Assessment practices during Covid-19: the confluence of assessment purposes, quality and social justice in higher education

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic necessitated an abrupt shift to emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT&L) in higher education institutions across the globe. In this shift, assessment and feedback, widely regarded as the heart of student learning experiences and a gauge of quality teaching pre Covid-19, became a major source of discontent and challenge for students and staff. In this paper, we present our reflections of observed and reported practices of assessment by staff and students, from the vantage point of our roles as facilitators of various professional development initiatives within our institution. We suggest that the challenges experienced during ERT&L reveal the entrenched view of assessment as gatekeeping and conceptions of quality as exceptional. We further contend that assessment strategies based on such a view during ERT&L may have further marginalised and disadvantaged students faced with digital/technological, economic, and socio-cultural access issues. However, we also highlight that despite the challenges for students and staff, the experience may have broadened lecturers' views of their role in addressing the ongoing social justice challenges of access, and the power of sustainable assessment practices to unsettle inequalities within higher education.

Key words: remote assessment, sustainable assessment, social justice, quality, Covid-19

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered seismic shifts in every aspect of life. The higher education sector is no exception. In South Africa, as in many other parts of the world, higher education teaching and learning rapidly shifted online in a process that has become known as Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERT&L). This shift saw lecturers having to rapidly rework materials for access in the online learning environment, facilitated through the learning management systems (LMS's) already in place. While the development of online materials was challenging for staff and the process of online learning has undoubtedly been challenging for students, it is the online assessment component of ERT&L that proved most unsettling for staff, students, and the higher education system overall - both locally and globally. Of interest to us in this paper is how online assessment strategies emerging during ERT&L supported or unsettled the already existing inequalities brought about by widening or reducing access to previously and marginalised persons to higher education.

In this paper, we reflect on the assessment practices that emerged in response to ERT&L. We argue that the challenges experienced during ERT&L stem from an entrenched view of assessment as a proxy for student competence and quality of teaching, and that the shift to ERT&L (which required the adoption of remote and uninvigilated assessment) proved problematic because it disrupted the foundations of this view. We further argue that these challenges may, nevertheless, be harnessed as an opportunity for a shift towards sustainable assessments (Boud 2007) for improved teaching, learning, and self-regulation in a post Covid-19 era.

Given our focus on shifts in assessment practices, we have chosen to undergird our reflections and analysis on the five dimensions of assessment described by Luckett and Sutherland (2000) in the seminal paper entitled "Assessment Practices that Improve Teaching and Learning", viz., 'Why assess? What to assess? How to assess? How to interpret performance? How to respond to students?'. Luckett and Sutherland addressed these dimensions of assessment in relation to two imperatives that dominated at that time, i.e., globalisation and massification. While these imperatives are undoubtedly still relevant, we now examine these dimensions in relation to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and ERT&L.

What follows is an account, based on our observations as teaching and learning advisors and lecturers in our institution, of the challenges experienced by lecturers and students in each of these dimensions. We discuss the complexities and dilemmas that were foregrounded in these dimensions during ERT&L and what these possibly reveal about stakeholder perceptions of the *purpose* of assessment and issues of *quality* (Harvey and Green 1993). We further highlight the interplay between assessment and quality and the implications of this for students from poor and marginalised urban and rural communities. We intend to demonstrate that while notable efforts were made during ERT&L to accommodate barriers to learning for students from poor and marginalised communities (through the provision of laptops, data and various forms of student support), these efforts largely addressed structural inequalities (Badat and Sayed 2014). However, assessment strategies driven primarily by certification purposes and underpinned by conceptions of quality as 'exceptional' (Harvey and Green, 1993) may have heightened social inequities (i.e., fairness and just treatment (Badat and Sayed 2014)), particularly for the most disadvantaged students. This stance is justified in relation to the concept of participatory parity within the economic, cultural, and political dimensions of social justice in education theorized by Fraser (2003; 2007), as discussed in the next section.

