Enhancing the Quality of Online Assessment in Higher Education

Sylvia Ndapewa Ithindi[1], Elock Emvula Shikalepo[2]

[1,2]Faculty of Education the International University of Management, Namibia

ABSTRACT: The devastating effect of Covid-19 have prompted educational practitioners to maximise efforts for ensuring continuous teaching, learning and assessment, by making use of instructional and assessment methods that do not involve human contact. The use of eLearning has since gained momentum, used for curriculum instruction and assessment. The purpose of this study was to establish the authenticity online assessment as used in higher education institutions, with the aim of advancing a model for ensuring an effective online assessment of curriculum content during and post-Covid-19 era. A desktop research methodology was used to gather data for the study. Published research articles on the challenges and effectiveness of online assessment were traced, reviewed and analysed according to predetermined topics of research interests. The findings from the review informed the themes that were interpreted and discussed as ultimate answers for the study. The interpretation of the themes draws insights from literature evidence and current observations in the field of online assessment.

The study established that online assessment was characterised by challenges that compromised its authenticity, thus not contributing to the effective mastery of learning outcomes by students. As students attempt assessment tasks on their own, it was difficult to establish if the submitted work was indeed their own or not. In addition, assessment tasks were too many and impractical for students to handle in a given time. Covid-19 pandemic requires that higher education institutions consider employing online instruction and assessment. However, online assessment methods should be authentic in design and implementation to reflect good quality teaching and learning. The study recommends that higher educational institutions should use online assessment methods that enhance objective and credible assessment such as administering synchronous activities and by customising assessment tasks for students.

KEYWORDS: Online assessment, Authentic assessment, eLearning, Covid-19, Higher education.

A. BACKGROUND

The onset of the Fourth Industrial revolution has caused changes to the traditional way of teaching, learning and assessment, requiring a paradigm shift from traditional educational practices to contemporary digital methods of teaching and learning. The International Council for Open and Distance Education predicts that online learning delivery formats will become the most significant driver of higher education all over the world (Walsh, 2009). As this new mode of instruction becomes more prevalent globally in higher education institutions, it is important to study the design and teaching of online courses, identifying challenges lecturers face and highlighting effective practices in the digital environment that will enable lecturer to propose strategies that can improve the authenticity of digital teaching, learning and assessment (Kearns, 2012). As civilisation gains momentum, traditional instructional practices need to shift into digital modes.

The need for shifting learning to digital modes became a complete necessity for making education possible in the midst of epidemiological challenges, notably the Covid-19 pandemic. The devastating effect of Covid-19 have prompted educational practitioners to maximise efforts for ensuring continuous teaching, learning and assessment, by making use of instructional and assessment methods that do not involve human contact. The use of elearning has since gained momentum, by used for curriculum instruction and assessment. elearning requires the use of multiple instructional and assessment methods to render digital learning effective. These methods included projects, portfolios, self-assessments activities, peer evaluations, peer evaluations with feedback, timed tests and quizzes, and asynchronous discussion (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007). Even though there is a myriad of online assessment methods, the challenges facing the implementation of this methods is now sufficiently documented, attracting further inquiry to establish these challenges and how they can be addressed to improve online assessment.

The purpose of this study was to establish the challenges facing written online assessment in higher education with the aim of improving the authenticity of online assessment as commonly used in institutions of higher education. A better understanding of the

challenges facing online assessment in higher education may help to inform the development of a framework for ensuring an authentic online assessment practices and methods of curriculum content during and post-Covid-19 era.

The study sought to address the following key questions:

1. What are the challenges facing assessment in higher education during the digital era?
2. How can the quality of assessment in higher education be improved in the digital era?

B. METHODOLOGY

A desktop research methodology was used to gather data for the study. Published research articles on the challenges and effectiveness of online assessment were traced, reviewed and analysed according to predetermined topics of research interests. The findings from the review informed the themes that were interpreted and discussed as ultimate answers for the study. The interpretation of the themes draws insights from literature evidence and current observations by the researchers in the field of online assessment.

C. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The necessity and benefits of online assessment is well documented in literature (Kearns, 2012; Nurwulan, Kurniawan, Rahmasari, Rahmasanti, Abbas, & Hadyanto, 2021). The findings from the analysis revealed that although written online assessment is the best method for assessing curriculum content during the Covid-19 era, the study established that online assessment was characterised by challenges that compromised its authenticity, thus not contributing to the effective mastery of learning outcomes by students in higher educations. These challenges related to the following:

The cost of technologies: The cost of the digital tools was often too high and not affordable to students and institutions. Some parents have low incomes, and they are automatically overwhelmed to meet their children's technological devices needs (Lubis & Dasopang, 2021). As a result, most students failed to access the given tasks well on times on the Learning Management System (LMS), ultimately failing to submit completed work on time due to the lack of the required electronics to carry out online assessment activities (Farhana, Tanni, Shabnam, & Chowdhury, 2020). Consequently, the schedule in terms of when the assessment tasks should be handed in is often compromised and having to be extended numerously in order to accommodate students who are struggling with the acquisition of the required technologies.

Originality of submitted work: Online assessment is challenged by the physical distance between lecturers and their students, making students to often complete assessment activities on their convenience. As students attempt assessment tasks on their own, it was difficult for lecturers to establish if the submitted work was indeed their own or not (Baijnath & Singh (2019). Some assessment tasks were not taken at the same time by students, making the assessment vulnerable to students to copy answers from one another. In addition, some tasks provide numerous attempts for students, which provided enough rooms for students to change their answers at any given time. Pal, Funilkul and Vanijja (2018) argue that students occasionally receive external assistance via smartphones or smart watches when completing online assessments, giving an impression that it is the students own answer when it is actually not. Additionally, the systems used by students provide numerous opportunities for cheating, such as connecting external storage devices and screen sharing. Such pitfalls within the assessment processes do not reflect well on the authenticity of the answers that students provides.

Increased workload: Assessment tasks were too many and impractical for students to handle in a given time. Nurwulan et al, (2021) revealed that the digital platforms provide good opportunities for lecturers to administer the assessment activities to students due to the convenience the platforms come with. However, some lecturers administer numerous activities to students at once, making it difficult for students to cope with the completion of the given tasks. Ultimately, students are faced with loads of work, often for different subject areas to work within a limited time frame (Lim, 2020). This implies that students may not devote enough time to each tasks and provide a required authentic answers as they could have provided had they have a manageable workload to work on. It becomes clear that online assessment does present numerous benefits to teaching and learning in the digital era, but it also come a fair share of challenges as outlined above. Having an understanding of the challenges facing the implementation of various methods of online assessment may inform lecturers of the best practices to employ in the design and implementation of their assessment activities in order to safeguard objectivity and authenticity of their assessment work.

To improve the authenticity of the digital assessment in higher education, the following strategies are essential for considerations:

Subsidizing gadgets for students: Institutions of higher education should liaise with the corporate community to provide sponsorship for instructional gadgets to students in order to save students who cannot afford the cost of acquiring the required technologies for learning (Farhana, et al, 2020). Alternatively, Lim (2020) is of the opinion that students-tailored acquisition packages should be negotiated in order to allow students to acquire the gadgets at lower prices. Such interventions will ensure that students have the required technologies to render their digital learning effective as required without compromise.

Appropriately paced assessment tasks: Students often complained of being subjected to numerous online tasks for different courses, with no enough time to complete one task and continue with another one. As a result, students have a multitasking schedule of completing different tasks within a short space of time, which can compromise on the quality of assessment. There is a need for

lecturers to space the assessment tasks appropriately, by ensuring that students have enough time to attempt a given assessment tasks successfully before being subjected to another task.

Timed assessment activities: To enhance the authenticity of the students' answers to a given assessment tasks, it is essential that assessment tasks should ideally be timed to be taken by students at the same. Synchronous assessment activities ensures that all students take the task at the same time, thereby minimising the chances of students having to copy the answers from their peers and write them as theirs, compromising the originality of their answers.

Timely meaningful feedback/individualised: Online assessment often involves students attempting different assessment tasks differently, thus attracting individualised feedback from the lecturers in terms of the specific points of strength and points of weakness that a specific student should improve on. Some lecturers often provide generalised feedbacks to students making it difficult for students to trace which of the given feedback comments relates to their level of performance in a given assessment tasks. Providing individualised feedback will help to improve the quality of assessment as comments specific to a student makes the students accountable to improve on what has to be improved for better performance in future assessment activities.

