

Analysis of Teaching Portfolio Efficacy in Higher Education through the Lenses of Validity Theory

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This paper investigates the credibility and effectiveness of teaching portfolios as instruments for evaluating teaching excellence in South African higher education. Using empirical data from the 2024/5 National University Teaching Awards (NUTA), which involved 100 submissions assessed by 10 adjudicators, the study applies Validity Theory to explore the systemic challenges that undermine portfolio reliability. Drawing on an advisory note to unsuccessful applicants, the analysis identifies fourteen recurring factors contributing to portfolio failure, including misalignment with assessment criteria, weak integration of theory and practice, insufficient evidence, and lack of critical reflection. Framed through the dimensions of construct, content, and consequential validity, the paper argues that teaching portfolios operate as high-stakes assessment tools that demand robust validation frameworks. Successful submissions demonstrate authentic philosophical grounding, student-centred pedagogy, data-informed decision-making, and evidence of transformative practice. Situated within the South African context, marked by diversity, decolonisation imperatives, and epistemological access, the study contributes to scholarship on teaching excellence by proposing that portfolio credibility hinges on demonstrable validity across multiple dimensions. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for applicants and adjudicators to address persistent challenges in portfolio development and evaluation.

Keywords: teaching portfolios, teaching excellence, validity theory, higher education assessment, NUTA, reflective practice, scholarship of teaching and learning

Introduction

The evaluation of teaching excellence in higher education remains contested terrain, characterised by ongoing debates about what constitutes ‘good teaching’ and how it should be assessed (Kreber 2002; Trigwell, Benjamin & Prosser 2000). Teaching portfolios have emerged as prominent instruments for documenting and evaluating teaching effectiveness, functioning simultaneously as tools for professional development, promotion criteria, and award adjudication (Seldin & Miller 2009; Simonson, Earl & Frary 2022). However, as Zubizarreta (2009:15) observes, ‘the teaching portfolio is only as good as the reflection, evidence, and narrative it contains’, a statement that raises fundamental questions about the validity and credibility of portfolios as evaluative instruments.

Before we proceed with the analysis, I should clarify my philosophical positionality. Employing Validity Theory as the analytical lens for this paper should not be misconstrued as advocating for structuralist, quantitative, or reductionist approaches to teaching portfolio evaluation. Contemporary validity theory, particularly Messick’s (1989) unified framework and Kane’s (2006; 2013) argument-based approach, transcends positivist paradigms by accommodating multiple forms of evidence: quantitative and qualitative, objective and interpretive, within a coherent validation framework.

This paper argues for *rigour* and *equity* in portfolio evaluation rather than standardisation or quantification. Rigour, in this context, means requiring authentic philosophical grounding, coherent theory – practice alignment, comprehensive evidence across relevant domains, and genuine critical reflection rather than superficial description. Equity means ensuring that evaluation frameworks recognise contextually appropriate excellence across differentiated higher education systems, accommodate diverse pedagogical traditions beyond Euro-centric norms, and validate teaching practices that advance decolonisation, epistemological access, and social justice imperatives. Validity theory provides the conceptual apparatus for systematically examining whether portfolio-based inferences about teaching excellence are defensible, fair, and consequentially appropriate, without prescribing the nature of evidence or privileging particular methodological orientations. The framework thus enables critical interrogation of evaluative instruments and processes whilst remaining open to the rich, context-sensitive, narrative, and reflective evidence that makes teaching portfolios valuable as scholarly artefacts and professional development tools.

The paper examines teaching portfolio efficacy using the empirical data generated from the 2024/5 National University Teaching Awards (NUTA) in South Africa. Based on evaluation data generated by 10 adjudicators assessing 100 submissions, the paper investigates factors rendering portfolios successful or unsuccessful. As coordinator of NUTA, I did not actively participate in the adjudication. Instead, I served as an independent observer and mediated conflicts of opinion when necessary. From this vantage point, it became apparent that the portfolio's promise of a rich, context-sensitive assessment is frequently overshadowed by concerns regarding its subjectivity, reliability, and validity (Meeus, Van Petegem & Engels 2009).

The South African higher education context provides particularly fertile ground for this investigation, given ongoing transformation imperatives including decolonisation, epistemological access, linguistic diversity, and the legacy of apartheid-era inequalities (Heleta & Chasi 2024; Jansen 2019; Govender & Naidoo 2023). Although the notion of teaching excellence remains contentious for higher education institutions globally, the teaching portfolio continues to be adopted as the principal instrument for documenting and assessing pedagogical practice, particularly in high-stakes contexts such as national teaching awards and promotion processes (Baume & Yorke 2002).

The findings from this NUTA analysis point to systemic issues, including the misalignment of theoretical frameworks, superficial reflection, and an over-reliance on descriptive rather than analytical evidence. The aim of this paper is to move beyond a critique of individual reflective capacity and offer a systemic explanation for these failures. The central argument advanced here is that teaching portfolios must be understood not merely as compilations of evidence but as complex assessment instruments requiring rigorous validation frameworks.

