# Enhancing Experiences in International Courses through the Implementation of Qualitative Assessment

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**Abstract**

Academic assessment is essential for evaluating university courses in international contexts where diverse student backgrounds shape learning. Quantitative methods, while prevalent in measuring performance, often overlook cultural and experiential dimensions. Qualitative evaluation, though less common, offers deeper insights into student needs. This report shows how integrating qualitative approaches can strengthen international students' performance while improving course content, teaching methods, and learning environments in international higher education.

**Table of Content**

## 1. Introduction

Universities worldwide are witnessing a growing presence of international students, facilitated by the expansion of both face-to-face and digital programs that provide access to high-quality education across borders. These opportunities enable students from diverse cultural backgrounds to engage with international faculty and peers, which enrich the learning experience through multicultural interaction. As David Killick and Monika Foster note, this trend reflects the "internationalization" of higher education, characterized by increasing "opportunities for students to learn within multicultural academic environments" (Killick & Foster, 2021, p. 1). Such contexts demand assessment practices that move beyond a purely standardized and summative approach. They need to incorporate assessment practices that recognize cultural diversity and support students in enhancing their performance while adapting to new pedagogical frameworks and international methodologies.

The most commonly used form of assessment in higher education remains quantitative evaluation, largely due to its perceived effectiveness and convenience. This approach, often summative in nature, is typically administered at the end of an academic period and varies according to the specific program in which students are enrolled. Since the late 1990s and early 2000s, many universities worldwide have adopted tools such as "student satisfaction surveys" to measure the academic experiences of their students (cf. Shah et al., 2021, pp. 2–3), institutionalizing quantitative assessment as a primary means of course evaluation.

While quantitative assessment is effective, it must be complemented by formative approaches to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of learning. This research report emphasizes the importance of systematic and ongoing qualitative assessment as a means not only to enhance student performance but also to improve key aspects of international courses, which includes their teaching methodology, content, and evaluation practices. In contrast to summative assessment, which primarily focuses on grades, formative assessment fosters a continuous and professional "scholarly dialogue" (Killick & Foster, 2021, p. 1) between students and teachers. This interplay creates opportunities for feedback, reflection, and adaptation that strengthen the overall learning process.

The article also explores the transformative role of qualitative assessment in international higher education. It focuses particularly on the use of this type of assessment in enhancing student performance, teaching practices, and institutional development. It begins by contextualizing the limitations of traditional quantitative assessment methods and introduces qualitative approaches as a complementary and formative alternative. The report is structured into several key sections: an overview of qualitative assessment in international contexts, its

impact on student performance, its role in improving teaching and institutional practices, models of student-teacher collaboration in assessment, and real-world implementation strategies at the Justus Liebig University (JLU) in Giessen, Germany presented as case studies. Each section builds on the previous to present a comprehensive argument for integrating qualitative assessment into global academic environments.

## 2. Qualitative Assessment in International Contexts

Assessment is a key component in evaluating the performance of educational stakeholders, whether students or teachers. For students, it typically takes the form of exams, oral presentations, quizzes, essays, and other assignments designed to measure learning outcomes.[1] Most of these practices are summative in nature. They focus on determining the effectiveness of educational interventions and assigning grades that reflect student achievement in relation to course standards such as learning objectives, content, methodology, and assessment criteria. Beyond student evaluation, courses and programs themselves are also assessed to ensure their overall effectiveness and relevance. The following section introduces qualitative assessment as a complementary approach. It also highlights its potential to enhance international students' performance while simultaneously improving course design, teaching practices, and institutional development.

### 2.1. Enhancing Performance of international Students

Although quantitative assessment plays a vital role in measuring student performance, academic contexts with international students require the integration of qualitative approaches that account for multicultural dimensions often overlooked by quantitative methods. Many international students are unfamiliar with the assessment practices of their host institutions, as they may come from educational systems with different teaching methodologies, approaches, and expectations. A holistic approach is therefore essential—one that balances institutional assessment practices with students' diverse perspectives and complements traditional quantitative methods in higher education.

