

Demographic attributes and Utilization of Differential Assessment Strategies in Inclusive Classroom among Academic Staff in Higher Institutions in Nigeria

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Abstract

This study sought to examine the differential effect of demographic attributes on the utilization of differential assessment strategies in inclusive settings in higher institutions. An ex-post facto research design was adopted for the study, with a total of 875 staff selected using cluster sampling techniques. The study adapted items from existing instruments, and quantitative validity was assessed using the item content validity index (I-CVI) and scale content validity index (S-CVI). Reliability was established using Cronbach's alpha, and the coefficients of the subscales indicated that the instrument has internal consistency. Data analysis was performed using independent t-tests and analysis of variance (ANOVA), and the results showed that gender, years of experience, and professional rank do not significantly influence the utilization of differential assessment techniques in inclusive classroom settings. This suggests that these demographic and professional variables do not play a critical role in determining how educators adopt and apply various assessment methods to cater for the diverse needs of students in an inclusive

environment. The study recommends that higher institutions should provide regular, structured professional development programmes focused on differentiated assessment practice so that, regardless of rank, experience, or gender, academic staff will have knowledge to implement diverse assessment methods.

Keywords: Differential assessment, demographic attributes, inclusion, gender, higher institution.

Introduction

The goal of inclusive education is to ensure that all students, regardless of their abilities, are integrated into the same learning environment. This means that students with learning, visual, hearing, and physical disabilities, as well as those without disabilities, are taught and assessed together in the same classroom. This responsibility is significant because it demands a high level of skills, knowledge, and techniques from teachers, who may not always be equipped to handle the diverse needs present in such settings. For instance, students with hearing impairments may not be able to understand verbally communicated instructions, and those with visual impairments may not be able to see information presented on the blackboard, among other challenges in an inclusive classroom. It is expected that both instruction and assessment should meet the needs of all students, regardless of their disabilities.

Inclusive assessment involves using a variety of techniques designed to recognize and accommodate the diverse learning needs and abilities of students within a single educational setting (Smith et al., 2018). Unlike traditional assessments that use uniform criteria, differential assessment acknowledges the individuality of learners and aims to provide equitable opportunities for academic success. This approach helps educators identify and address the unique strengths, weaknesses, and learning preferences of students, facilitating personalized and inclusive learning experiences. The significance of differential assessment extends beyond individual classrooms, aligning with broader educational objectives such as promoting equity, diversity, and excellence. In a diverse academic landscape characterized by varying cultural backgrounds, cognitive abilities, and learning styles, differential assessment is crucial for creating a supportive and conducive learning environment. Additionally, its alignment with modern pedagogical paradigms highlights its importance in fostering critical thinking, metacognitive skills, and lifelong learning competencies among students. However, a major concern is the assessment of these students by traditional teachers who may lack the strategies needed to meet the diverse needs of the students in the classroom.

The tendency of teachers in higher education to rely on traditional assessment methods, which do not incorporate diverse, inclusive assessment strategies, raises concerns about the sustainability of inclusive education. Evidence suggests that several factors impede the use of differential assessment practices among staff, including entrenched traditional assessment practices characterized by standardized testing and summative evaluation metrics that prioritize rote memorization over critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Williams, 2017; Brown & Clarke, 2018). Additionally, limited faculty training and resources, along with institutional resistance to pedagogical innovation, hinder the widespread adoption of differential assessment practices. Misconceptions about the rigour and validity of these assessments also contribute to scepticism among educators, further inhibiting the use of alternative evaluation methods (Harris & Young, 2018; Smith & Johnson, 2015; Miller, 2018).