Drawing on Validity Theory, particularly Messick's (1989) unified concept of construct validity and Kane's (2006) argument-based approach, this paper analyses how portfolio credibility depends on demonstrable validity across multiple dimensions. Recent scholarship emphasises the inherent validity of portfolio-based assessment in enabling authentic evaluation of real-world professional capabilities (Campbell & Tran 2021; Ngui, Pang & Hiew 2022), while also acknowledging persistent validity concerns regarding subjectivity, standardisation, and comparability (Zaabalawi & Zaabalawi 2024).

Theoretical Lenses: Conceptualising Validity in Educational Assessment

Validity Theory provides a robust framework for examining teaching portfolios as assessment instruments. Traditionally understood through multiple types: content validity, criterion validity, construct validity, contemporary validity theory advocates for a unified conception (Messick 1989). As Kane (2013:1) argues, ‘validation involves developing a clear statement of the proposed interpretations and uses of test scores and evaluating the plausibility of these interpretations and uses’. This definition proves particularly salient for teaching portfolios, which make high-stakes claims about teaching excellence based on selective evidence presentation. Recent systematic reviews (Quansah *et al.* 2024), confirm the centrality of validity concerns in evaluating teaching quality, particularly regarding student evaluations and portfolio-based assessments.

Messick’s (1989) framework identifies six aspects of construct validity particularly relevant to portfolio assessment: content relevance and representativeness, substantive theories and process models, structural fidelity, generalisability, external correlates, and consequential implications. For teaching portfolios, these dimensions translate into questions about whether portfolios adequately represent teaching practice (content validity), whether they reflect authentic pedagogical philosophies grounded in educational theory (construct validity), and whether portfolio-based evaluations lead to appropriate recognition of excellence (consequential validity). Contemporary scholarship on e-portfolios confirms that ‘there is inherent validity in asking learners to demonstrate by the works in their portfolio that they have achieved the course learning outcomes’ (Campbell & Tran 2021:3), while acknowledging that lack of standardised evaluation measures raises ongoing validity concerns (Donaldson 2018; Scully, O’Leary & Brown 2022).

Applying Validity Theory to Teaching Portfolios

Kane’s (2006) argument-based approach to validation proves especially useful for analysing teaching portfolios. This approach conceives validation as building and evaluating an interpretive argument from observed performances to conclusions about target constructs. For teaching portfolios, the interpretive argument proceeds from documented evidence (teaching materials, student feedback, reflective narratives) to claims about teaching excellence. Validity

threats emerge at each inferential step: from evidence selection to representation of practice, from practice documentation to demonstration of impact, and from impact evidence to claims of excellence. This framework aligns with contemporary understandings of portfolio assessment as requiring clear rubrics and guidelines to standardise evaluation processes while accommodating diverse styles and approaches (Sackstein 2024).

Applying this framework to the NUTA context, three validity dimensions prove critical. First, construct validity addresses whether portfolios authentically represent the underlying construct of ‘teaching excellence’ appropriate to diverse institutional contexts (traditional universities, universities of technology, comprehensive universities). Second, content validity concerns whether portfolios include representative evidence across all relevant domains – pedagogy, assessment, curriculum design, student engagement, professional development, and scholarly engagement with teaching. Third, consequential validity examines whether portfolio-based evaluations produce fair and beneficial outcomes, particularly regarding recognition of contextually appropriate excellence in South African higher education.

Teaching Portfolios and Excellence Evaluation

Evolution of Teaching Portfolio Scholarship

Teaching portfolio literature reveals evolving conceptions of purpose, content, and evaluation criteria. Early scholarship emphasised portfolios primarily as professional development tools fostering reflective practice (Seldin 1991; Wolf & Dietz 1998). Murray’s (1997) influential work established portfolios as mechanisms for documenting teaching effectiveness through systematic evidence compilation. However, as Kreber (2009) observes, the shift toward using portfolios for high-stakes evaluation: promotion, tenure, awards, necessitates more rigorous attention to validity and reliability concerns largely absent from earlier developmental frameworks. This evolution continues in contemporary scholarship, with renewed emphasis on portfolios as reflective practice tools that require systematic, evidence-based approaches (Samarawickrema *et al.* 2024; Yik *et al.* 2022).

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognises portfolios as sites of scholarly inquiry into teaching and learning, situated within the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) movement. Boyer’s (1990) reconceptualisation of scholarship to include the ‘scholarship of teaching’ provided theoretical justification for treating pedagogical work as legitimate scholarly

activity. Hutchings and Shulman (1999) further developed this concept, arguing that teaching becomes scholarship when made public, subjected to critical review, and exchanged with others. Recent work emphasises SoTL as ‘systematic inquiry into student learning which advances the practice of teaching in higher education by making inquiry findings public’ (Felten 2013), with reflective practice constituting a core dimension (Jackson 2024; Miller-Young & Boman 2023). This evolution positions teaching portfolios not merely as evidence compilations but as scholarly arguments about teaching effectiveness grounded in theory, evidence, and critical reflection.

Critical Perspectives on Portfolio Validity

Despite widespread adoption, critical scholarship questions teaching portfolio validity as assessment instruments. Zeichner and Wray (2001) identify several validity threats: selective evidence presentation, difficulty verifying authenticity, limited inter-rater reliability, and cultural biases favouring particular teaching philosophies. These concerns prove especially salient in diverse contexts like South Africa, where Western-derived pedagogical frameworks may inadequately capture contextually appropriate teaching excellence indicators (Cross & Atinde 2015; Le Grange 2016). These validity challenges regarding the subjective nature of portfolio assessment, lack of standardised measures, and potential for bias in grading stubbornly endure (Zaabalawi & Zaabalawi 2024), despite various quality interventions by universities.