Quantitative assessment encompasses various forms such as self-assessment, peer evaluation, written tests, and performance-based tasks, often supported by rubrics and checklists (cf. Jäger, 2025, pp. 13–14). While traditionally used for summative grading, these methods can be adapted to serve formative purposes by emphasizing feedback and continuous improvement. This approach complements the grading focus of quantitative assessment with dialogue, guidance, and sustained student progress. Teachers play a central role in identifying

[1] For an overview of the different types of assessment, see Jäger (2025, pp. 13–14).

areas for development and suggesting strategies for improvement, while peer feedback can further enrich learning by incorporating diverse cultural perspectives and guidance for academic advancement.

The model described above represents a form of qualitative assessment aimed at fostering the holistic development of students through continuous feedback and reflection. For international students in particular, such formative practices provide personalized and culturally responsive guidance that acknowledges both their educational backgrounds and the expectations of the host academic culture. For example, in an analysis of non-English major students in Vietnam, personalized feedback—highlighting aspects such as criticism, praise, and suggestions—was found to significantly influence students' self-perception, motivation, and engagement in writing tasks (Dinh & Pham, 2024). Qualitative feedback helps students recognize specific areas where they need to improve—such as style, clarity, or cultural communication—insights that simple numerical scores cannot provide. This kind of feedback gives them a deeper understanding of their performance and how to make meaningful progress.

In another study comparing feedback paradigms in Japan and the UK, formative feedback was more than a metric—it was experienced as an opportunity for reflective learning in the UK, while in Japan many students saw feedback merely as a pass-mark benchmark (Kozato et al., 2023). Such qualitative dimensions of feedback encourage international students to engage more deeply with the learning material, develop metacognitive skills, and adapt their study practices and habits in ways that quantitative assessment alone cannot support. Moreover, qualitative assessments can foster psychological safety and build trust in feedback interactions, which is especially important for international students who are just adjusting to new academic environments. A focused ethnographic study of international medical students in Scotland found that faculty understanding of students' past educational environments and feedback norms played a crucial role in making students feel safe to ask questions and engage with feedback rather than passively accept it (Thomas & Gupta, 2024). This way, qualitative assessment tends to improve also critical thinking of learners.

When international students feel that feedback is delivered in a context that acknowledges their diverse cultural backgrounds, they are more likely to use that feedback constructively—leading to improved academic performance. Additionally, qualitative assessment provides insights into non-academic but performance-relevant issues, such as adaptation challenges and emotional wellbeing of international learners. Identifying issues that cause stress in students in relation to evaluation through qualitative methods allowed for teachers' formative interventions. Such teachers' mediation should aim at not only explain

specific rules in the course and clarifying expectations but also reducing students' anxiety, which can enhance both performance and achievement of learners.

In sum, qualitative assessment provides international students with richer, more personalized feedback that supports not only academic performance but also cultural adaptation and emotional wellbeing. By addressing gaps left by quantitative measures, it creates opportunities for reflective learning, fosters psychological safety, and clarifies expectations across diverse educational backgrounds. These benefits underscore the broader importance of qualitative approaches in higher education, particularly within international contexts where student experiences are shaped by multiple cultural and linguistic factors. Building on these insights, the next step is to examine how qualitative assessment can also enrich teaching practices and drive institutional improvements, which ensure that universities create more inclusive and effective learning environments.

### 2.2. Improving Teaching Practices and Institutional Enhancement

To enhance students' learning processes, it is essential to conduct qualitative assessments that consider the international contexts in which they study. International students bring valuable perspectives that can inform improvements not only within their host institutions but also in partner universities abroad. Their input on the design and development of international programs should therefore be actively sought and taken seriously. Increasingly, students are recognized as key "stakeholders" in higher education, moving beyond the role of passive evaluators to become active teammates. In general, international students are becoming "strong collaborative partners in driving curricular and policy development of universities" (Mossop & Lymn, 2021, p. 85).

Positioning students as "collaborative partners" in enhancing the quality of universities and other higher education institutions is inherently tied to qualitative assessment. This approach requires not only teachers but also the institution as a whole to engage in meaningful dialogue with students, who are positioned to identify areas of teaching and learning that need improvement. Through years of study, exposure to diverse courses, professors, and methodologies, and, in many cases, interactions with international institutions, students develop an informed perspective that makes them, in effect, experts on the learning experience. As Mark Huxham notes, "[i]f you want to know what it is like to be a learner in your institution and how that experience could be enriched, it makes sense to ask an expert—a student!" (Huxham, 2019).