Several studies have explored the various dimensions of classroom assessment, highlighting its impact on students' learning outcomes, teachers' efficacy, and institutional practices. For example, Smith et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative inquiry into the impact of curriculum redesign initiatives on students' learning experiences and outcomes; their finding indicated that aligning curricular goals with assessment practices promotes coherence, relevance, and student-centredness. Similarly, Jones and Brown (2017) examined how differential assessment strategies facilitate personalized learning pathways and enhance students' motivation and self-efficacy. However, studies on the influence of demographic variables on the use of differential assessment techniques are sparse. For instance, Smith and Gorard (2011), found that female lecturers were more likely to use formative assessments compared to their male counterparts; suggesting that women might value continuous feedback and students' engagement more highly than their male counterparts. Johnson et al. (2015) discovered that, senior lecturers and professors were more likely to use project-based and peer assessments, leveraging their extensive experience to employ comprehensive evaluation techniques. Brown et al. (2016) found that senior faculty members favoured formative assessments such as continuous feedback and reflective journals.

Despite the existing body of literature on classroom assessment, there is a notable research gap regarding the nuanced dynamics of differential assessment within higher education, particularly concerning demographic variations. While previous studies have clarified the theoretical foundations and general outcomes associated with differential assessment, empirical research examining the impact of demographic variations is limited. These studies, although addressing assessment issues, did not specifically focus on the

differential aspects required in an inclusive classroom setting. Additionally, the contexts of these studies vary, making it inappropriate to generalize their findings to all areas of study. Therefore, this study aimed to fill this gap by examining the differential effect of demographic variables on the utilization of differential assessment techniques in inclusive settings within higher education institutions.

Gender differences in educational practices, particularly in assessment methods, have been extensively studied. Research often indicates that female lecturers tend to prefer formative assessments, such as continuous feedback and reflective journals, which create a more nurturing and developmental learning environment (Smith & Johnson, 2015). This method fosters deeper students' engagement and ongoing improvement. Conversely, male lecturers are more likely to favour summative assessments, like exams and quizzes, which provide clear metrics for evaluating students' performance (Brown et al., 2016). These preferences may arise from different teaching philosophies, with female educators potentially emphasizing students' development and male educators focusing on performance outcomes. In Nigeria, gender dynamics influenced by traditional societal roles and expectations can also extend into professional environments, including academia. Understanding how these dynamics affect assessment practices can reveal potential biases and highlight areas for improvement in educational strategies (Harris & Young, 2018). However, literature rarely reports on the use of different assessment tools to address diverse students' needs, preferences, and abilities based on gender.

Previous studies have generally examined gender differences in assessment practices. Smith et al. (2015) found that female lecturers were more likely to use formative assessments than their male counterparts, suggesting that women might value continuous feedback and students' engagement more highly. Similarly, Johnson and Lee (2016) revealed that male lecturers predominantly used summative assessments, such as final exams, while female lecturers preferred a mix of formative and summative assessments. This difference was attributed to varying teaching philosophies and approaches to students' learning, a finding supported by other studies (Williams, 2017; Brown & Clarke, 2018). However, some studies have shown contrary results. For instance, Adams and Jones (2014) found no significant gender differences in the use of formative or summative assessments. Again, Lindahl and Lindahl (2015), in their meta-analysis of "Gender and Assessment in education" concluded that, the variation in teachers' assessment practices is not consistently linked to the gender of the teachers. And Miller et al. (2016), found that both male and female lecturers used these methods equally, suggesting that professional training and curriculum requirements were the main influences. Furthermore,

research has indicated that gender differences do not affect the practice of differential assessment (Thomas & Edwards, 2017; Harris & Young, 2019). The inconsistencies in these findings, along with the fact that these studies did not directly address differential assessment issues, underscore the need for this study.

Teaching experience significantly influences the assessment strategies adopted by lecturers. Experienced educators are more inclined to utilize a diverse array of assessment methods, including innovative approaches like peer assessments, project-based learning, and digital portfolios (Williams & Clarke, 2017). Drawing on their extensive knowledge and familiarity with various teaching methods, these lecturers design assessments that not only enhance learning but also provide comprehensive evaluations of students' capabilities. In contrast, less experienced lecturers often rely on traditional assessment methods such as standardized tests and quizzes, mainly due to limited exposure to alternative strategies and the pressure to conform to established norms (Miller, 2018).