Dimensions of social justice in higher education

Descriptions of social justice in higher education are wrought with contestations. For our purposes, however, Fraser's theorisation of the three domains of social justice in education provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the issues of social justice that arose in the sphere of assessments during ERT&L.

The economic dimension of Fraser's theory may be summarised as that which refers to the distribution of material resources that enable or constrain participation as equals (Fraser 2003). In this respect, the unequal distribution of resources prevents or constrain participation for those who are marginalised or deprived of such resources. In contrast, the cultural dimension is based on the notion of equal respect for all participants and equal opportunities for achieving social esteem. Participatory parity may be prevented in the cultural domain "through a hierarchical status order in which institutionalized patterns of cultural value depreciate certain attributes

associated with people or the activities in which they are engaged” (Bozalek and Boughey 2012, 689). The political dimension, on the other hand, refers to representation and boundary setting, where the rules for participation are based on criteria of social belonging that determine eligibility for participation (Fraser 2007). The theory thus provides a useful framework for distinguishing between different sources and forms of marginalisation and injustice in higher education. However, we acknowledge Fraser’s proviso that these dimensions are separated only for the purposes of analysis. In reality, these intertwine in complex and often intangible ways, adding to the difficulty of clearly defining social justice in education. Still, the domains provide a useful analytical framework for explaining the structuring and organisation of social interactions in higher education (including teaching, learning, and assessment). This is particularly relevant in the context of a country like South Africa, where the effects of colonisation and apartheid continue to inflict social injustices on many levels of society, including higher education (Badat and Sayed 2014).

Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007) highlight the effect and impact of ongoing social injustices in higher education, pointing out that it is often students from poor and marginalised communities who are most disadvantaged, as seen in poor pass rates and high level of attrition. This is supported by the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2013), which explained that lingering inequalities keep such students perpetually disadvantaged by virtue of the injustice of non-participation.

In South Africa, the challenge of poor pass rates and high rates of attrition amongst students from poor and marginalised communities has been and continues to be addressed through various academic development and student support initiatives. It may also be addressed more directly by lecturers through pedagogical responsiveness linked to the improvement of the effectiveness of assessment to meet the disciplinary-specific needs, economic needs and address the diverse socio-cultural-historical realities of students (Slonimsky and Shalem, 2006).

Despite various levels and types of support for students, these social justice challenges remain and deepen, signalling the existence of more intractable, often hidden factors, at play. From a pedagogical perspective, it may be argued that assessment is one of the most significant of these factors, especially when viewed in

light of the CHE's recommendation that assessments be used to promote equity and fair chances of success to all students in the face of a diversified student body (CHE 2000). Understanding the nature and purpose of assessment in higher education thus becomes central to our thesis that the disruption to entrenched views of assessment during ERT&L may have exacerbated the divide between the advantaged and the disadvantaged while presenting opportunities for rethinking assessments for greater equity.

The link between assessments and beliefs about quality

The dominant view of assessment is that it is the task, sets of tasks and activities or processes of confirming the achievement of learning outcomes, or measurement of competence and/or quality (Boud 2007). Lockett and Sutherland (2000) address the purpose of assessment through the "why assess" dimension of the process of assessment which they classify broadly into formative and summative purposes, for learning and accreditation purposes respectively. Boud and Falchikov (2006) similarly point out that assessments should serve a dual purpose (or double duty), i.e., as a tool to drive lifelong learning as well as for accreditation purposes. In a multi-stakeholder landscape like higher education, the task of defining assessment becomes even more complex.

Institutional assessment policies are, for instance, often crafted to foreground the multiple purposes of assessment. However, one often gets a sense that University management is primarily interested in throughputs or completion rates of students because of their link to funding/subsidy and rankings. Quality assurance and accreditation bodies on the other hand, often look at assessment outcomes in relation to graduate attributes, levels of competence, and employability skills. Similarly, employers and professional accreditation bodies view assessment as an indication of the level of graduate competence and institutional standards of exceptional.