Scully, O’Leary and Brown’s (2022) integrative review highlights persistent tensions between theoretical frameworks and practical applications in portfolio assessment. They note that portfolios often fail evaluation criteria due to ‘misalignment between espoused educational theories and enacted teaching practices’ (Scully *et al.* 2022:12), with reflection constituting part of summative assessment potentially producing ‘negative washback effects’ as students avoid honest engagement with weaknesses (Thanaraj 2012). This observation resonates with analysis, which demonstrates how teaching philosophy statements frequently lack coherence with documented teaching practices, creating credibility gaps undermining portfolio validity.

South African Context and Decolonisation Imperatives

The South African higher education landscape presents unique challenges for evaluating teaching excellence. Ongoing decolonisation efforts (Heleta 2016;

Mbembe 2016; Akinmolayan *et al.* 2024) require reconceptualising excellence beyond Eurocentric frameworks toward pedagogies addressing epistemological access, multilingualism, and historical disadvantage. Recent scholarship emphasises that despite transformation rhetoric, ‘curriculum in South African higher education remains largely Eurocentric’ with decolonisation matters ‘relegated to the margins’ (Heleta & Chasi 2024; Le Grange 2019:35). As Fataar (2025) argues, moving the decolonising education imperative productively forward requires a comprehensive framework for curriculum knowledge that pluralises epistemologies.

Morrow’s (2009) distinction between ‘formal access’ and ‘epistemological access’ proves particularly relevant here. Teaching excellence must encompass not merely student enrolment but meaningful engagement with disciplinary knowledge, despite linguistic and cultural barriers. Contemporary research confirms ongoing challenges, noting that ‘transformation in higher education since the end of apartheid has been largely about demographics and numbers and not about apartheid-era institutional cultures, politics of knowledge, epistemic decolonisation and promotion of plurality of knowledge’ (Heleta & Dilraj 2024). Furthermore, South Africa’s differentiated higher education system, comprising traditional universities, universities of technology, and comprehensive universities, necessitates context-sensitive evaluation criteria. As Scott (2018) argues, teaching excellence manifests differently across institutional types, requiring portfolio evaluation frameworks that accommodate institutional diversity while maintaining rigorous standards.

Methodology

Research Design and Paradigmatic Position

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design grounded in document analysis methodology (Bowen 2009). The research adopts a critical realist epistemological stance, acknowledging that while teaching excellence exists as a real phenomenon with observable manifestations, our understanding of it is mediated through socially constructed evaluation frameworks and interpretive processes (Maxwell 2012). This positioning is particularly appropriate for examining teaching portfolios through Validity Theory, as it recognises both the material reality of pedagogical practice and the interpretive nature of assessment processes.

The study’s methodological approach aligns with what Creswell and Poth (2018) characterise as systematic inquiry into documents as ‘social facts’,

treating the adjudicator feedback not merely as individual opinions but as institutionally-situated professional judgements reflecting collective understanding of teaching excellence criteria within South African higher education. This approach acknowledges that evaluation data are co-constructed through the interaction between portfolio submissions (as authored texts), evaluation criteria (as institutional frameworks), and adjudicator expertise (as interpretive communities).

Data Analysis Procedures

Analysis proceeded through an iterative, multi-phase process informed by thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke 2006) and specifically tailored to Validity Theory's conceptual framework.

Phase 1: Familiarisation and Initial Coding. The researcher (who also served as NUTA coordinator but did not participate in adjudication) engaged in repeated close reading of the synthesis document to develop comprehensive familiarity with the data. Initial descriptive coding identified key concepts within each of the 14 factors for unsuccessful portfolios and 14 attributes of successful portfolios. This phase generated 78 preliminary codes capturing nuanced dimensions of each factor/attribute.

Phase 2: Theoretical Coding through Validity Dimensions. The 78 preliminary codes were systematically mapped onto Validity Theory's three key dimensions: construct validity (codes indicating misalignment between portfolio content and the underlying construct of 'teaching excellence'), content validity (codes indicating inadequate sampling of evidence across relevant teaching domains), and consequential validity (codes indicating potential for unfair or inequitable evaluation outcomes). Some codes exhibited relevance to multiple validity dimensions, reflecting the integrated nature of Messick's (1989) unified validity concept. Such codes were assigned to the dimension they most directly threatened, with cross-referencing notes maintained.

Phase 3: Pattern Identification and Analytical Synthesis. Following theoretical coding, the analysis employed constant comparative analysis, examining whether particular validity threats were universal across disciplines and institutional types or context-specific; independent factors or clustered in thematically coherent groups; and remedial (addressable through improved

guidance) or fundamental (requiring reconceptualisation of portfolio assessment).

Phase 4: Interpretive Framework Development. The final analytical phase involved synthesising coded patterns into a coherent interpretive framework explaining teaching portfolio credibility through the lens of validation. This framework reconceptualises portfolios not as documentation compilations but as scholarly arguments (following Hutchings & Shulman 1999) whose credibility depends on defensible inferences across multiple validity dimensions.