Commitment to student discussion posting: It has been observed that some lecturer pays limited attention to discussion forums of students (Gaytan & McEwen, 2007). Discussion forums are good avenue for lecturers to engage wit students, given them a topic of discussion and assess their level of participation thereof, thereby being able to detect how well students have mastered the contents and which subject areas needs further emphasis. Lack of commitments to discussion forums implies that students interact with one another without any expert guidance to provide clarity of thought and direction about the learning outcomes, ultimately disadvantaging students and defeating the aim of assessment through discussion forums.

D. CONCLUSION

Covid-19 pandemic requires that higher education institutions consider employing online instruction and assessment strategies in order to ensure minimal disturbances to teaching and learning. However, online assessment methods is characterised by numerous challenges that lecturers need to be aware of and reduce their impacts on the quality of assessment. This implies that, despite the assessment being conducted online, it should be authentic in design and implementation to reflect good quality teaching and learning.

E. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the literature review, and as discussed, the following strategies are proposed for consideration and subsequent implementations by all online educators and facilitators:

Administering synchronous activities: Conduct written tests to be done synchronous so that teachers can monitor the process of students the time they are writing the test. Online discussion with peer assessments should be done synchronous so that all participants in the study group can be active and build interaction. The synchronous assessment method will be the best as it is carried out in real-time, which is during the online learning process compared to the asynchronous assessment method, which is not done in real-time and as a result most of the time is characterised by the issue of plagiarism.

Customising assessment tasks for students: assessment task should be designed in such a way that they become difficult for students to copy from one another. The assessment items, such as questions, should be reshuffled so that each question appears at a different numbering and time to different students. This will ensure objective answers from individual students. In addition the review options should ideally be set so that students are able to see their feedback after the due date for the given task.

Individualised feedback: lecturers should provide timely and individualised feedback to students in order to cultivate positive experiences of online assessment from students. Yang and Cornelius (2014) explained that the delayed feedback from the lecturers was conceived as the main factor which shaped students' negative experience on the quality of online assessment. Students expect to receive timely feedback from lecturers on any assessment done online but this is not the case most of the time.

It is highly recommended that higher educational institutions should consider and subsequently implement the above online assessment methods and techniques that may enhance the objectivity and credibility of the online assessment in higher education.

REFERENCES

1) Baijnath N, Singh D (2019) Examination cheating: risks to the quality and integrity of higher education. *S Afr J Sci* 115(11/12):1–6. https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2019/6281
2) Farhana, Z., Tanni, S. A., Shabnam, S., & Chowdhury, S. A. (2020). *Secondary Education during Lockdown Situation Due to Covid-19 Pandemic in Bangladesh:* Teachers' Response on Online Classes.
3) Gaytan, J., & McEwen, B. C. (2007). Effective online instructional and assessment strategies. *The American Journal of Distance Education,* 21(3), 117-132. doi:10.1080/08923640701341653
4) Gupta, R., Aggarwal, A., Sable, D., Chahar, P., Sharma, A., Kumari, A., & Maji, R. (2021). Covid-19 Pandemic and Online Education: Impact on Students, Parents and Teachers. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment,* 1-24.
5) Kearns, L.R. (2012). Student Assessment in Online Learning: Challenges and Effective Practices. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching.* 8(3):198-208.

6) Lim, I. (2020). Reality for Malaysia's university students: Online learning challenges, stress, workload; possible solutions for fully digital future until Dec. *Malay Mail, 16.*

7) Nurwulan, N. R., Kurniawan, B. A., Rahmasari, D. A., Rahmasanti, J. W., Abbas, N. A., & Hadyanto, M. H. (2021). Students Workload and Stress Level during COVID-19 Pandemic. *Indonesian Journal of Educational Studies,* 24(1), 9-16.

8) Pal, D. Funilkul, S. & Vanijja, V. (2018). the future of smart watches: assessing the end-users' continuous usage using an extended expectation-confirmation model. *Universal Access in the Information Society.* Doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10209-018-0639-z

9) Walsh, P. (2009). *Global trends in higher education, adult and distance learning*. Oslo, Norway: International Council for Open and Distance Education. Retrieved from
http://www.icde.org/filestore/Resources/Reports/FINALICDEENVIRNOMENTALSCAN05.02.pdf

10) Yang, Y., & Cornelius, L. F. (2004). *Students' perceptions towards the quality of online education: A qualitative approach.* Association for Educational Communications and Technology.