From a student perspective, especially students from poor and marginalised communities, assessment may represent the gateway to achieving a higher education qualification, which, in turn, may be viewed as the key to decent

employment (CHE 2013). In contrast, individual lecturers may view assessment as a reflection of the quality of their teaching and student learning (Ramsden 1992). Yet lecturers are also acutely aware that assessment performance serves as a signal to employers and society of students' competence and level of employability. Lecturers are thus always faced with the challenge of balancing the competing demands brought about by the multiple purposes of assessments (Boud 2000). However, Luckett and Sutherland, contend that lecturers often move to assessment methods without first critically considering the purpose of assessment, which, as we will illustrate, may lead to significant challenges when the "what" and "how" is subject to change, as has been the case during ERT&L. Nevertheless, all views of assessment tend to be underpinned by conceptions of quality in some way.

Conceptions of quality

The concept of quality is equally complex and difficult to define because it too may mean different things to different individuals and different institutions, based on personal and institutional values and cultural norms. Nevertheless, it is a critical component in the education landscape, with the UNESCO Global Education 2030 Agenda stating a clear aim to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" (UNESCO 2015). Harvey and Green (1993), however, provided a useful framework for analysing and defining quality, by providing 5 categories into which different conceptions of quality could be understood, viz., 1) quality as exceptional; 2) quality as perfection; 3) quality as fit for purpose; 4) quality as value for money; 5) and quality as transformation of the student. Quality as exceptional or as perfection may be linked to institutional prestige, rankings, and international gold standards. However, if learning, competence development, and employability are the ultimate goals, then assessment would link more closely to quality as fit for purpose, while quality as transformation may be more relevant in relation to the graduate identity and skills of self-regulation that may be shaped through the teaching, learning and assessment process. It is, therefore, these conceptions of quality that we will explore further as these came to bear more strongly during ERT&L.

Assessment as "fit for purpose"

The drive for assessment and feedback to be 'fit for purpose' from various education stakeholders highlights the need to rethink the purpose and role of assessment. According to Brown (2019, 54), "Fitness for purpose implies a deliberative and measured approach to decision making around assessment design, so that choices of methodologies and approaches, orientation, agency and timing are all made in alignment with the purposes of the task with that particular cohort of students, at that level, in that context, that subject discipline and at that stage in their academic careers". Under pre Covid-19 circumstances, the dominant purpose of assessment was arguably certification and accountability. In the context of ERT&L, however, the principles of fit for purpose assessment were brought sharply into focus as lecturers grappled with the need to adapt (reimagine) assessment strategies to address the assessment intentions within the contextual constraints and affordances of ERT&L.

In a more general sense, if the purpose is broadened to employability then the conception of "fit for purpose" assessment becomes more complex, especially given the rapidly changing world of work (Barnett 2000). Barnett's theory of a world characterised by rapid change, uncertainty, unpredictability – super complexity (of which Covid-19 has proved characteristic) - suggests that assessments that focus exclusively on the attainment of disciplinary knowledge and skills, will not lead to graduates who are adequately equipped for such a world. This is echoed in studies of employers' perceptions of the workplace readiness of graduates. Griesel and Parker (2009), for example, indicate that many employers of graduates in South Africa are disillusioned with graduate abilities. This resonates with earlier sentiments of Harvey and Mason (1996) that employers believe that graduates possess solid theoretical knowledge but this is increasingly less important than other transferable skills such as critical thinking skills, self-regulation, the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in different and multiple contexts, and the ability to work effectively in teams. The debates about the preparation of graduates for the world of work and fit for purpose assessment thus brings into focus the conceptions of sustainable assessments as transformative learning and quality as the transformation of the student.

Sustainable assessments as transformation

Boud (2000) conceptualised the idea of sustainable assessment as an assessment designed to equip students with the ability to effectively regulate their current and future learning (lifelong) and outcomes. Boud's theorisation of sustainable assessment was expanded on into sustainable feedback by authors such as Hounsell (2007) and Carless and his colleagues who defined it as "dialogic processes and activities which can support and inform the student on the current task, whilst also developing the ability to self-regulate performance on future tasks" (Carless et al. 2011, 397). A central aspect of sustainable assessment and feedback is thus the development of students' self-regulation capabilities, which encompasses the development of reflexivity and evaluative judgements. This requires assessment practices that create opportunities for students to learn how to assess and to practice assessing and providing feedback to themselves and their peers.