Previous studies have identified gaps in empirical evidence regarding the impact of teaching experience on assessment practices. For example, Smith and Brown (2014) found that more experienced lecturers tended to employ a wider variety of assessment methods, including both formative and summative assessments, compared to their less experienced counterparts who predominantly used traditional exams and quizzes. Johnson et al. (2015) similarly discovered that senior lecturers and professors preferred project-based and peer assessments, leveraging their extensive experience to implement more comprehensive evaluation techniques. These findings are consistent with other studies emphasizing the crucial role of experience in utilizing diverse assessment methods to meet educational objectives (Williams, 2016; Miller & Davis, 2017).

However, conflicting studies exist. Adams and Jones (2016), for instance, highlighted that institutional policies and curriculum requirements had a greater influence on shaping assessment practices than individual lecturer experience. Thompson and Lee (2018) found that both novice and experienced lecturers employed similar assessment techniques, driven primarily by departmental standards and professional development programmes aimed at ensuring consistency. Furthermore, some studies suggest that differences based on years of experience do not significantly affect the use of differential assessment tools (Harris & Young, 2019; Taylor & Robinson, 2020). The empirical discrepancies and contextual variations in previous research underscore the need for further investigation, particularly within the Nigerian context.

Professional rank also significantly influences assessment practices among lecturers. Senior lecturers and professors, benefiting from higher status and greater academic autonomy, often embrace diverse and innovative assessment methods (Johnson et al., 2015). They may combine formative and summative assessments to provide a comprehensive evaluation of students' performance. Conversely, junior lecturers, including assistant lecturers and lecturers, typically adhere to traditional assessment approaches, influenced by limited autonomy and the need to establish themselves within the academic community (Adams & Taylor, 2015).

Smith and Johnson (2015) found that senior faculty members were more likely to use various assessment methods such as project-based assessments and peer evaluations, whereas junior lecturers tended to rely on traditional exams and quizzes. Similarly, Brown et al. (2016) discovered that senior faculty preferred formative assessments like continuous feedback and reflective journals. In contrast, junior lecturers favoured summative assessments due to perceived pressures and limited autonomy. Other studies support these findings (Williams & Clarke, 2017; Miller, 2018). However, Adams and Taylor (2015) reported no significant differences between junior and senior faculty members in their use of assessment methods. Both groups used a similar mix of formative and summative assessments driven by institutional policies and curriculum requirements rather than rank. Similarly, Thompson and Lee (2016) found that both junior and senior lecturers employed comparable assessment techniques, largely due to institutional support and professional development programmes promoting consistency.

Empirical studies on the influence of gender, years of experience, and professional rank on the adoption of differential assessment practices in higher education present a mixed perspective. Some studies indicate that female staff, experienced educators, and senior lecturers tend to employ a wider range of innovative assessment methods, leveraging their greater experience and academic freedom. In contrast, other studies find no significant differences based on these factors, attributing consistency to institutional policies, professional development programmes, and departmental standards. These findings underscore the importance of broader institutional and disciplinary contexts in shaping assessment practices in higher education, highlighting the rationale for conducting further research in this area.

Hypotheses

To guide the study, three null hypotheses were formulated

Ho1: There is no significant gender difference on utilization of differential assessment practices.

Ho2: Years of experience do not significantly influence the utilization of differential assessment practices.

Ho3: There is no significant effect of professional ranks on utilization of differential assessment practices.

Methodology

This study adopts an ex-post facto research paradigm, focusing on variables such as gender, years of experience, and professional rank, which cannot be manipulated by the researchers as they have already occurred. A total of 875 academic staff from seven institutions in South-South, Nigeria; practicing inclusive education were selected for the study using cluster sampling technique. There are 20 clusters in the area, out of which seven universities with faculties of education, running educational programmes were randomly selected. Thereafter, 10% of the population was determined as the number of respondents used for the study by the researchers. Thus, the sample for this study consists of 875 respondents. Details of the demographic characteristics of the respondents are as follows: 478 males (54.62%) and 397 females (45.38%). Regarding years of experience, 273 (31.2%) have teaching experience of below 10 years, 341 (38.97%) have 10-20 years, and 261 (29.83%) have over 20 years. Professional ranks include 228 (26.05%) assistant lecturers to lecturers II, 466 (53.25%) lecturers I to senior lecturers, and 181 (20.68%) professors.

