

In Pursuit of Equity in Assessment among Indigent and Affluent Students at ODeL Institutions

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Abstract

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic which ravaged the world, has triggered new strategies of teaching and learning. Globally, institutions of higher learning have resorted to online platforms as a turnaround strategy for teaching students. The ‘new normal’ is perceived as a transformed curriculum concept with online pedagogy at the core of this transformation. As for Open Distance and e-Learning institutions, equity in assessment and digital learning have emerged as pivotal for all students. A post-apartheid South Africa’s world of teaching and learning; is destined to be one where every student, has equal opportunities and rights to be taught and to learn. However, it is a deplorable situation that the playing field is still not level. Online platforms gratify urban and privileged students, thus widening the gap between the indigent and the affluent. A qualitative approach was employed and participants who took part in the interviews were purposefully sampled. The pedagogy for online teaching and learning occurs in a society labelled as one of the most unequal in the world. The most vulnerable students are among those who have inferior digital skills. Barriers to equity in examinations at ODeL institutions were identified as intermittent internet connectivity and religious holidays.

Keywords: Equity, Online Assessment, ODeL, Curriculum, Intermittent connectivity, Loadshedding, Inclusion

Introduction

It would be a blunder for one to comment about equity in assessment at ODeL institutions without also referring to education. Education was historically considered a great equaliser in African society, capable of uplifting underprivileged students and improving their opportunities for success as responsible adults. Education in an ODeL system, too, is supposed to be ‘the great equalizer’ as it provides the same education to everyone. It is supposed to promote equal educational opportunities for all students irrespective of their socioeconomic background. However, the system has never been a great equaliser, and research indicates that it is even much less of an equaliser today than it ever was (Riley & Coleman 2012).

Equality focuses on ensuring that students are presented with the same educational opportunities throughout their academic journey. However, this approach does not consider that even with those opportunities, various students will have dissimilar needs and interests to succeed (Catapano 2016; Sayed 2004). This is where equity comes in. Equity focuses on taking those opportunities presented to students and infusing them with support and resources to turn the education system into a level playing field. This means that underprivileged students will get the maximum support they need to become equal to students who are highly privileged (Atchison, Diffey, Rafa & Sarubbi 2017).

It takes equality a step further by uplifting students who may not have the same opportunities as others more fortunate and ensuring that they are not only presented with the same options, but that the differences are made good for these students (Bensimon 2006). This study focuses on pursuing equity in assessment at ODeL institutions and will therefore look at some world-wide ODeL institutions. Online assessment in this study will refer to examinations at ODeL institutions and not tests or assignments.

The following questions guided the study.

- What kind of assessment challenges are experienced by ODeL students from indigent families?
- How can such assessment challenges be addressed?

Literature Review

Equity in the field of education should contribute to equal opportunities in

access to studies regardless of gender, social origin, or ethnicity. Equity must promote access to quality education and academic results, so that all students can access higher education and thus breach the inequality gap. The interest in creating a more equitable educational system is evident (Hanson 2019).

Equity in education is a complex issue and critical to helping all students thrive in a teaching and learning environment. While there is no ready-made solution, every lecturer can strive to identify students at risk and increase equity each day in their assessment. Lecturers who are focused on promoting equity are critical to the success of each student.

According to Martin (2007), technology is a crucial aspect of a student's educational programme, but many students do not have access to reliable internet or even a computer that can support their studies at home. Knowledge is no longer restricted to the walls of education institutes. There was a time when students had to wait for the college/school time to get their doubts cleared on any particular topic. They can now get them cleared with the help of technology. They can do it anywhere and anytime. With distance education, they can attend the classrooms virtually.

By providing access to reliable technology through the ODeL institution, administrators can create an avenue of support for their students. Although it is a mammoth task, ODeL administrators can assist in creating equity around technology by ensuring that all students are able to access technology (McNair 2019). Monitoring student performance is an important part of the process, as it shows where a lecturer's equitable approach is effective and where there is room for improvement.