Limitations

Secondary Data: The analysis relies on a synthesised feedback document rather than original portfolios or detailed adjudicator commentary. While this synthesis captures patterns across cases, it necessarily involves information reduction that may obscure nuances or contradictions within individual assessments.

Adjudicator Reliability: The study does not examine inter-rater reliability among adjudicators. Variations in how individual adjudicators interpret evaluation criteria could influence which factors emerge as salient in unsuccessful portfolios. However, the synthesis document represents collective judgement following moderation, partially mitigating individual reliability concerns.

Generalisability: Findings emerge from South African national teaching awards context and may not transfer directly to other assessment contexts (institutional promotion, international awards, non-research-intensive institutional types). While 100 portfolios were assessed, only approximately 15 received awards (success rate consistent with NUTA's competitive nature). The analysis of successful attributes therefore draws on a smaller evidence base than the analysis of unsuccessful factors. However, the Validity Theory framing provides conceptual scaffolding for examining portfolio credibility across diverse contexts.

Ethical Considerations

This study did not obtain formal ethical clearance, as it relied exclusively on secondary data in the form of a synthesised feedback document from the

2024/5 National University Teaching Awards (NUTA). No individual portfolios, adjudicator identities, or personal data were accessed or analysed. The synthesis document represents aggregated, anonymised evaluative insights produced through institutional moderation processes, thereby minimising risks related to confidentiality, consent, or harm. Consistent with ethical research practice in higher education, the study treats these evaluative texts as public-facing professional judgements rather than private communications, and engages them respectfully and analytically to advance scholarly understanding of teaching portfolio assessment. The interpretive stance adopted foregrounds systemic patterns rather than individual critique, aligning with principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, and scholarly integrity.

Analytical Framework

Analysis proceeded through systematic thematic coding guided by Validity Theory’s three key dimensions: construct validity, content validity, and consequential validity. The 14 factors identified by adjudicators as rendering portfolios unsuccessful were analysed to determine which validity dimension each factor threatened. This analytical approach revealed how seemingly disparate problems ranging from insufficient evidence to superficial theoretical engagement, fundamentally represent validity threats undermining portfolio credibility as assessment instruments.

Table 1: 14 Reasons Why NUTA Teaching Portfolios were Deemed Unsuccessful

Main Factor/ Reason	Brief Explanation
1. Misalignment with NUTA criteria	Portfolios failed to address required criteria, included excessive or irrelevant content, or lacked institutional endorsement.
2. Misalignment between theory and practice	Theoretical frameworks were outdated, superficial, or disconnected from actual teaching practices.
3. Lack of authentic philosophical reflection	Teaching philosophies were generic, ungrounded, or inconsistent with demonstrated practice.

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| 4. Insufficient evidence | Portfolios lacked curated, relevant examples of teaching materials, student work, or assessment data. |
| 5. Lack of critical reflection | Reflections were shallow, overly positive, or failed to show self-assessment and growth. |
| 6. Over-reliance on descriptions of practice | Narratives were descriptive without linking to theory or demonstrating impact on student learning. |
| 7. Absence of innovation in teaching and learning | Claims of innovation were superficial, unsubstantiated, or equated with basic technology use. |
| 8. Lack of student-centered approaches | Portfolios did not show how teaching engaged students or responded to their learning needs. |
| 9. Inadequate use of data/learning analytics | Portfolios lacked evidence-based insights into student achievement or pedagogical effectiveness. |
| 10. Overlooking diversity and differentiation | Portfolios failed to show responsiveness to diverse student needs or differentiate teaching strategies. |
| 11. Lack of context and audience awareness | Portfolios were not tailored to adjudicators or failed to reflect student outcomes and engagement. |
| 12. Failure to show technological literacy | Portfolios did not demonstrate meaningful integration of digital tools to enhance learning. |
| 13. Lack of exceptional teaching capabilities | Portfolios presented generic practices without showing exemplary, transformative teaching. |
| 14. Neglecting the student voice | Portfolios omitted or downplayed student feedback, weakening credibility and reflective depth. |

In parallel, the same 14 attributes were used to analyse successful portfolios, identifying how award-winning submissions demonstrated validity across multiple dimensions. This dual strategy, examining both failure and success, offers a nuanced understanding of the validity requirements essential for credible teaching portfolio assessment.

Findings: Validity Threats in Teaching Portfolio Assessment

Construct Validity: Misrepresenting Teaching Excellence

Several identified factors fundamentally threaten construct validity by misrepresenting the underlying construct of ‘teaching excellence’. The most significant construct validity threat emerges from lack of authentic philosophical reflection (Factor 3). As adjudicators noted, many portfolios referenced teaching philosophies that appeared ‘as adornment rather than integral to the applicants’ praxis’, with philosophies ‘overly generic, broad or filled with educational jargon and clichés’ failing to ‘convey the teacher’s unique approach or values’. This observation aligns with Schönwetter et al.’s (2002) research demonstrating that superficial philosophy statements lack the conceptual depth necessary for valid claims about pedagogical expertise. Recent scholarship on reflective practice confirms that meaningful reflection requires moving beyond description to critical engagement with educational theories and one’s own assumptions (Yik *et al.* 2022).