Our concern is that even before the shift to ERT&L, the development and adoption of self-regulating assessment approaches were not sufficiently integrated into course designs. It is, therefore, our argument in this paper that the Covid-19 crisis positions sustainable assessment as a way of rethinking teaching, learning, and assessment practices as inclusive and integrated systems that can equip students for the multiplicity of challenges while promoting student autonomy. We contend that with the shift to ERT&L, lecturers were afforded an opportunity to redesign their pedagogical strategies to empower students to be self-managing and self-regulating. In doing so, lecturers may also have been afforded the chance to address social justice imperatives more explicitly, by providing structures to enable greater parity of participation and cultivating attributes for self-determination. However, real gains towards social justice may have been compromised by issues of distrust, underpinned by issues of accountability (Carless 2009). We elaborate on these tensions and affordances next, using the dimensions of assessments and the concept of sustainable assessment to interrogate some of the assessment practices during ERT&L and the broader implications thereof.

Reflections on assessment during ERT&L

Regardless of the mode of teaching and learning, there are established principles of good assessment and feedback (Gibbs and Simpson 2004; Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006) that should underpin what and how to assess. JISC (2010, 14), points out

that these principles, can “ensure that the educational purposes of assessment and feedback are clear and that they are grounded in what is known about good practice...and ...also make it possible to identify where the application of technology may add educational value”. Nicol (2010) similarly emphasizes that assessment should not be an after-thought but should be integral to all aspects of online teaching and learning, guided by the intended learning outcomes. JISC (2010) points out, however, that the use of technology often replicates existing assessment practices rather than embracing sustainable learning-oriented practice that would enhance learning. The different ways in which lecturers used the tools of the institution’s Learning Management System (LMS), is one example that illustrates this point.

Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, our institution’s Learning Management system (LMS) was generally used for administrative purposes (such as communication of course learning outcomes and assessment plans/weightings) despite that it also offered an array of learning and assessment tools. Hence, in the early stages of ERT&L, several key Learning and Teaching units at faculty and institutional level provided support and guidelines geared to familiarising staff with the LMS tools in general as well as various resources that could be used for online assessments. There was a recognition that assessments could no longer take place as planned with the primary focus on summative high stakes assessments. However, the urgency for formal training on the technical aspects of online assessment tools meant a lost opportunity for more critical engagements on the nature (what), purpose (why), and methods (how) of assessment.

The early days of ERT&L were thus characterised by lecturers’ attempts to familiarise themselves with, and use, various features and tools of the LMS, the benefit being that these tools offered simpler ways of delivery of tests/quizzes, assignments, and other forms of assessment while minimising the risk of increasing staff workload. A clear shift in ‘how’ to assess was evident in the postponement of high stakes end-of-topic summative assessment (in the hope that circumstances would soon normalise), and in the provision of numerous small, continuous assessment tasks that would “capture sufficient study time and effort” (Gibbs and Simpson 2005, 12) and enhance student engagement. This shift appeared to align with Carless’ (2007) learning-oriented assessment conception of designing

assessment tasks as learning tasks, the adoption of multiple, low stakes assessments with feedback offering the potential for enhanced student motivation and confidence building. There was also the hope that the provision of small connected tasks would enable students to monitor their learning progress, as recommended by Carless (2015), and in doing so, move towards a view of quality as transformation of the student. However, the assumption underscoring such transformational assessment strategies is that students know what and how to interrogate and internalize feedback to measure their progress towards achieving their learning goals, which may not always be the case.

