

Editorial:

Assessment through Digital Platforms within Higher Education Studies

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Introduction

This book is a collection of responses from academics of higher education institutions (within and outside of South Africa) to the Covid-19 pandemic, with a focus on assessment within digital platforms. (For examples of collective writings as alternate genres in publications see Peters et al., 2020 and Waghid et al., 2020.) The intent of the book is to illuminate possibilities, challenges, concerns, insights and solutions, on assessment using digital platforms during the pandemic conditions, through research and personal accounts of academics from a range of disciplines and institutions. Extending Le Grange's (2021) notion of platform pedagogy, the experiences and insights on assessment using digital platforms enhance the integration of teaching, learning and assessment.

Having foregrounded teaching, learning and experiences of academic staff during Covid-19 in a number of publications by the *Alternations African Book Series* on their migration into the digital spaces for continuing with the academic programme at universities across institutions within South Africa, we

turn our attention to assessment in this volume of the series. Drawn from a colloquium hosted by the College of Humanities of the University of KwaZulu-Natal in 2021, the chapters in this publication presents an eclectic account on assessments using digital platforms that were grounded in practicality, experimentation, appreciative insights and relevance to academic programmes that unfolded during Covid-19. The intended learnings arising out of this edited collection of chapters do contribute to learning on digital forms of assessment as an on-going exploration of hybrid teaching, learning and assessments possibilities that have unfolded a few decades ago.

Noting the territorialisation of assessment by measurement, standardisation, accountability and performativity regimes (Le Grange et al., 2022), Covid-19 opened up spaces for academics to challenge these regimes in times of crises and in so doing prise open possibilities that centre on learning through assessment strategies and processes. Noting further that summative assessment as one of the three types of assessment, i.e. assessment of learning, assessment as learning and assessment for learning (Kanjee and Bhana, 2020), has dominated this neoliberal perspective on education, the Covid-19 conditions provided an exciting opportunity to shift the assessment as measurement and accountability discourses into assessment for learning discourses that have since gained traction in South Africa and globally, as evidenced in the pandemic scholarship on school and higher education. Moreover, Fataar and Badroodien (2020), argue that the future of education post- Covid-19 provides opportunities for new and emergent imaginaries within a social justice agenda taking note of the huge disparities prevalent within our societies and institutions of learning. Noting Soudien's (2020) notion of systemic shock brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, treading the learning complexity requires a just and moral step when considering that learners are different. Hence the place for our usual ways of assessment must be re-imagined, using the affordances of technologies at our disposal to be inclusive, just and responsive. The chapters in this volume attempt to contribute to imaginative ways of conceptualising and utilising alternative forms of assessment beyond the standardisation, measurement and accountability regimes only. The chapters focus on skills and conceptual framing informing assessments using digital platforms, types of assessments that have been used by academics during the pandemic period, experiences of assessing students using digital platforms and reflections by academics on the use of digital platforms for assessments. The chapters in this book has been double blinded peer reviewed.

Chapter Summations

Upasana Singh's chapter on *A Self-Assessment of Academic Empowerment in the Transition to the Digital Space with the ASSET© Framework* foregrounds the academic skills set needed for conceptualising assessment using digital spaces. She argues in her chapter that when educating online, where lecturers no longer have immediate, face-to-face engagement with their students, the academic skills set is vastly different from the skills set required in a traditional face-to-face environment. She offers the ASSET© (Academic SkillSET) framework for online teaching, learning and assessment as a possible conceptual framework for academics in higher education. The framework was developed from her interaction with academics at ground level and includes practical, rather than theoretical elements. In Lina Methi's chapter on *Exploring the personal factors that mediate the resilience of students during online assessments*, she engages in a systematic literature review to respond to the question, 'What we do not know is how individual students' personal factors influence their transition to online assessment?' The strengths-based approach was used as a lens to highlight constructs that depict the personal protective factors that have developed the strengths and capabilities of students in positive ways. She argues that the six key personal factors that emerged from the study could be targeted in terms of intervention. They can also provide data that could be used in future studies to explore the integration of personal factors and contextual resources in building the resilience of students in an Open and Distance e-Learning environment. Her study could also serve as a baseline for understanding the various character traits of the students.

Using Foundation-Phase teacher education learning environments, Makeresemese R Mahlomaholo and Sechaba MG Mahlomaholo's chapter on *Formative virtual assessment towards sustainable Foundation Phase Teacher Education learning environments* proposes forms of virtual formative assessment strategies, based on the conceptualisation of assessment of, for and as learning, geared towards the creation of sustainable Foundation-Phase teacher-education learning environments. This focus has become necessary, because limited resources like time, skills and requisite human capital at many universities threaten to lead to surface learning where only the bare essentials are learnt and taught. Among these are ways in which pre-service teacher education in South Africa in particular is assessed virtually, continuously and formatively. Extending on these limitations, David Lokhat, in his chapter on

Scenario assignments within a digital platform: A superior assessment tool?, compares conventional tests with scenario assignments to determine their effectiveness in the learning cycle. He argues, based on this research, that conventional tests still test at low cognitive levels; plagiarism and collusion in online assessments are rife; and the type of assessments offered creates an enabling environment for this. There is also often poor alignment between the course content and assessments, and no tangible use of taxonomies. He proposes scenario assignments to counteract some of these challenges.