The ‘saviour mindset’ (Factor 15) represents another critical construct validity threat. Portfolios exhibiting this orientation ‘tend to pathologise students as the bearers of deficits which must be fixed’, with lecturers promoting themselves as ‘custodian[s] of the requisite abilities to rescue students from their pathologies, rather than recognising students as having agency’. This problematic framing contradicts contemporary understanding of teaching excellence as fostering student agency, critical thinking, and empowerment (hooks 1994; Freire 1970). As Flaherty (2016) argues in ‘No More Heroes’, such ‘saviour’ orientations fundamentally misrepresent teaching effectiveness by centring educator heroism rather than student learning and development. This critique resonates with decolonial perspectives emphasising the need to move from ‘objectification of the colonised to centring the African being’ in educational contexts (Govender & Naidoo 2023:4).

Misalignment between theory and practice (Factor 2) further compromises construct validity. Adjudicators identified portfolios evincing ‘clear disconnect between the theoretical frameworks cited and the actual

teaching practices demonstrated’, with ‘superficial treatment of theory’ where references appeared ‘tacked on as an afterthought’. This disconnect suggests that documented practices fail to authentically represent theoretically-grounded pedagogical expertise – the core construct teaching excellence portfolios purport to measure. As Murphy (2016) observes, sophisticated teaching philosophies offer ‘clear statement[s] of pedagogical purpose’ genuinely informing practice; absent this coherence, portfolios cannot validly demonstrate teaching excellence. Contemporary SoTL scholarship confirms this requirement, emphasising that scholarly teaching must be ‘grounded in context’ and ‘methodologically sound’ (Felten 2013), characteristics absent when theory disconnects from practice.

Content Validity Threats: Incomplete Evidence Domains

Content validity concerns whether assessment instruments adequately sample the relevant content domain. For teaching portfolios, this translates into comprehensively representing all dimensions of teaching practice. Multiple factors identified by adjudicators represent content validity threats through inadequate domain coverage. Recent scholarship confirms that portfolio assessment requires careful consideration of what to include, with clear guidelines about demonstrating learning outcomes across multiple competencies (Sackstein 2024).

Insufficient evidence (Factor 4) directly threatens content validity. Portfolios ‘lack[ing] concrete examples of teaching materials, student work, and assessment data’ fail to provide representative samples across key teaching domains. As Seldin and Miller (2009) argue, robust portfolios must include diverse evidence types: syllabi, assignments, assessment rubrics, student feedback, peer observations, comprehensively representing teaching practice. Contemporary research emphasises that effective portfolios showcase ‘a variety of teaching artefacts, including syllabi, assignments, and student feedback, to create a robust and convincing teaching portfolio’ (Simonson, Earl & Frary 2022:168). Overemphasis on quantity over quality compounds this problem, with adjudicators noting that ‘including too much information, without curating the most relevant and impactful elements can overwhelm reviewers’.

Absence of innovation evidence (Factor 7) represents another content validity gap. Adjudicators noted portfolios demonstrating ‘limited evidence of innovation’ or treating innovation superficially through ‘checkbox’ mentality.

Particularly problematic was ‘equating innovation to technology’ which ‘oversimplifies both technology integration as well as the role of innovation in higher education’. This finding resonates with Sharples et al.’s (2016) ‘Innovating Pedagogy’ framework emphasising that genuine innovation encompasses pedagogical transformation, not merely technological adoption. Content-valid portfolios must document innovation across multiple dimensions: curriculum design, assessment practices, student engagement strategies, and epistemological access mechanisms, not solely technology use. Recent work on e-portfolios confirms that while technology enables portfolio creation, the substance lies in demonstrating creative innovation and comprehensive understanding of modern educational environments (Jahara, Kumar & Abdelrady 2023).

Neglecting student voice (Factor 14) creates critical content validity gaps. Student feedback provides essential evidence of teaching impact; its omission means portfolios lack ‘third-party validation of teaching effectiveness’ and present ‘incomplete picture[s] of teaching impact’. As Matthews and Dollinger (2019) demonstrate, student voice constitutes fundamental evidence for credible teaching evaluation. Recent scholarship confirms this requirement, with Takhar (2024) emphasising the necessity and urgency of student input for decolonising curricula and ensuring teaching practices respond to diverse learner needs. Moreover, adjudicators noted that portfolios ‘highlighting only positive feedback and not leveraging negative aspects to demonstrate growth’ fail to represent the full spectrum of teaching development – another content validity limitation.

Discussion: Toward Validity-Centred Portfolio Evaluation Reconceptualising Teaching Portfolios as Assessment Arguments

This analysis has attempted to demonstrate that teaching portfolio credibility fundamentally depends on validity: the degree to which portfolios support defensible inferences about teaching excellence. Applying Kane’s (2006) argument-based validity framework, we can conceptualise portfolios as interpretive arguments proceeding from evidence to excellence claims through multiple inferential steps, each requiring validation. This conception aligns with contemporary understanding of portfolios as enabling authentic assessment of ‘real-world professional capabilities’ (Campbell & Tran 2021:3),

while acknowledging the persistent challenge of ensuring validity, reliability, and fairness (Donaldson 2018; Scully *et al.* 2022).