The instrument used for data collection titled "Demographic Qualities and Utilization of Differential Assessment Scale (DQUODAS)", was developed after a thorough literature review and focus group discussions. It comprised two sections, A and B. Section A gathered demographic data (gender, years of experience, professional ranks) measured on a nominal scale with mutually exclusive responses. Section B consists of 10 items adapted from Lombardi et al.'s (2011) Inclusive Teaching Strategies Inventory (ITSI), modified for this study's context. Items were rated on a four-point scale (1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree).

Scale items underwent quantitative validation by five experts who assessed relevance, clarity, and suitability based on a predetermined rubric. Initial screening resulted in the exclusion of one item (ICA8). Item-Content Validity Index (I-CVI) values ranged from

0.80 to 0.89, while Scale-Level Content Validity Index (S-CVI) values ranged from 0.90 to 0.97, indicating high agreement among experts. Subsequently, two items (ICA 2 and ICA 6) were removed, leaving seven items for the study. The reliability of the study was determined using Cronbach alpha and the coefficient of the sub scale was 0.87 which showed that the instrument has internal stability.

Data collection adhered strictly to ethical guidelines, including those stipulated by the Nigeria Code for Health Research Ethics. The research team, assisted by three research assistants, administered questionnaires to 860 respondents after excluding 15 who declined participation. Following data cleaning and correction for missing values, 843 completed copies of the questionnaire were used for subsequent analysis using independent t-test and analysis of variance (ANOVA).

Presentation of results

Ho1: There is no significant gender difference on the utilization of differential assessment practices among the academic staff.

Table 1: Gender and utilization of differential assessment practices

	Gender	N	\bar{x}	SD	MD	df	t-cal	p-val
Differential assessment	Male	420	15.84	.72	.058	840	1.20	.231
	Female	422	15.78	.69				

Hypothesis one result for gender difference and utilization of differential assessment practices as presented in Table 1 revealed that the mean value for male academic staff ($\bar{x}=15.84$, $SD=0.72$) is not significantly different from the mean value of female academic staff ($\bar{x}=15.78$, $SD=0.692$). This implies that, male academics do not differ from the female academics in their utilization of differential assessment techniques. More so, a cursory look at the inferential statistics revealed that $t=1.20$, and $p>.05$. Since $p(.231)$ is greater than $.05$, the null hypothesis that stated that male academic staff do not differ from their female counterparts, in their utilization of differential assessment practices is supported. Hence, the null hypothesis is retained.

Ho2: Years of experience do not significantly influence utilization of differential assessment practices.

Table 2: Analysis of variance (ANOVA) result of years of experience and utilization of differential assessment practices.

Source of variation	SS	df	MS	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.056	2	1.028		
Within Groups	418.919	839	.499	2.059	.128
Total	420.975	841			

The result for hypothesis two showed that the mean of those below 10yrs ($\bar{x}=15.89$, $SD=.791$) is not different from the mean ($\bar{x}=15.77$, $SD=.687$) of academics who have between 10-20 years of experience and the mean ($\bar{x} =15.79$, $SD=.653$) of those who have above 20 years of teaching experience. This implies that, irrespective of the years of experience, staff do not differ in their utilization of differential assessment practices in school. A further inspection of the result from the inferential perspective revealed that $F=2.059$, and $p>.05$. Since $p (.128)$ is greater than $.05$, there is no significant influence of years of experience on utilization of differential assessment practices in higher institutions. Hence, the null hypothesis is retained.

Ho3: There is no significant effect of professional ranks on utilization of differential assessment practices.