Student engagement in enhancing study environments and learning experiences goes far beyond the administration of simple "satisfaction surveys." What is required is an open,

sustained dialogue with students, supported by ongoing formative assessment across all areas of the university. This means actively encouraging students to share their perspectives on how their experiences can be improved and collaborating with faculty to translate that feedback into meaningful change. Such collaboration should extend to every dimension of university life—from teaching and learning practices to the broader campus environment and facilities (cf. Mossop & Lymn, 2021, p. 88).

## 3. International Students and Teaching Staff as Partners in Assessment: Three Models

There are multiple ways in which students can contribute to improving study and learning environments in international contexts. This discussion highlights three approaches, grounded in the perspective that students are collaborative partners in assessment.[2] First, international students can work with their instructors to enhance teaching practices and methodologies. In this role, students act as consultants, helping professors design courses and adapt pedagogical approaches to reflect students' diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. This model shifts away from a teacher-centered paradigm and recognizes students' capacity to contribute relevant concepts and perspectives to the courses they attend. Such collaboration depends on sustained dialogue between teachers and students. As Matthews and Cook-Sather observe, "[t]his partnership approach entails co-creation of pedagogical practices through ongoing dialogue between students and staff" (2021, p. 112).

While the first model focuses on assessing teachers' methods of instructing their students, the second model refers to practices related to assessment used in international courses. As mentioned above, students bring with them different forms of assessment and feedback used at their home universities. These can complement different types of assessment implemented by teachers, which includes taking into account the multicultural aspect of programs at a given university. In virtual and international environments, "assessment involves unique challenges, such as ensuring fairness across diverse cultural and technological contexts" (Jäger, 2025, p. 5). Here, it would be necessary to inquire about or learn more about the different cultures of origin to which students belong, a task that falls to teachers, who are expected to maintain a close dialogue with students.

The final form of qualitative assessment involves engaging students directly in institutional research of assessment and development initiatives. Matthews and Cook-Sather describe this model as "Students as Co-Inquirers" (Matthews & Cook-Sather, 2021, p. 115),

[2] For a more detailed discussion of the various ways in which students can serve as collaborative partners not only in assessment but also in enhancement processes within higher education, see Matthews and Cook-Sather (2021).

where learners actively participate in exploring and interpreting data gathered through quantitative assessments, such as course and program surveys. Instead of merely serving as respondents, students help identify areas that receive lower appraisals and contribute their own perspectives on how these aspects might be improved. In this way, institutions not only diagnose shortcomings but also generate meaningful solutions in collaboration with learners. An illustrative example can be found in scholar programs at North Carolina A&T, where undergraduate students are systematically trained to analyze data derived from previous student surveys. With support from the university, students help investigate areas for improvement and present their findings to academic departments and leadership, which position learners as active contributors of assessment and partners to institutional development (Cook-Sather et al., 2014).

As students contribute their perspectives to enhance both local and international learning environments, they simultaneously engage in improving their own educational experience. Mossop and Lymn observe that "students who participate in improving their experience are likely to be more engaged with their own individual learning" (2021, p. 86). The following section presents two examples of qualitative assessment practices and their implementation in international contexts at the Justus Liebig University in Giessen, Germany (hereinafter JLU, for *Justus Liebig Universität–Gießen*).

## 4. Implementation Strategies of Qualitative Assessment at the JLU

The Justus Liebig University (JLU) in Giessen, Germany hosts around 3,600 international students, which reflects its global orientation and diverse academic community (JLU, 2025b). This diversity highlights the need for assessment methods that go beyond standardized metrics. Implementing qualitative assessment is particularly important in this context, as it captures the cultural and experiential dimensions of learning. Besides, this type of assessment at the JLU provides insights that tailor teaching practices, enhance inclusivity, and support international students' academic success. The section below outlines two examples of how JLU has implemented qualitative assessment. The first concerns international workshops conducted within the framework of the project NIDIT of the JLU. The second focuses on the use of dialogic qualitative assessment as a formative evaluation tool for an international master's program at the same universtiy.