Indeed, correspondences from students who were struggling with connectivity issues and requiring extensions for completing assessment revealed their major concern to be completion of the assessment tasks rather than any notions of engaging with and learning from the feedback. The fear of failure was subsequently heightened for such students, with potentially negative consequences for their learning. It was also noted by several lecturers that the provision of multiple assessment tasks for engagement purposes without programme wide assessment coordination resulted in several students reportedly feeling overwhelmed and over-assessed. The consequence thereof was students adopting strategic approaches to the completion of these tasks, with observations reported of students choosing to complete assessments perceived to be of higher stakes while ignoring others, and minimal engagement with feedback. We argue that such observations of student behaviour towards assessments were significant insofar as it may have revealed the limitations to student participation and the potential injustice described by Fraser (2003). As such, it is possible that the intentions of such assessment strategies during ERT&L (i.e., to promote learning and engagement), may also have been compromised.

It is important to note too, that while multiple, small assessments were, for the most part, included to promote engagement and learning, some lecturers used quizzes and tests for 'policing' students, highlighting the issue of distrust in assessment as described by Carless (2009). Distrust, marked by the potential for plagiarism and cheating in the virtual assessment environment, quickly became the focus of many discussions among lecturers. Unfortunately, these concerns were confirmed in some instances, where heightened anxiety and inconducive circumstances for learning led

to some students to engage in less honest academic practices during online tests. These practices included cyber cheating and collaborations via social media applications such as WhatsApp, where screenshots were supposedly shared while assessments were being conducted. While such behaviour may have spanned across the board, it can be argued that the more sophisticated options for cheating (e.g., so-called 'contract cheating', involving signing up to online tutor sites and paying for answers to assessment questions) were the purview of those with the socio-economic affordances to do so.

Unsurprisingly, these instances of dishonesty led to increased interest in digital proctoring software. While it may be true that such software enhances the capacity of institutions to detect and deal with academic dishonesty, such applications may run the risk of inflicting a range of additional social injustices which we are only just beginning to realise. It is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these. It does, however, remain a critical point for ongoing discussions and critique. Digital proctoring was not, however, a viable option during ERT&L, and the tensions and dilemmas experienced by lecturers were heightened as the possibility of conducting high stakes invigilated examinations at mid-year diminished. Concerns about cheating and plagiarism consequently compelled many lecturers to postpone high stakes assessment to later in the year, justifying such decisions in terms of validity and accountability, especially accountability to potential employers and other external stakeholders such as professional accreditation bodies. In addition, lecturers also cited concerns around the potential impacts on the quality of assessment among the main reasons for postponing summative assessments until sit-down, invigilated examinations again became possible.

The concerns regarding the negative impacts on assessment quality appeared to be underpinned to some extent by perceptions that objective testing methods (viz., tests and quizzes) available on the LMS are limited to the assessment of higher-order skills favouring the assessment of lower-order cognitive skills. Lecturers also expressed concern that the quality of assessment would also be constrained by lack of sufficient time to design multiple choice and short answer questions in ways that could assess higher-order cognitive skills. There were thus important and valid reasons for the objections and hostility towards online high stakes summative

assessments by some lecturers, underpinned by anxiety about what could be assessed online and how this would affect the interpretation of student performance.

It is worth mentioning that the traditional forms of assessment insisted upon by some lecturers also exemplifies the “unequal power relations between the assessor and assessed” (Knight 2002, 279), with the concerns raised by lecturers foregrounding the power and authority of the lecturer in the assessment process. It could also be argued that rigid adherence to traditional assessment norms and values was indicative of those lecturers’ views of the purpose of assessment as gatekeeping, and their role as gatekeepers. Such notions also foreground the potential injustices arising from impenetrability of the gates for those faced with various types of constraints which were exacerbated during ERT&L, especially those students who were forced to return to home environments that were inconducive for learning and assessment. Importantly, conditions during ERT&L appeared to have sensitised many lecturers to this potential injustice, and some lecturers seized the opportunity presented in the shift to ERT&L to interrogate the university policy on student assessment and to critically engage with the concept, method and purpose of invigilated examinations. Informal discussions revealed an acknowledgement of the need to explore pedagogical sound, valid and reliable online alternatives, and there was also an overwhelming need expressed by many lecturers for ideas on designing assessment tasks that could allow students to showcase their ability to use and apply what they have learned across multiple learning contexts.

