

Teaching to Think or Teaching to Pass? Critical Thinking in the Age of Standardized Testing among Universities in Tanzania

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Abstract: *This study explores the tension between fostering critical thinking and the prevalence of standardized testing within Tanzania's higher education system. Using a qualitative case study approach, data were collected from 75 undergraduate students and 15 lecturers across three public universities: The University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM), Sokoine University of Agriculture (SUA), and the University of Dodoma (UDOM). Methods included semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of course syllabi and assessments. Thematic analysis revealed four key findings: (1) teaching practices remain predominantly lecture-based, with limited use of interactive methods that promote critical thinking; (2) students perceive their education as overly focused on rote memorization and exam preparation, leaving little room for deep engagement with course content; (3) assessment practices are heavily reliant on standardized testing formats such as multiple-choice questions, which prioritize factual recall over analytical thinking; and (4) institutional and policy pressures contribute significantly to the persistence of these practices. The study concludes that despite curricular intentions to nurture critical thinking, prevailing pedagogical and assessment strategies-driven by exam-oriented cultures impede its development. The research calls for policy reform, lecturer training, and the adoption of diversified assessment methods to better align higher education with the goals of critical and independent thought.*

Keywords: Critical thinking in Tanzanian higher education is hindered by standardized testing practices