Theoretical Framework

Bourdieu's Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) underpins the study. The framework is viewed as a theoretical lens to interrogate equity in assessment at an ODeL institution. Bourdieu's SRT focuses research on the relation between education, family, and social class. It is argued that education plays a key role in aiding and abetting the reproduction of social inequality and social exclusion. Cultural capital assumes vital importance in the above process of social reproduction because inequalities in cultural capital reflect inequalities in social class (Sayed 2004).

Bourdieu argues the reproduction of these inequalities to be facilitated in universities; where the Ministry of Education and lecturers'

pedagogic actions promote the cultural capital, of the dominant class by rewarding students who possess such capital and by penalising others who do not. Thus, the ODeL institution in this study, becomes a central agent of social exclusion and reproduction (Catapano 2016).

Equitable assessment proceeds from the recognition that the cultures of ODeL institutions have frequently made it arduous for students from marginalised backgrounds, to engage fully with higher learning. For the sake of assisting every student to succeed, it is pivotal that assessment processes and practices are proper and equitable for all students. It is maintained that persistent inequalities in educational attainment; may be unrelated to the cultural capital-based mechanism as this is defined and described by Bourdieu. Cultural capital can be retained both as a heuristic and analytically potent concept; but should be operationally unbound from Bourdieu's original but restrictive class-analytic framework.

A qualitative method was employed, and participants were sampled purposefully for the interviews. 16 students, comprised of four from each of the four Faculties namely Education, Law, Health Sciences and Economic and Business Management took part in the study. The results below evolved from the collected data.

Results

✓ *Online Assessment*

An online assessment is perceived to be a virtual examination conducted remotely on a computer with high-speed internet. Although it is a virtual examination, it is time-bound and in most cases supervised through a webcam and proctor, making it cheating-free, firm and easily scalable (Henning & Lundquist 2018). Participants maintained that virtual examinations enable examiners to conduct assessment using the internet for remote candidates. They further argued that;

In an online examination, candidates are expected to respond to the questions on their systems. As soon as the scheduled assessment time is over, the test window shuts down automatically.

While the technology side of online examinations should be viewed as a merit, it can also pose major challenges. The transition from traditional paper

and pen to online may be cumbersome for some students, more especially students from deep rural areas and those who are computer illiterate. The transition may also initially take time, as examiners need to get used to the system and find strategies to use it effectively and efficiently. Certain examiners and students are simply resistant to change. A demerit of an online examination system surfaces in deep rural and remote areas where access to electricity, a stable internet connection; and other basic system requirements are overtaxing to meet. Such barriers impede online assessment.

✓ ***Intermittent Internet Connectivity***

Jankowski, Baker, Brown-Tess and Montenegro (2016) argue that an intermittent internet connection can occur due to a multiplicity of reasons ranging from poor signal to equipment failure. Finding a system that is accessible to every student, even at the remotest of corners, on a large scale, with minimal bandwidth and maximum technical prowess is a niggling challenge

Participants also mentioned that sometimes when they are in the middle of writing an online examination, they experience the internet connection cut out. Limited access from homes in rural areas can contribute to students falling behind academically. The educational setbacks can have significant impacts on academic success, and career opportunities. Students without internet access and those who depend on a cell phone for their only access are half a grade point below those with fast access. This gap has ripple effects that may last an entire life.

The absence of Wi-Fi or poor Wi-Fi retards the student's performance because of the time spent trying to plug and unplug the power cord router. When the modem is not able to get access to a full range of signals from internet service providers, it consequently hampers the proper distribution of internet packets. Fiber optic cable, coaxial cable, or ethernet cable may be damaged which ultimately disturbs the proper flow of signals (McNair 2019).

Once there is no signal to the router, it automatically affects the student psychologically. The time allocated for the examination does not allow for rebooting or bypassing the router. Besides, when the internet is slow, the learning management system cannot connect to the server to save the answer and it affects the student. Imagine sitting for an examination with the clock ticking while at the same time the internet is inconveniencing you.

This is a huge source of frustration and anxiety for students.