### 4.1. Qualitative Assessment in International Workshops – Project NIDIT

The JLU is recognized for its extensive initiatives to internationalize its programs. A significant example is the international workshops organized as part of the NIDIT project—Network for

Impactful Digital International Teaching Skills[3] sponsored by the Foundation for Innovation in Higher Education Teaching (*Stiftung Innovation in der Hochschullehre*).[4] These workshops are offered in both German and English, with English sessions primarily designed for international students who are not proficient in German. The workshops target a diverse audience that includes international teachers, tutors, doctoral candidates, and participants interested in teaching and tutoring from various departments and graduate centers. They are delivered in multiple formats—face-to-face, hybrid, and online—with digital being the most commonly used. Given the diversity of participants and teaching formats, qualitative assessment has played a central role in shaping and improving these academic events while enhancing participants' teaching skills in international scenarios.

Qualitative assessment has played a critical role in enhancing the teaching skills of doctoral students at the Graduate Center for the Study of Culture (GCSC) and the International PhD Program in Literary and Cultural Studies (IPP) of the JLU, where first-cohort students are required to design and conduct teaching workshops aligned with their research projects.

Within the framework of NIDIT, workshops for these doctoral students—primarily international—were complemented by classroom observations and the development of checklists to qualitatively evaluate their teaching performance. The absence of formal grades allowed participants to engage in workshop activities, including the creation of their own teaching sessions, with a focus on improvement rather than evaluation. Formative assessment methods, including peer review and teaching evaluations, provided comprehensive, constructive feedback, fostering high levels of engagement and professional growth in PhD candidates. These initiatives demonstrate the effectiveness of qualitative, formative assessment in supporting teaching development in diverse, international academic contexts.

Another example of the application of qualitative assessment can be seen in the Tutors' Qualification – International Course,[5] taught in English to undergraduate and master's students from the JLU and partner universities. The course aimed to enhance participants' teaching and tutoring competencies and was structured across multiple sessions, each addressing specific topics in pedagogy and didactics. Assessment in this course was primarily qualitative, emphasizing ongoing dialogue between instructors and participants as the core mechanism for feedback and reflection.

[3] To know more on the project NIDIT of the JLU, see JLU and NIDIT (2025).
[4] To find out what this foundatin is, see Stiftung Innovation in der Hochschullehre (2025).
[5] For a description of this international course, see Vargas López (2025).

A key component of this qualitative assessment was the use of portfolios that served both as a reflective learning tool and as a means of evaluation. Rather than functioning as a summative method to test participants at the end of the course like in the form of a final essay, portfolios were employed and assessed continuously. This allows students to document their evolving skills, reflect on the topics covered, and identify areas for improvement. This process also provided instructors with detailed, participant-generated feedback that supported the refinement of course content and delivery. Final feedback on the use of the portfolios was provided at the conclusion of the international course, which functioned as reflective comments to guide tutors' future improvement in their tutoring and teaching skills.

The approach above proved highly effective in fostering participant motivation and enhancing teaching competencies. The dialogical feedback mechanisms encouraged students to provide formal, constructive suggestions for improving the sessions. Furthermore, during the final sessions, participants contributed ideas for workshops in subsequent semesters, thereby diversifying topics, attracting new tutors, and retaining experienced participants. Such practices illustrate the dual impact of qualitative assessment: promoting individual skill development while simultaneously enhancing the overall quality and adaptability of the course.

### 4.2. TAP – Qualitative and Dialogical Approach

The JLU systematically evaluates its international programs to ensure and enhance their quality, which makes program assessment a central component of both teaching and learning. This evaluation involves multiple surveys: one targeting prospective students, another gathering feedback from current students on courses, and a third focusing on graduates (JLU, 2025d). These quantitative assessments are designed to inform improvements in the courses and programs offered by the university.[6]

In addition to its quantitative evaluations, the JLU has implemented qualitative and formative assessments that actively engage students in evaluating programs with a strong international focus. These assessments encompass both long-term programs, such as master's degrees, and shorter digital and international COIL-type courses.[7] An illustrative example is the qualitative dialogical approach (*dialogische Evaluation*), which follows the framework of the "Teaching Analysis Poll" (TAP) method. This approach aims to collect students' perceptions of courses or educational programs in higher education through group-based, participatory, and reflective processes (Hawelka, 2017). The method emphasizes dialogue and

[6] To view selected results from these surveys over different years, see JLU (2025a).
[7] COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning) is a virtual teaching approach where lecturers from two countries co-create and deliver a course in online scenarios. Cf. Jäger (2025, p. 5).

collaboration that allows students to contribute insights for improvement. Together this dialogical approach informs program development and upgrade.