The first inference, from teaching artefacts to practice representation, requires construct validity. As the findings suggest, this inference fails when philosophies appear ‘as adornments’, when theory is disconnected from practice, or when ‘saviour’ framings misrepresent teaching relationships. Valid portfolios authentically represent pedagogical expertise through coherent alignment between espoused philosophies, theoretical frameworks, and documented practices. Recent work on reflective practice emphasises that this requires critical reflection, defined as ‘looking deeply into one’s practice’ and questioning fundamental assumptions (Mohamed, Rashid & Alqaryouti (2022), rather than merely describing activities.

The second inference, from practice representation to comprehensive evidence, requires content validity. This inference fails when portfolios lack ‘concrete examples’, omit student voice, or inadequately document innovation, differentiation, or data-driven decision-making. Content-valid portfolios systematically sample evidence across all relevant teaching domains, providing representative documentation of multifaceted practice. Contemporary scholarship confirms that effective portfolios must include ‘both direct and indirect evidence of teaching effectiveness’ (Simonson, Earl & Frary 2022: 175), encompassing teaching materials, student work, assessment data, and multiple forms of feedback.

The third inference, from evidence to excellence claims, requires consequential validity. This inference fails when evaluation criteria inadequately recognise contextually appropriate excellence, when procedural requirements override substantive quality, or when portfolio formats privilege particular rhetorical traditions. Consequentially valid evaluation ensures that recognition appropriately accrues to genuinely excellent teaching across diverse contexts and pedagogical approaches. In the South African context, this requires explicit attention to decolonisation imperatives, with Heleta and Dilraj (2024) noting that without fundamental transformation and epistemic decolonisation, excellence evaluation risks perpetuating Eurocentric hegemonies.

Finally, evaluating Teaching Excellence via Portfolios is characterised by a fundamental tension between its two primary objectives: **developmental**

growth and **summative accreditation**, representing the tension between the portfolio's dual objects:

- **Object 1 (Developmental):** To foster professional growth, deep reflection, and a critical understanding of one's own teaching philosophy. This object is typically internal and formative.
- **Object 2 (Summative):** To provide a reliable and valid basis for external judgment, accreditation, and the allocation of high-stakes rewards. This object is external and summative.

The core contradiction highlighted in the NUTA feedback advisory reflects a systemic failure to reconcile two competing imperatives.

Applicants, responding to the high-stakes summative nature of the award, tend to prioritise compliance and volume, meeting criteria and producing content over the deep, critical engagement demanded by its developmental intent. The most pronounced tension lies between the Subject (the Applicant) and the Community (the Adjudicators), with the Rules acting as the mediating artefact. According to the NUTA feedback, portfolios often fail due to 'misalignment with NUTA criteria' (National University Teaching Awards 2025: 2), indicating a breakdown in the shared understanding of what the Rules signify. While the Community expects a demonstration of excellence: a high-level outcome, the Rules are often interpreted by Applicants as a checklist for compliance, a low-level outcome. This misalignment results in portfolios that meet formal requirements but lack philosophical depth and theoretical rigour.

To restore the portfolio's credibility and efficacy, the System requires modification. This involves re-mediating the Rules to prioritise theoretical analysis as the central Tool, thereby forcing the Subject to transform their practice into a scholarly argument. Only through such a systemic intervention can the teaching portfolio transcend its current paradox and become a more valid and reliable instrument for measuring teaching excellence.

In the next, concluding section, we explore the attributes of successful NUTA portfolios, indicating how award-winning submissions demonstrate validity across multiple dimensions.

The 14 identified attributes cluster around four validity-enhancing strategies.

Successful Portfolios as Validated Excellence Claims

- **Coherent theoretical grounding:** Successful portfolios articulate clear teaching philosophies genuinely informing practice, demonstrate disciplinary expertise currency, and align pedagogies with institutional contexts, establishing construct validity through authentic representation of pedagogical expertise. This aligns with contemporary SoTL principles requiring inquiry to be ‘grounded in context’ and reflecting ‘the natures, values, fundamental concepts and modes of inquiry specific to our disciplines’ (Miller-Young & Boman 2023:4).
- **Comprehensive evidence documentation:** Award-winning portfolios present diverse assessment methods, integrate research with teaching appropriately for institutional type, demonstrate technology innovation beyond mere adoption, and include robust student feedback, establishing content validity through representative domain sampling. Recent research confirms that effective portfolios must showcase varied artifacts providing a ‘comprehensive view of how students grow, both in their academic skill’ (Jahara *et al.* 2023:298).
- **Student-centred impact demonstration:** Successful submissions provide quantitative and qualitative learning outcome data, demonstrate engagement with diverse backgrounds, show evidence of differentiation responding to varied needs, and document culturally responsive practices, establishing both construct and content validity through authentic, comprehensive impact evidence. Contemporary scholarship emphasises that ‘student voice coupled with’ systematic evaluation ‘is important particularly with reference to finding out what is missing, creating awareness, and a sense of contributing a critical voice to their education’ (Takhar 2023:8).
- **Context-sensitive excellence articulation:** Award-winners demonstrate awareness of South African higher education challenges, show curriculum development addressing decolonisation and Africanisation, provide evidence preparing students for South African contexts, and exhibit language and cultural sensitivity, establishing consequential validity through contextually appropriate excellence recognition. This dimension proves crucial given that ‘decolonising education is nothing less than the

full incorporation of humanity’s knowledge systems into the curriculum’ (Fataar 2025:2).