South Africans, just like anyone world-wide rely heavily on strong internet connections. Most students from impoverished families cannot afford the high bandwidth that online assessment requires, and thus fail to be on par with their fellow virtual peers. Their defective monitors and screens make it extremely arduous to follow what is required by the examination question paper and their learning experience becomes burdensome.

Computers and smartphones enable students to reposition themselves in a world which was devastated by Covid-19. The pandemic has nudged rural and urban students to seize e-learning opportunities instantly. It is an appalling situation that the pandemic is still having a negative impact on students from deep rural areas more than urban students. This approach to learning creates added barriers for specific learners, including financial constraints and lack of access to online platforms.

Thus, in the context of equity in assessment and with reference to students from remote rural areas, there is a dire need for conditions that would emancipate students and promote positive learning conditions (Perumal 2009). Rural students should be empowered to benefit from online learning, which has been regarded as a tool to address trajectories, during times of calamity, not only for survival but also teaching and learning for students from impoverished societies. Students from well-off families are not seriously affected by intermittent internet connectivity because their parents; have contingency plans in place, that are suitable for emergencies during online examinations.

Built on the constructs of culturally relevant pedagogy; culturally responsive assessment argues for an intentional focus on conducting online assessment, in conditions that support the needs and interests of the increasingly diverse student populations, whilst attending to issues of equity. Assessment approaches that are culturally appropriate can more effectively promote academic achievement for all students from diverse backgrounds. This is illustrated in Table 1 which presents an idea of the primary features of online assessment practices being conducted at ODeL universities world-wide.

Table 1: Online Assessment Approaches at Selected ODeL Institutions

ODEL	COUNTRY	ASSESSMENT TYPE	ASSESSMENT PRACTICES
<p>University of South Africa (Unisa) A prominent University in Africa and beyond</p>	<p>South Africa ✓ Pretoria</p>	<p>Two-tier system</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formative assessment comprises online assignments, field experience, teaching practice supervision, seminars, and group discussions ▪ Weighting 20%/30 assignments and 80%/70 examinations ▪ Summative assessment comprises term-end examination, e-portfolios, projects, and M & D dissertation/thesis evaluation
<p>The Open University (OU) A leading university in Europe</p>	<p>United Kingdom ✓ Milton Keynes</p>	<p>Two-tier system</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formative and summative evaluation are conducted ▪ Higher weighting to summative assessment and lower weighting to formative assessment ▪ Assignment in each course, term-end examination, projects,

			dissertation/ thesis, seminar, group discussion, observation records, practical assignments, fieldwork and contact sessions
Open University of Brazil (UAB) A leading university in South America	Brazil ✓ Porto Alegre	Two-tier system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formative and summative evaluation are conducted. ▪ More weighing to summative assessment and lesser weighing to formative assessment. ▪ Assignment in each course, term-end examination, projects, dissertation/thesis, seminar, group discussion, observation records, practical assignments; fieldwork and contact sessions.
The Open University of China (OUC) An eminent university in East Asia	China ✓ Beijing	Two-tier system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formative and summative evaluation are conducted to ensure the learning process and quality of learning ▪ The OUC operates a credit bank with the functions of credit accreditation, transfer, deposit, and withdrawal. The bank

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			helps learners establish lifelong learning portfolios and accredit or receive certificates for various learning achievements between degree and non-degree education
Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) A famous university in South Asia	India ✓ New Delhi	Two-tier system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Formative assessment comprises assignments, and workshop-related activities such as practicals, micro teaching, community participation, school-based activities, field experience, hands-on activities, group discussion and seminars. ▪ Weighting for assignments and term-end examination constitute 30% and 70% of total assessment respectively ▪ Summative assessment comprises term-end examination, project, and dissertation/thesis evaluation

✓ ***Load Shedding***

Loadshedding is portrayed as an action to reduce an unbearable load on something, especially the interruption of electricity supply to avoid an excessive heavy load on the generating plant. In South Africa, parts of the electric grid is switched off in a planned way due to insufficient capacity or to avoid a country-wide blackout. This all happens in various stages. Stage 1 is equivalent to one hour of no power supply to businesses and residential areas alike. Stage 2 is equivalent to two hours of no electricity. Stage 4 is the worst as it is equivalent to two or four hours twice a day or night without any power (Tkatchov 2019). The stages can stretch up to stage 8 depending on the need.