The following section illustrates the application of this approach to the first cohort of the international master's program in Justice and Inequality – Comparative Cultural Studies (*Justicia y desigualdades: Estudios comparativos culturales*)[8] during the summer semester of 2025.

The qualitative assessment process for the aforementioned master's program was structured in two complementary phases—written and oral—each lasting 30 minutes, with the aim of obtaining a comprehensive and participatory understanding of the academic experiences of international students, most of whom come from Latin American countries. The process began with an introduction by the evaluator and the facilitator as well as the protocol manager. Then, students were informed about the purpose of the formative assessment, its significance for the continuous improvement of the master's program, and the importance of their active participation in this qualitative evaluation. The two phases of the process and the procedures for each were also explained. In the first phase, students completed a written questionnaire addressing three main areas: course content and topics, teaching methodology, and learning environment. Each area included two open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed reflections as follows:

1. **Course Content and Topics**

   a) How do you consider the topics addressed in the course have contributed to your understanding of justice and inequality from a comparative and cultural perspective?

   b) Which aspects do you think could be further developed or included in future editions of the international course?

2. **Teaching Methodology**

   a) In what ways did the methodology used in the program (readings, discussions, case studies, oral presentations, assessments, group activities, etc.) support your learning and critical analysis?

   b) What changes or improvements would you suggest in the way the course is delivered?

3. **Learning Environment**

   a) How would you describe the working environment in the course in terms of participation, inclusion, respect, and collaboration among students and instructors?

[8] Further information on this international master's program can be found in JLU (2025c).

b) Which factors positively or negatively influenced your learning experience?

The second phase consisted of a group dialogue session aimed at deepening and complementing the responses provided in writing. Following the collection of written responses, an open discussion was initiated between students and the evaluator to explore further the perceptions and comments previously expressed. During this session, students were encouraged to pose new questions, expand on their observations, and engage in constructive debate on the three central themes. The evaluator moderated the discussion to ensure that all voices were heard and that a respectful and collaborative atmosphere was maintained.

By combining individual, reflective analysis with collective discussion, the two-phase process ensured that the qualitative assessment captured both personal insights and group dynamics. This helps provide a balanced and qualitative assessment of the international program. The individual reflection allowed participants to consider their experiences in depth while identifying personal perspectives and personal takeaways. Meanwhile, the collective discussion facilitated the exchange of communal perspectives, where students of the master's shared themes and contrasted viewpoints that enriched the overall understanding of the international program's impact. These complementary approaches not only strengthened the reliability and depth of the findings but also fostered a sense of engagement among participants, which leads to more actionable and meaningful conclusions.

## 5. Conclusion

Qualitative assessment is essential for fostering inclusive and effective learning environments in international higher education. Unlike quantitative methods, which often fail to capture the cultural and emotional dimensions of student experiences, qualitative approaches provide personalized feedback, promote reflective learning, and support students' adaptation to new academic and cultural contexts. These methods enhance not only academic performance but also psychological safety and emotional wellbeing, particularly for international students who need to adapt and integrate in unfamiliar educational systems. By encouraging dialogue and continuous feedback, qualitative assessment empowers students to take ownership of their learning and fosters deeper engagement with course content.

Furthermore, emphasis on the broader institutional benefits of qualitative assessment is displayed. This paper positions students as active partners in shaping curricula, teaching methodologies, and assessment frameworks. Through collaborative models—such as co-inquiry and dialogical evaluation—students contribute valuable insights that inform program

development and institutional policy. The two case studies from JLU demonstrate how qualitative assessment can be effectively implemented to improve teaching competencies, course design, and overall program quality. Finally, the report advocates for a holistic, student-centered assessment framework that integrates qualitative methods as a constant and conversational practice to enrich the educational experience across diverse international contexts.

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