-learning"*, funded by the European Union (Lifelong Learning Programme, reference number 543097-LLP-1-2013-1-PT-KA3-KA3MP). This tool reviews general assessment methods such as multiple-choice questions, essays, problem-solving, practical tasks, and short-answer questions.

Based on this study, and a series of other evaluations periodically conducted by UNED itself, the following conclusions were drawn:

- There is alignment between the expected learning outcomes, both at the individual course and programme levels, and the assessment methods employed, reflecting programme-focused assessment approaches in open and distance education (Brunton et al., 2016).
- The new blended examinations (multiple-choice questions combined with open-ended questions) and the optional assignment bring assessment methods closer to more "authentic assessment tasks."
- The increase and enrichment of feedback provided to students through more advanced assessment tools—such as rubrics or complex technological tools—is a well-established trend and is proposed as the main initiative to be implemented in courses to improve assessment.

In the context of mass education, such as that offered by UNED, it is more appropriate to consider simple, scalable assessment methods that can be used to evaluate the range of different learning outcomes simultaneously.

7.6 Open Universities in Australia (OUA)

Australia has a long history of distance education, largely shaped by its vast geographical distances and dispersed population. Despite initial opposition from local communities, distance teaching in primary education developed rapidly, first in Victoria (1914), followed by New South Wales (1916), Western Australia (1918), Tasmania (1919), South Australia (1920) and Queensland (1922) (Cunningham, 1931). In higher education, early attempts to provide distance education emerged almost in parallel, beginning with the University of Queensland in 1909. Over time, distance education expanded across multiple universities, evolved significantly after the

Second World War, faced resistance from conventional educational models, and served different institutional purposes at different historical moments.

A major milestone was reached in 1993 with the establishment of the Open Learning Australia (OLA) association, which in 2004 evolved into Open Universities Australia (OUA), a non-profit partnership of several universities aimed at widening access to higher education (Evans & Jakupec, 2023). Today, Open Universities Australia operates as a national online higher education platform, offering open access to individual units and full qualifications from leading Australian universities, with a strong emphasis on professionally oriented, authentic, and flexible assessment practices aligned with adult learning and employability objectives (Open Universities Australia, n.d.).

Open universities in Australia have more the character of providing distance education and less the free access of every adult to undergraduate studies, a characteristic that the Open University of the United Kingdom (OUUK) has (Evans & Jakupec, 2023). Thus, it is important to ensure ways of reliably assessing their students to check the degree of assimilation of the material taught and to enable students to understand the type of projects they will be asked to undertake in a real working environment.

The different types of assessment used in Australian Open Universities, according to their official website, are as follows:

Written assessments: These are foundational in most courses and may include:

- *Essays:* Structured arguments on specific topics.
- *Reports:* Detailed analyses or evaluations (The University of Melbourne, n.d.).
- *Literature Reviews:* Critical evaluations of existing research.
- *Annotated Bibliographies:* Summaries and critiques of sources.

These assessments evaluate a student's ability to articulate ideas, analyze information, and construct coherent arguments (Shafamarwa et al., 2024). Lecturers want to see how well a student can address the challenge or concept and how well he/she can structure and support his/her argument (Open Universities Australia, n.d. a).

Oral assessments: Despite the online format, oral assessments are integral and include:

- *Presentations* are usually done individually or with a group via a chat platform such as Zoom. Students are assessed on their recall of information about their topic through speaking, the way they organise their information on the slides, how well they interact with the audience and how well they collaborate, if working in a group (Open Universities Australia n.d. a).
- *Interrogations* involve being questioned by an examiner on a particular topic, assessing the level of knowledge and the clarity and quality of his/her responses. In a postgraduate course, he/she might be asked to discuss a longer piece of written work (like a thesis) during an interrogation with examiners.
- *Role-playing scenarios* tend to be common in clinical or language courses. In a language course, he/she might be asked to use skills in a conversational setting so that examiners can see how well he/she speaks and comprehends the language. In psychology courses, role-playing assessments are used to evaluate how a student would respond in a real-world patient situation. These assessments test verbal communication, understanding of the subject matter, and the ability to engage with an audience.
- *Demonstration-related assessments*: A demonstration-related assessment or 'skills demonstration' involves a practical examination or simulation in which students show what they have learned through practical application. An example is the Objective Structured Clinical Examination (OSCE), which is a clinical exam set in health sciences degrees, where the student is required to move from one simulated patient to another and answers questions about the diagnoses (Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia, n.d.).

Reflective Assessments: These assessments encourage students to reflect on their learning experiences such as:

- *Reflective Journals*: Regular entries reflecting on learning progress.
- *Reflective Essays*: In-depth analysis of personal learning experiences. They help in developing self-awareness and critical thinking skills (The University of Melbourne. n.d.).

Quizzes and Exams: These are used to assess knowledge and understanding of course material (The University of Melbourne. n.d.).

- *Online Quizzes*: Short assessments to test specific knowledge areas.
- *Exams*: Comprehensive assessments at the end of a course or module. They can be formative (for learning) or summative (for grading) (OpenLearn, n.d.)

Portfolios: Portfolios compile a student's work overtime, showcasing learning progression and achievements. «Portfolio assessments are used to gauge both student learning, and the efficacy of the learning process» (Charles Sturt University, n.d.).

8. Discussion - Conclusions

This comparative study highlights the central role of assessment in adult education within Open Universities and emphasizes how assessment practices bridge the gap between theory and practice. In particular, the distinction between formative and summative assessment based on their purpose—rather than solely their timing, as conceptualized by Scriven—emerges as a critical consideration in designing effective evaluation strategies. This distinction enables institutions to create assessment systems that not only certify learning outcomes but also actively promote continuous improvement and learner engagement.

Across the European context, institutions such as The Open University in the UK, FernUniversität in Germany, and the Hellenic Open University in Greece have prioritized formative assessment methods that provide continuous feedback, support learner autonomy, and accommodate diverse educational needs. These practices are complemented by the integration of e-assessment tools, which enhance accessibility and the timely provision of feedback. In contrast, Australian Open Universities demonstrate a strong emphasis on authentic assessment approaches linked to professional skills and real-world applications, reflecting an educational culture oriented toward employability and practical competencies.

The comparison of these assessment models underscores the importance of adaptability and innovation. While regional and institutional contexts shape how assessment methods are implemented, the shared goal remains the creation of reliable, fair, and learner-centered evaluation systems. Furthermore, the incorporation of technological tools, particularly digital and multimedia resources, has

proven essential in ensuring equity and engagement for adult learners balancing complex personal and professional commitments.

It is important to acknowledge that this study is based primarily on a review and synthesis of existing literature rather than empirical fieldwork. Consequently, further research involving direct observations, interviews with educators and learners, and case studies within specific Open Universities is recommended. Such research could enrich understanding of how assessment practices are experienced in practice and inform more nuanced policy recommendations.

In conclusion, the findings highlight that assessment in Open Universities must be continually refined to remain responsive to adult learners' evolving needs and to support lifelong learning. A clear conceptual framework that distinguishes assessment purposes, coupled with flexible implementation and technological innovation, is key to maintaining the relevance, effectiveness, and credibility of adult education programs in an increasingly dynamic global environment.

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