Loadshedding appears to be inconveniencing ODeL students the most, sometimes during critical moments in their online examinations. It was reported that some students forfeited their online examinations, due to Eskom power outages. Most students from underprivileged families, particularly those who are computer illiterate miss their examinations, or do not finish their examination at the stipulated time. Sometimes they forget to save while writing. As soon as loadshedding starts, and the power goes out, the examinations answers may be wiped out. As a result, some of them end up performing poorly or worst-case scenario fail hopelessly.

Students from more privileged families are not affected because their parents have backup plans in case of load shedding. Poor families simply cannot keep up with the rich, who spend hand over fist to ensure that their dependents end at the forefront of the rat race. It is obvious that students from affluent families tend to do better at ODeL institutions, yet the income divide has received far less attention from policymakers and government officials than gaps in student accomplishment by race.

Power outages disturb numerous university students' online examinations. The frequent blackouts lead students to lag in their studies. UNISA, just like most universities world-wide, introduced online examination in response to the outbreak of the unprecedented pandemic in 2020, making a consistent and reliable power supply essential for the performance of their students.

Students who missed the first opportunity paper or failed to finish the paper on time had to rewrite supplementary or second opportunity exami-

nations at a later stage. This has serious financial implications. Moreover, it has an impact on time to prepare for the paper and it is an opportunity lost to those who are job seekers because they cannot be hired without the relevant qualification. This is a painful experience because it affects all students either directly or indirectly. Whilst some students, especially those from rich families are celebrating after receiving positive results of passing with flying colours, some from impoverished background are mourning.

The disparities between advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds have increased tremendously, exacerbating the difference between universities and widening the opportunity gap.

✓ ***Lack of Adequate Resources***

A vexatious factor for underprivileged students is the lack of adequate resources which could mar taking online examinations. The absence of online examination software that would ease the worry and cause a seamless user experience is a solicitude.

When it comes to accessing tablets and the internet, many students, especially those from underprivileged backgrounds, are dependent on their universities. Many parents and guardians became unemployed during the pandemic. 2021 experienced an increase in students dropping out of ODeL institutions; because their parents could not afford the exorbitant fees, and cost of equipment that are basic requirements for an online assessment setup. Students from low socioeconomic groups are encountering major online learning challenges. Being able to afford a stable internet connection or even the presence of a decent internet service provider is one of the primary concerns. With the onset of online education, there was a surge in purchasing new laptops, tablets, PCs, and various other related gadgets. While the rich experience no obstacles, investing in additional electronic items to facilitate their children's education, the lower-income groups must face the adversity (Riley & Coleman 2012).

The foregone argument also means that students' achievements in examinations are adversely affected. The rationale behind the growing gap in achievement could be that opulent parents invest more time and inject more money than ever before in their children's education. On the other hand, lower-income families, which are now more likely than ever to be headed by a single parent, are steadily becoming more stretched for time and

financial resources. This is exceptionally real as more parents and guardians try to position their dependents for universities, which has become ever more essential for success in today's fragile economy.

Conducting assessments online has become easier to students as they no longer sit for examinations using pen and paper. Examinations are conducted on a computer which saves not only time but also paperwork. Students from well-off families boast having the latest gadgets such as expensive laptops, desktops, and mobile phones. However, poverty-stricken students find it extremely difficult to acquire adequate resources. Those who are fortunate enough, get outdated electronic tablets which are unreliable, more especially when they sit for an online examination.

Outdated electronic devices are viewed as impediments to a seamless education and assessment exercise. Old, outdated device drivers on a laptop can severely degrade performance and overall usability. An outdated laptop that experiences quirky connections, slow speeds, or any other anomalies that cannot be explained easily, would require service (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development & 2008McNeil & Blad 2014). When being serviced, the laptop's wireless device drivers can be updated.