Sarah Bansilal, in her chapter on *Second-chance assessments: social justice action or assessment disruption*, raises concerns about inequitable access to online platforms for teaching, learning and assessment which led to her university recommending that they offer students a second chance to improve their marks. Using a mixed-method approach, she sought to investigate the effect that the second-chance assessments have on the overall marks. The purpose was to examine how second-chance intervention impacts on the marks in two modules. The findings show that in both cases the outcomes significantly changed, raising issues about whether second-chance intervention offers equitable access or whether it in effect lowers the quality of the assessment. Turning to staff issues, Dusty-Lee Donnelly, in his chapter on *Here be dragons: A critical reflection on the experience of using formative assessments to teach professional drafting skills*, suggests that formative assessment remains an unexplored territory for many academics, and although its importance has long been recognised, its features are not well understood. Scaffolding, self-assessment and feedback are, amongst others, the key issues in on-line assessments, which he established in his case study of assessment of an aspect of the Law curriculum.

Examples of assessment forms within the digital platforms include mobile-based formative assessment, which Veena Singaram explores in the chapter on her work in progress to establish the rigour and efficiency of this form of technology. Her chapter on *Mobile-based Formative Assessment and Feedback in Medical Education – work in progress* reports on the preliminary development and design of this mobile-based feedback application prototype to facilitate and create opportunities to prompt self-assessment and constructive formative feedback conversations between trainers, trainees, and peers in the clinical training environment.

The efficiency of assessments through digital platforms cannot be established outside of students' experiences and insights. In this cluster of

chapters, we explore student and staff experiences of using the digital platforms for assessments, especially within a rapid learning curve brought about by Covid-19. In the chapter on *The Digital Shift in Higher Education and the Aftermath of Covid-19: A Wellness Perspective case in an ODeL Institution*, Meahabo Dinah Magano presents a student wellness perspective on assessment. Using ODeL experiences she found that the ICT challenges experienced during the uploading of assignments and examination papers on the side of students affect the academic wellness of students. The blended approach that was used at an institution which claimed to be an ODeL for years, had to realise that there is an ‘e’ in the ODeL. The shift to online examinations brought doubts and concerns on authenticity of qualifications for students. Academics’ career wellness was also affected, since they had more administrative work.

Karen Ferreira-Meyers and Mandana Arfa-Kaboodvand highlight concerns of compatibility of online learning and assessment with independent, self-directed and autonomous learning, and whether students can benefit from the sudden change in content delivery (from face-to-face to virtual) and learning facilitation mode. Their chapter on *Rethinking Formative Assessment in Times of COVID-19: A Critical Analysis of University Assessment in Eswatini* makes the point that in order to benefit from the given circumstances and use assessment for learning, rapid and fundamental changes in the delivery and practice of teaching are also essential. They conclude with some suggestions regarding the use of the advantageous aspects of e-learning and assessment.

Frank Joseph Mensah, Sakyiwaa Boateng and Alex Boateng note that it is commonly accepted in the contemporary context that online assessment is no longer a choice, but a necessity for measuring knowledge and ensuring that learning outcomes are reached. In their chapter on *Assessments during the Covid-19 pandemic: The experiences of students in higher education institutions within the South African context* they used a mixed-method approach to determine students’ assessment experiences during the pandemic. Mixed results were recorded, indicating that students were optimistic and motivated by their assessment experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic. They argue that online assessments are a significant technical innovation that should be incorporated into the educational system. In the past, students used assessment data to improve their well-being, but in an increasingly competitive enrolment landscape exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, an impactful student assessment experience has become more critical than ever.

Having experienced conducting on-line assessments during the rapid

transition to remote teaching, learning and assessment, academic staff reflected critically on their experiences. The last of the chapters in this edition pay attention to academic staff's reflections on the migration of their assessment processes using digital platforms. Using a case study of a private higher education institution that employs a centralised model in which all curriculums are developed, quality-assured and distributed from the central support office to the multiple delivery sites across South Africa, Shamola Pramjeeth, Willy Engelbrecht, Gillian Mooney & Priya Ramgovind suggest policy changes to institutional practices. In their chapter on *A rapid forced adjustment in assessment strategy in a time of disruption: the idea, the impact and the change*, they suggest that the lockdown necessitated changes to two primary policies: the assessments and management of intellectual integrity policies, referring to them as 'pandemic policies'. Of note are aspects of the policies that deal with cheating and sanctions. While the institution had previously included cheating in their policy, it revised the intellectual policy to clearly demarcate different forms of contract cheating. It also includes severe penalties for students who either facilitate or who use contract cheating platforms. Their focus also shifts from plagiarism (the use of published sources) to cheating (the use of student sources). These policy changes were necessary to address the substantial challenges that their institution faced when transiting assessments onto the digital platforms.

The people-centred nature of social work presented unique challenges for the summative assessment process. As a result, the digital shift required of social work academics to reflect and rethink summative assessments. Digitisation made these issues even worse because of the 'digital poverty' of students, where they could not afford the necessary information technology hardware for them to study effectively from home. Based on the academic staff's experiences, Bongane Mzinyane and Sphiwe Motloung, in their chapter on *Reflecting on Digital Summative Assessments during Covid-19 lockdown at a South African University: the accounts of Social Work academics*, argue that marks are a commodity for social work students and serve as motivation for them to participate in assessments. In this final chapter on *Chronicling lecturers' and students' experiences in using digital technologies for continuous assessment practices at some South African universities*, Vusi Mncube; Shepherd Nondo and Emmanuel Olawale reveal that these rampant inequalities in the society have incapacitated lecturers and students in the use of digital technologies. They also argue that such rampant inequalities amongst students

have also hampered the proper implementation of assessment procedures. They conducted a desktop review by surveying literature from books, journals and websites to examine the nature of digital assessment at higher education institutions, as well as the experiences of lecturers and students. The review also examined the extent to which lectures and students succeeded in the use of digital technologies in assessment and ways of enhancing digital continuous assessment. This study also revealed that, although digital technologies were used in assessment, the socio-economic inequalities prevalent in society have led to a lack of institutional support in the use of digital technologies.

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