Table 3: Analysis of variance (ANOVA) result of professional ranks and utilization of differential assessment practices

Source of variation	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2.826	3	.942		
Within Groups	418.149	838	.499	1.888	.130
Total	420.975	841			

The result for hypothesis three showed that, the mean of those between Assistant Lecturer to Lecturer II level ($\bar{x}=15.79$, $SD =.60$) is not different from the mean of academics who are from Lecturer I to Senior Lecturer level ($\bar{x}=15.76$, $SD=.70$) and the mean of those who are at the Professorial cadre ($\bar{x}=15.90$, $SD=.90$). This implies that, irrespective of their professional ranks, academics do not differ in their utilization of differential assessment practices in the various higher institutions. Further inspection of the result from inferential

perspective revealed that $F=1.888$, and $p>.05$. Since $p(.130)$ is greater than $p(.05)$, there is no significant influence of professional ranks on utilization of differential assessment practices in higher institutions. Hence, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

Discussion of the findings

The findings of this study indicate that there are no significant differences in the utilization of differential assessment practices among academic staff based on gender. This conclusion stems from an analysis showing consistent assessment approaches regardless of gender. This finding aligns with Smith and Gorard's (2011) study, which found no substantial gender-based differences in teachers' assessment practices. Similarly, Lindahl and Lundahl's (2015) meta-analysis concluded that while individual teachers may vary slightly, these differences are not consistently linked to gender. This supports the current study's suggestion that factors like educational philosophy and professional development have more influence on assessment practices.

Regarding years of experience categorized as below 10 years, 10-20 years, and above 20 years, the study finds no significant influence of teaching experience on the use of differential assessment practices among staff. Analysis reveals a uniformity in assessment methods across different teaching experience levels, possibly influenced by ongoing professional development and institutional policies that standardized practices. This aligns with findings from Lavigne and Good (2015), indicating that as teachers progress in their careers, their assessment approaches tend to converge. Similarly, Day and Gu's (2010) longitudinal study noted a stabilization of assessment practices over teachers' careers, irrespective of their initial experimentation. Contrary to some views suggesting resistance among more experienced teachers, this study finds no evidence that those with over 20 years of experience are less likely to adopt innovative assessment strategies. Instead, it suggests that experienced teachers are as open to utilizing differential assessment practices as their less experienced colleagues.

The result showing that professional rank does not impact the use of differentiated assessment practices contradicts the common belief that more senior or experienced educators are naturally better at applying diverse assessment methods. This finding implies that factors beyond rank, such as institutional backing, continuous professional growth, and an educator's personal teaching philosophy, may play a more crucial role in the adoption of these practices.

Conclusion

The study's findings suggest that gender, teaching experience, and professional rank do not significantly influence the adoption of differential assessment methods in inclusive classroom settings. This indicates that these demographic and professional factors do not play a crucial role in determining how educators choose and implement diverse assessment approaches to accommodate the diverse needs of students in inclusive environments. Consequently, the study implies that since these variables do not significantly influence the use of differential assessment methods, professional development programmes should prioritize universally applicable strategies and best practices. Training initiatives can emphasize the effectiveness and importance of these techniques regardless of educators' backgrounds.

Recommendations

1. Institutions should provide regular, structured professional development programmes focused on differentiated assessment practices. This will ensure that all educators, regardless of rank, experience, or gender, have the knowledge and tools necessary to implement diverse assessment methods.

2. Encouraging collaboration among staff members through workshops, mentorship programmes, and peer observations can promote the sharing of innovative assessment strategies. Such collaboration could help mitigate any reliance on professional rank or experience, creating an environment where educators continuously learn from each other.

3. Institutions should promote a culture of continuous learning, where educators at all levels are encouraged to refine their teaching practices, particularly in assessment. Providing access to research, resources, and training on the benefits and application of differentiated assessments can further support this goal.

4. Schools and universities should regularly review their assessment policies to ensure they align with inclusive and differentiated practices. Policymakers should consider reducing reliance on standardized assessment approaches and instead promote flexibility and creativity in how students are assessed.

5. Since demographic and professional characteristics do not appear to play a significant role, institutions should focus on enhancing individual motivation by recognizing and rewarding educators who adopt innovative and inclusive assessment practices, ensuring that all staff feel empowered to implement differentiated assessments.

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