Online assessments during ERT&L thus allowed some lecturers to rethink assessments beyond recall or “Googleable” answers type assessment because of the concerns of students’ dishonesty, fear of collusion amongst students, plagiarism, and contract cheating. Lecturers were also increasingly interested in providing assessment opportunities for student partnership and other forms of assessment that could better engage students as active participants in their learning (Bloxham and Boyd 2007). In addition, some lecturers also embraced the opportunity to explore alternative assessments using take-home, reflective and project-based assessments as recommended by Biggs (2012), as well as authentic assessment approaches described by Villaroel et al. (2020).

Authentic and sustainable assessments during ERT&L

According to Biggs (2012), take-home and project-based assessment alternatives are most likely to assess the ability of students to apply, organise and interrelate knowledge, skills, and attitudes, and may, therefore, be better suited to the assessment of the cross-transferable skills increasingly needed in the modern workplace. This is supported by Villaroel et al. (2020), who suggest that adoption of authentic and integrative assessments can be used not only to motivate and engage students but to also address the desire for assessments to reflect what students will do in their professional lives. Authentic assessments may also present opportunities for inducting students into the ways of thinking and practicing in the discipline or profession and to develop the graduate attributes valued by prospective employers, thereby eliciting possibilities for the realisation of the broader conception of quality as fit for purpose described earlier.

The adoption of authentic assessment involving group/peer assessments and project work is not without its challenges, a key issue being how to assess both the process and outcomes/product in fair and valid ways. One way of addressing this challenge was the development and explicit communication of assessment criteria with students. This became crucial for lecturers who attempted such assessments during ERT&L as alternatives to traditional timed and invigilated examinations. For some lecturers who really pushed the boundaries of tradition and involved students in the process of conceptualising the assessment criteria, the shift away from traditional forms of assessment resulted greater transparency, greater participatory parity and reduced power differentials between students and lecturers. It could, therefore, be hypothesised that such approaches might have engaged students in deeper approaches to learning.

However, we are emphatic in our avoidance of any claims regarding the impact of any assessment strategies on pass rates during the Covid-19 pandemic as student performance could have been due to any number of different causal factors for each student. Nevertheless, we speculate that lecturer who attempted to implement alternative high stakes assessments were also afforded the chance to explore possibilities for greater adoption of sustainable assessment strategies, with greater potential for developing self-reflexivity and evaluation competencies in students. In

the absence of analyses of actual assessment documentation, however, we cannot confirm this to have been the case.

The adoption of sustainable and learning-oriented assessment during ERT&L also allowed lecturers to explore alternative ways of assessing discipline-specific skills and content, as well as other 21st century/ 4th Industrial revolution related skills, attributes, and competencies. The assessment of discipline-specific skills (i.e., laboratory and fieldwork) during ERT&L did, however, prove more challenging for lecturers in some fields such as Science and Health Science, where access to laboratory or field station facilities proved problematic. Even though simulations, interactive virtual laboratories, and the use of online data sets were adopted, there was a feeling that these were not adequate in addressing some of the intended learning outcomes. The listed options cannot assess all the skills and competence normally assessed in laboratory, experimental, and field contexts such as equipment handling techniques (hands-on skills) and students were in effect, robbed of the benefits of genuine experiential learning opportunities. Also, while these options were available for assessment purposes, they required reliable and stable internet access - a requirement which some students in rural areas of South Africa simply did not have access to during periods of the Covid-19 lockdown. Thus, when viewed through a social justice lens, it becomes clear that these options, while potentially useful, could amplify inequalities for students from poor and marginalised communities.