Old desktops, laptops and smartphones are no longer reliable during online examinations. Such devices are very slow and not user friendly. The student spends most of their time trying to download the examination question paper. Sometimes when students are busy writing, the device freezes, and it disadvantages the student. Time which is set aside for the online examination is wasted trying to fix the computer.

Students from the deep rural areas are denied the latest devices and levels of accessibility to online content which is the norm for urban students. Many students from the remote rural villages possess old gadgets. They depend entirely on the smartphones of their family members for teaching and learning activities. When it is time for online assessment, rural students suffer because they do not have reliable gadgets which will enable them to take their examinations. Deprived students who find themselves in such an unenviable situation, are likely to fail, not because of a lack of knowledge, but due to their unpleasant standard of the devices. Socioeconomically advantaged students use the latest devices for their online examinations. It is noted that many students from the rural areas cannot compete with their urban counterparts.

Some ODeL institutions lack the resources to ensure their students are ready to cope with their studies. Although it can be expensive, assisting all students with Wi-Fi data for their study is vital. Changes within the government and education system need to be made to close this gap in universities. It is essential to increase academic achievement. All students should be held to the same high expectations, and all be given the same resources and tools to assist them to navigate through their studies.

It is public knowledge that poverty is a notable stumbling block besetting the African continent and in the context of this study, South Africa. Underprivileged students in South Africa are not only tortured, by lack of dependable gadgets at home, but their ODeL institutions must also scrape by on the minimum. The middle class appears to be vanishing and the gap is widening between the upper class and the lower-class sectors of society. Bourdieu in his Social Reproduction Theory argues that the socioeconomic status of students and their families has a profound effect on the students' education, even in a country that prides itself on equal opportunity and fair treatment for all.

✓ *Students with Special Educational Needs*

Students with special educational needs (SSEN) refers to students with learning, physical, and developmental disabilities; behavioural, emotional, and communication disorders; and learning deficiencies (Schmidt 2015). These students need significantly more attention than other students. Although some ODeL institutions have specialists who can work with SSEN, the problem regarding how and who must assist SSEN when they write virtual examinations remain. Some ODeL administrators are not able to train parents to assist SSEN when they sit for their virtual examinations. Thus, education becomes a futile exercise for many SSEN as they are being excluded.

Online assessment for students with special educational needs can be a daunting task. Some students, such as those with autism, struggle with testing situations and cannot remain at a task long enough to complete such assessments. Physical and mental disabilities also create a huge barrier between healthy and unhealthy students at ODeL institutions.

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a further typical disabling disease, which affects many students in ODeL institutions. Such SSEN have problems with concentration span, which makes them easily

distracted. This disease can be treated only with preparation combined with behavioural therapies (Schmidt 2015). Physical deviation is a further challenge which is a barrier to online assessment. Some students may have challenges with movements while others struggle with gripping. However, they are all related to physical disabilities to walk, write, hold anything, or even simply sit. One wonders how these students cope with online assessment.



Figure 1: Student-centred Learning

A lecturer’s role in online examination is not that of a taskmaster but that of a guide. A student is treated as a plant, a lecturer as a gardener and an ODeL

institution as a garden. Therefore, a learner grows and develops in a natural atmosphere (McNair 2019). The principles of student-centred learning where diversity is one of them should be applied (See figure 1 above).

When students write online examinations remotely, ODeL institutions rely on parents to assist students to a certain extent. In most cases, individualised support is provided by their institutions, but it is difficult when students require such service at home. There are SSEN who cannot use desktops, laptops, iPads sometimes for a period which can exceed one hour, yet most examination question papers have a duration of either two or three hours, which suggests that SSEN are excluded. Question papers such as the former, are meant for the chosen few because as they do not cater for everyone.

With the recent online examinations at an ODeL institution, SSEN (visually impaired) complained about the small font used when typing the papers they wrote. Writing from home, without any form of assistance from qualified instructors was viewed as a major obstacle. Issues with sensory stimulation, trouble interacting with peers, and poor time management and organisational skills are all challenges that SSEN must negotiate. These challenges, in addition to their learning problems, make it extremely arduous for this population of students to break through in ODeL examinations.