These attributes demonstrate that valid teaching portfolios function as scholarly arguments (Hutchings & Shulman 1999) systematically building evidence-based cases for excellence claims. Rather than mere documentation, they construct interpretive arguments whose credibility depends on validity across construct representation, content coverage, and consequential appropriateness. This understanding aligns with contemporary SoTL conceptions emphasising systematic inquiry that is ‘methodologically sound’, ‘conducted in partnership with students’, and ‘appropriately public’ (Felten 2013).

In the table below: *Solutions to Failed Teaching Portfolios*, I attempt to offer possible solutions to the perennial problems facing the credibility of portfolios. The solutions presented are grounded in validity theory, which reconceptualises assessment validity as a unified concept encompassing multiple sources of evidence (Messick 1989; Kane 2013). 2019). Each solution addresses specific validity threats: applicant strategies enhance the substantive and structural validity of portfolio evidence, while adjudicator strategies strengthen the procedural fairness and consequential validity of the assessment process. Together, these interventions create a more robust validity argument for teaching portfolio assessment, transforming portfolios from bureaucratic exercises into authentic representations of pedagogical expertise that serve both evaluative and formative purposes in higher education.

Table 2: Solutions to Failed Teaching Portfolios

Reason for Failure	Solutions for Applicants	Solutions for Adjudicators
1. Misalignment with NUTA Criteria	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Review NUTA criteria thoroughly; create a checklist mapping each criterion to portfolio sections• Engage with teaching centres or mentors early for alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide clear, detailed rubrics with examples• Offer workshops for clarifying requirements• Develop exemplar portfolios

Reason for Failure	Solutions for Applicants	Solutions for Adjudicators
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include only directly relevant materials; be selective • Obtain institutional endorsements early 	<p>demonstrating successful alignment</p>
<p>2. Misalignment Between Theory and Practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ground theoretical discussions in current scholarship (past 5-10 years) • Explicitly connect frameworks to specific classroom practices with concrete examples • Use SoTL approach to demonstrate systematic inquiry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources on current pedagogical theories • Encourage articulation of personal pedagogical frameworks
<p>3. Lack of Authentic Philosophical Reflection</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop teaching philosophy through genuine introspection about core beliefs and values • Ground philosophical statements in specific teaching examples • Make philosophy distinctive, personal, and context-reflective 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide prompts for deep philosophical reflection, not formulaic responses • Value authenticity over polish; recognize evolving ideas
<p>4. Insufficient Evidence</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include diverse evidence: syllabi, assignments, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specify minimum evidence

Reason for Failure	Solutions for Applicants	Solutions for Adjudicators
	<p>assessments, student work, feedback, peer observations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curate evidence purposefully with context and annotation • Use triangulation: support claims with multiple evidence types 	<p>requirements with flexibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide guidance on appropriate types and amounts with examples
<p>5. Lack of Critical Reflection</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use structured frameworks (Gibbs’ Cycle, Brookfield’s Four Lenses) • Address challenges and failures honestly; show learning from difficulties • Include reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value growth over perfection; reward honest analysis • Provide exemplars of critical reflection demonstrating depth
<p>6. Over-Reliance on Descriptions of Practice</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Move beyond ‘what’ to ‘why’ and ‘impact’; link practices to rationale and outcomes • Use ‘What? So What? Now What?’ framework • Provide evidence of student learning outcomes, not just activity descriptions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require explicit connections between practice, theory, and impact • Provide prompts moving from description to analysis

Reason for Failure	Solutions for Applicants	Solutions for Adjudicators
7. Absence of Innovation in Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define innovation clearly; include thoughtful adaptation of established practices • Document innovation process: problem, solution, implementation, outcomes • Show innovations are evidence-informed and pedagogically grounded 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify that innovation includes context-specific adaptation • Value reflective experimentation and iterative improvement
8. Lack of Student-Centered Approaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate shift to student-centered approaches; show students actively constructing knowledge • Provide evidence of diagnosing needs, adapting teaching, supporting diverse learners • Include examples of student choice, voice, and agency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize student learning outcomes as central criteria • Ask about engaging students as partners in learning design
9. Inadequate Use of Data/Learning Analytics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include quantitative data on performance, retention, engagement, satisfaction with thoughtful analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide guidance on appropriate analytics use with ethical considerations

Reason for Failure	Solutions for Applicants	Solutions for Adjudicators
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use assessment data to show alignment between outcomes, strategies, and achievement • Demonstrate evidence-informed teaching decisions and improvements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value both quantitative and qualitative data
<p>10. Overlooking Diversity and Differentiation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate understanding of and response to cultural, linguistic, socioeconomic, learning differences • Provide examples of differentiated instruction with multiple learning pathways • Show commitment to inclusive teaching and Universal Design for Learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize inclusive excellence as fundamental teaching quality • Provide frameworks for culturally responsive teaching
<p>11. Lack of Context and Audience Awareness</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research adjudication process; tailor portfolio to specific evaluation criteria • Provide context about teaching environment, student demographics, institutional expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make evaluation criteria and processes transparent • Recognize teaching excellence manifests differently across contexts