Apart from authentic assessments involving simulations and virtual laboratories, encompassed in the shift towards more authentic assessments was also some notable shifts towards greater inclusion of opportunities for reflection and reflexivity, in both individual and peer settings. As such, there appeared to be a gradual but marked shift in the purpose of assessment amongst some lecturers at our institution, from assessment *of* learning to assessment *for* learning, accompanied by a broadening of the view of quality to include quality as personal transformation.

The challenge with authentic assessments and a more explicit focus on reflection and reflexivity, however, was how to ensure that the assessment tasks were inclusive and fair to all students. For instance, lecturers needed to consider students' social and cultural familiarity with illustrations or scenarios used. Socio-cultural

differences also needed to be accounted for when setting up collaborative tasks among students from diverse backgrounds and material circumstances, and also when assessing reflection pieces influenced by different prior experiences and different worldviews. By keeping such consideration in mind and designing assessment criteria that explicitly accounted for differences, lecturers adopting such assessment strategies would also have addressed issues of fairness and Fraser's cultural dimension of social justice.

Sensitivity to issues of fairness in assessment was also highlighted in conversations with staff about how to respond to students (i.e., how to provide feedback) during ERT&L. The key to effective feedback design that enhance learning is to provide feedback which "clarify good performance, allowing students to reflect, act on and self-correct through interactions and dialogue with peers and lecturers" (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006). The utilisation of the LMS digital tools such as automated multiple-choice questions (MCQs) tests and quizzes brought about challenges and affordances on how to respond to the outcomes of these assessments. The feedback from automated assessments was generally in the form of marks indicating the extent of acquisition or mastery of content knowledge. However, Biggs (2012, 50) warns that "quantifying performances gives little indication of the *quality* of the performance". Also, as mentioned earlier, lecturers' adoption of multiple low stakes objective assessments and students' performance on these assessments might not be a good indicator of students' progress towards achieving the learning outcomes. Hence the need to have a variety of assessment tasks to cater to different learning outcomes and to accommodate for the diversity in students' learning contexts and preferences.

In cases where the assessment designs required students to show conceptual understanding/change by providing justifications for their responses in quizzes/tests or produce assignment/essays with extensive writing, these presented opportunities for individualised/personalised feedback and dialogic forms of the learning and teaching processes (Carless et al. 2011). LMS-based options of providing audio and video feedback can be seen as promoting social online presence, potentially tapping into dialogic forms of feedback and bringing students more directly into the assessment and feedback 'conversation'. In instances of collaborative assessments

through the LMS Chats and Forum tools, both the process and product outcomes are likely to generate dialogic feedback between students and teachers, and among students, with many benefits to such interactions. For example, as students reflected on the feedback received, they would develop self-reflective, self-managing, and evaluative skills especially when assessment criteria and intended learning outcomes are transparent (Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick 2006; Nicol 2010). This raises the possibility of shifting the assessment and feedback into a more transformative process. Furthermore, such practices present greater opportunities for students to shift from peripheral (or marginal) participation (Lave and Wenger 1991), to more integral participation in the assessment process and the learning community, thereby boosting students' confidence as their voices (and values) become heard and acknowledged.

Despite the many potential benefits of participatory assessments to empower students, some lecturers participating in webinars and other staff development forums reported mixed successes with these. In cases where the approaches worked well, student-led conversations provided valuable learning opportunities. It should be noted, however, that access and participation on this forums and group chats appeared to favour students with particular forms of socio-cultural capital, i.e., students who were more confident and who were consequently able to voice their opinions more easily in group settings.

With the increasing demand for providing timely and appropriate feedback amidst concerns of staff workload, the institution also explored the use of various digital assessment and feedback applications. What became clear to us was that adoption of these tools required lecturers to apply sound pedagogical strategies to make them effective learning tools. Designing rubrics and assessment criteria as a basis for marking and providing feedback within these applications also required significant manual input in terms of design and thought from lecturers. Equally, students had to be provided with opportunities to become familiar with these applications before they were used in higher stakes assessments. Thus, whilst there were notable affordances to the use of such applications, the trade-offs also became apparent, as did the realisation that without the intentionality of use, these applications could veer towards summative rather formative purposes of assessment.