Another typical problem is an irrelevant curriculum. Most ODeL institutions design a curriculum for common students. Such types of curricula exclude the needs, interests, and challenges of SSEN. It is of paramount importance to create special plans that address all categories of students to ensure equal possibilities to learn. SSEN who suffer from myopia cannot type fast and manage their efficiency online for the entire duration of examinations. Failure to address learning and attention issues result in students being incarcerated, which further disrupts their education and contributes to high dropout and recidivism rates.

It is unfortunate that when the scripts are marked, the issue of special educational needs is no longer a consideration. Most of them end up sitting for a second opportunity or supplementary examination. This is grossly unfair because SSEN have significantly greater difficulty; in negotiating learning, than other students and special educational provision needs, to cater for them during assessment as well. Students without any form of special educational need always perform better than SSEN when writing online examinations.

Apparently, one reason for the achievement gap is that students without special educational needs tend to believe they belong to a university whilst SSEN tend to believe they do not belong (Darling-Hammond & Post 2000). A concerted effort by lecturers and other staff; to show that everyone belongs, that everyone is respected, cared for, and welcome will increase participation, and hence the achievement of deprived students, thereby reducing the gap.

✓ ***Religious Vacations***

Religious beliefs are steadily becoming more diverse world-wide. There are several dominant religions, such as Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism, Shinto, Islam, Sikhism, Confucianism, Hinduism and Bahai. In South Africa, Christianity is the primary belief system, with Protestantism being the vastest denomination. Non-Christian organisations in the country comprise Islam, Hinduism, Judaism, and Buddhism. Even though South Africa prides itself on being a multi-dominion country, a small percentage of the population does not associate themselves with any religion, the second largest group after the Protestant Christians (Henning & Lundquist 2018).

Participants reported that at their ODeL institution, Muslim students took a swipe at the administration; whose examination timetable favoured a group of other religions at their expense (Martin 2007). The Muslim students registered their concern about unfair treatment experienced when they sat for their Economics paper. Two slots were set aside for the examination. The first slot was scheduled two weeks prior to the second slot which was termed a special examination. A difference of about two weeks gave Sikh students enough time to prepare thoroughly for their examination.

To make matters worse, Sikh students who sat for the special examination wrote the same paper. According to them, the paper was easy because they had a chance to communicate with the cohort that sat for the first paper. In the process, there was a leakage of the examination paper. Most of them were in possession of the paper that was copied and sent to them via email and WhatsApp. They revised the question paper and only to be rewarded by getting the same examination paper. All students were in jubilation after writing their online examination. As for Muslim students, they struggled to juggle finals with their faith at the ODeL institution.

They had no choice but to fast nearly 18 hours a day during final

week because it concurred with Ramadan, Islam's holy month. Fasting during the festivity is regarded as one of the Five Pillars of Islam, accompanying the daily prayer, declaration of faith, charity and performing the Hajj pilgrimage in Mecca, Saudi Arabia (Schmidt 2015).

Students from the Shinto belief were frustrated with the timetable which did not give them enough chance to prepare for the examination. They wrote two days in succession whilst those from the Christian Orthodox religion were exempted from writing a paper on Labour Relations. Christian Orthodox students missed the first paper because they had to observe their Feast of the Resurrection of Jesus, called the 'Pascha' (Easter). It is the greatest of all holy days and as a result it is termed the 'Feast of Feasts'. As a result, they wrote the same paper two weeks after the Shinto students. This is a worrying factor because students were treated unfairly when it came to writing their online examinations. Christian Orthodox students had enough time to prepare thoroughly for their examinations.

Another concern was registered by students from the Buddhism faith who wrote the mathematics paper earlier whilst those from the Judaism belief wrote the same paper three weeks after them. Here, too, the paper was the same and it had already leaked. Jews were exempted from writing the paper on a Saturday because they observed the 'Shabbat' or 'Sabbath' also called 'Shabbos'. According to biblical tradition, it commemorates the original seventh day on which God rested after completing the creation.