Reason for Failure	Solutions for Applicants	Solutions for Adjudicators
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write clearly for educated non-specialist audience 	
<p>12. Failure to Show Technological Literacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate TPACK framework: integration of technological, pedagogical, content knowledge • Show how technology enhances learning outcomes, engagement, and access • Include reflection on successes and challenges with educational technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify expectations while recognizing resource differences • Value pedagogically sound integration over sophisticated tools
<p>13. Lack of Exceptional Teaching Capabilities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate distinctive impact, creativity, scholarly approach to pedagogy • Provide evidence of influence beyond classroom: mentoring, curriculum development, innovation • Include external validation: awards, peer recognition, invitations to share practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Define excellence clearly with concrete indicators • Recognize excellence manifests in multiple forms

Reason for Failure	Solutions for Applicants	Solutions for Adjudicators
14. Neglecting the Student Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include multiple forms of student feedback: evaluations, comments, focus groups, work samples • Analyse feedback critically; show response to concerns and building on strengths • Present student voice authentically without cherry-picking positive comments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Require meaningful engagement with student feedback as reflective practice • Value thoughtful response to criticism over perfect evaluations

Concluding Observations

This paper has argued that teaching portfolio efficacy and credibility fundamentally depend on validity, the degree to which portfolios support defensible inferences about teaching excellence. Through Validity Theory analysis of NUTA adjudication data, three key insights emerge regarding portfolio assessment in South African higher education. First, portfolio validity requires alignment across three dimensions: construct validity ensuring authentic representation of pedagogical expertise, content validity providing comprehensive evidence across relevant domains, and consequential validity producing appropriate, equitable recognition outcomes. The 14 factors rendering portfolios unsuccessful primarily represent validity threats in one or more dimensions, demonstrating that portfolio credibility problems fundamentally concern validity rather than merely inadequate documentation. Recent research confirms these ongoing challenges, with Zaabalawi and Zaabalawi (2024) noting that portfolio assessment faces ‘inherent challenges associated with this approach’, including ‘time and effort required’ and ‘concerns about reliability and consistency’.

Second, successful portfolios function as validated scholarly arguments systematically building evidence-based cases for excellence claims.

The 14 attributes characterising award-winning submissions reveal how excellence demonstration requires coherent theoretical grounding, comprehensive evidence documentation, student-centred impact demonstration, and context-sensitive excellence articulation, validity-enhancing strategies supporting defensible inferences from evidence to excellence claims. This finding aligns with contemporary SoTL scholarship emphasising that teaching portfolios constitute ‘reflective practice in higher education that is publicly shared and reviewed by a community of peers’ (Miller-Young & Boman 2023:2), requiring methodological soundness and appropriate contextualisation.

Third, validity-centred portfolio evaluation proves especially crucial for South African higher education, where teaching excellence must simultaneously meet world-class standards and address contextual imperatives including decolonisation, epistemological access, linguistic diversity, and historical redress. Validity frameworks can navigate tensions between universal standards and contextual appropriateness by distinguishing validity requirements applicable across contexts from criteria requiring context-sensitive application. As Heleta and Dilraj (2024:15) argue, ‘without the decolonisation of the predominantly Eurocentric curriculum, the achievement of justice for the colonised remains elusive’, necessitating excellence evaluation frameworks explicitly engaging with epistemological pluralism.

This research contributes to scholarship on teaching excellence evaluation by demonstrating that portfolio assessment credibility depends fundamentally on validity rather than merely evidence quantity or presentation quality. Future research should investigate inter-rater reliability in portfolio evaluation, examine how validity frameworks might be operationalised in evaluation rubrics, and explore whether validity-centred professional development enhances portfolio quality. Additionally, comparative research across institutional types could illuminate how validity requirements manifest differently in research-intensive universities, universities of technology, and comprehensive universities, advancing understanding of contextually appropriate excellence in differentiated higher education systems. As SoTL scholarship continues evolving, with renewed emphasis on ‘purposeful conversations’, ‘engaged and supportive peers’, and ‘ongoing centre leadership’ (Kim 2024), validity-centred approaches promise to enhance both the credibility of excellence evaluation and the quality of pedagogical practice.

Finally, while the solutions outlined in *table 2* constitute an advisory for both applicants and adjudicators, they should not be misconstrued as definitive or universal fixes. These strategies address recurring challenges in port-

folio development and evaluation, but they operate within complex, context-dependent systems, shaped by institutional cultures, disciplinary norms, and evolving pedagogical paradigms. Teaching excellence cannot be reduced to a checklist, nor can reflective practice be fully captured through formulaic responses. The solutions are best understood as scaffolds, tools that support deeper engagement, critical introspection, and dialogic understandings.

Ultimately, reconceptualising teaching portfolios as assessment instruments requiring rigorous validation, rather than mere documentation compilations, promises to enhance both the credibility of excellence evaluation and the quality of pedagogical practice in higher education. As Messick (1989: 13) observed, ‘validity is an integrated evaluative judgement of the degree to which empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of inferences and actions based on test scores’. This principle applies equally to teaching portfolio assessment: credibility depends not on evidence volume but on validity, the defensibility of inferences linking documentation to excellence claims.

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