It is, therefore, clear that despite the many possibilities for shifting away from a 'marks dominated' culture of assessment of learning that emerged during ERT&L, there was still an underlying value for high stakes, summative purposes indicating the deeply entrenched view of quality as exceptional in our context, and the pivotal role of assessment in signalling this value.

Two issues emerge in this regard that are worth noting in relation to our central argument. Firstly, although many lecturers did shift to more integrated assessment, including portfolios of learning where possible, many students still sat for timed, summative assessments online amidst the fear of technical difficulties, poor internet connectivity, and numerous uncertainties about the online assessment protocols and procedures. While this may have been true for many students, there almost certainly were those who were more affected by such challenges, leading to higher levels of stress and anxiety for such students. This brings into question the reliability of the assessment as a true indication of student performance.

Secondly, while institutional provisions were made to support students who were not able to participate effectively in ERT&L courses, these provisions were usually in the form of short, intensive boot camps characterised by cognitive overload and little time for formative feedback. Thus, while substantial efforts were made nationally and by individual institutions to ensure completion of the academic year for most students, these efforts were targeted at the obvious barriers to access and participation while other barriers may have been overlooked or unexplored. It is, therefore, likely that many limitations to full and equal participation remained for some students. These limitations cannot be ignored when interpreting performance.

Conclusion

While it is indisputable that most institutions and individual lecturers attempted to maintain the standard, integrity, and credibility of the assessments processes during ERT&L, our observations of lecturers' and students' assessment practices and behaviour suggest that the reliability of assessments conducted during this period may be clouded by layers of complexities and challenges. From concerns about the level of cognitive demand possible in online assessments, to allegations of cheating and collusions, and heightened levels of anxiety, it becomes difficult to interpret the

assessments as reliable indicators of students' achievement of learning outcomes. The digital divide foregrounded during ERT&L, as well as the impact of stark differences in material circumstances amongst students (especially during the period of lockdown) also highlighted numerous instances of social injustices that were suddenly exaggerated during this time.

However, ERT&L has provided an unforeseen opportunity to reveal the complex interplay between assessment purpose, conceptions of quality, and the impacts of these on achieving social justice in higher education. By revealing certain entrenched assessment practices that have arguably limited genuine and full participation in learning for students from poor and marginalised communities, lecturers have become more aware of the material realities of students and the numerous actual and potential challenges to full participation in the learning process and in assessment in particular. This realisation and awareness led many lecturers to explore alternative assessment options that minimised those challenges, thus achieving greater levels of parity of participation for many students.

Rethinking teaching and redesigning assessment strategies during ERT&L also appears to have triggered a shift in assessment ideology for many lecturers. Possibilities have begun to emerge for a broadened view of assessment that recognises that the need for pragmatism but also acknowledges the fact that assessment *for* and *of* learning will always remain in tension, given the many stakeholders with different vested interests. We suggest that when assessments are designed for these dual purposes with conceptions of quality as 'fit for purpose' and as 'transformation' in mind, the outcome will inevitably be one of quality as exceptional, not only for those students with the resources to succeed but for *all* students. However, ERT&L also drew attention to the limitations and potential injustices that may arise when one purpose of assessment and a singular view of quality is privileged.

It is also important to remind ourselves that this is not the first time that a crisis forced a re-think of assessments in our context. The #Feesmustfall protests of 2015 and 2016 had also provided the grounds for these reflections and shifts in praxis, however, our experience is that most of the assessment practices that emerged

during those years were not sustained beyond the protests. It, therefore, remains to be seen if the unexpected gains and insights achieved during ERT&L will be sustained in the longer term. What is clear, however, is that as we move into blended or hybrid models post Covid-19, lecturers will inevitably draw on the lessons learned during Covid-19 to meet the needs of students in the teaching and learning paradigm that will emerge. Doing so in a critical and reflexive manner may lead to more equitable learning experiences and more sustainable outcomes for students.

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