Confucianists, too, were concerned when they wrote a Peace Studies paper on a different date to Buddhists who celebrated Wesak, the full moon in May. It is celebrated to commemorate the death and birth of Buddha and to remember how the Buddha became enlightened. It is also an opportunity for Buddhists to try to gain their own enlightenment. It looks as if there is a tendency of repeating the same question paper with various ODeL institutions. Although certain affected students protested, it did not pay dividends, because most of them failed the paper and had to write the second opportunity examination. As for students who were favoured by the timetable, they passed with distinctions.

The issue of online assessment on religious days of observance needs decisive administrative decisions. Therefore, it seems imperative that ODeL management be aware of the law and be sensitive to an array of religious practices. Institutions of higher learning are not supposed to support one religious' belief, neither should an ODeL institution require others to accept

religious or anti-religious beliefs.

Closely related to research regarding ODeL climate is research assessing the value of ‘inquiry-based teaching’. This is a pedagogy of teaching that is less top-down than what is usually the case in certain institutions of higher learning. The intention is to bring students’ own frustrations and issues to the forefront, and to take all students’ questions and ideas seriously.

When these issues are addressed well, it engages all students, regardless of their religious beliefs, including those students who would otherwise be the most disengaged. Some studies have indicated that this pedagogy of teaching assists previous under-achievers, to improve even more than it helps previously high achievers, and thereby narrowing the achievement gap (Riley & Coleman 2012).

Recommendations

An approach to university reform quite opposite to the pressure, drill, and standardisation approach is that of improving the ‘ODeL climate’. Climate is precisely about the attitudes that permeate a university’s culture. A positive climate is one where lecturers are trustworthy, caring, appreciative and reverent toward students as unique individuals and where students feel supported, empowered, and good about their institution.

There are interrelated reminders which could be of assistance to ODeL management when they work towards assessment for equity:

- All assessment practices should be aligned to the national higher education legislative and policy environment.
- Lecturers should use assessments to adjust their practices (*who is taught, what is taught, when is it taught, and how will it be taught*) to respond to and meet the needs and interests of all students.
- Assessment tools should be just as diverse as the students who take them.
- Students should not feel intimidated by online assessments but see them as opportunities to get a snapshot – a picture of where they are and what they need to do to improve if opportunity arises.

In case of a non-venue-based examination, students who are affected by interconnectivity and load shedding should be given a fair chance of writing

a second opportunity examination. ODeL institutions should be committed to ensuring fair treatment for all its students. This should include amongst others, students with special educational needs resulting from disabilities including aspects such as venues, time for completion of examination and mode of the examination (taped, oral, braille and other relevant aspects). All religious faiths should be accommodated and where possible their religious holidays should not clash with the online examination timetable. When ODeL administrators draw up a timetable, they should remember to account for religious observances. Where there are conflicts, affected students should alert the relevant sections.

Conclusion

It is prudent to indicate that the unprecedented pandemic; catalysed ODeL institutions' pivot, towards online devices and unaccustomed *modus operandi*. The education sector defied overwhelming odds; signaling remarkable alacrity in moving assessments to an online ecosystem. In conclusion, Bourdieu's theoretical framework shows how equity should be incorporated into the education system under the parameters of equal opportunities and equal access to higher education, irrespective of gender or socio-cultural background.

In this sense, acting under the principles of equity involves developing education policies that favour compensatory education, inclusive education, and equitable education. At the macro-political level of the ODeL university, this means that stakeholders must create legislation, regulations, and actions that make it possible for universities to develop these equity policies. This requires human, material, and technical resources, as well as the sharing of the ideology that these principles imply.

Only with a joint action of the different persons responsible for the education system can educational equity be achieved, favouring the integral development of students and their incorporation into society in their lifelong learning process. Equity remains an outstanding issue in education for many countries world-wide. It is true that recent results show a slight, but growing, improvement in equity. It is therefore necessary to identify the elements that favour and harm equity, and then to offer appropriate policies. The intention is to eliminate gender disparity in ODeL institutions and ensure access to a level playing field for vulnerable people.

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