Shifting assessment paradigms in South African higher education: Evolving towards transformative approaches to policy development.

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ABSTRACT

Assessment policies facilitate the optimisation of learning and academic performance through the provision of fair, equitable, and standardised criteria for evaluation. In recent years, the assessment policies of three South African universities have been reviewed. These policies, in comparison to their previous iterations, are indicative of transformative approaches taken in assessment practices in South Africa amid broader disruptions to higher education. This article explores shifts in assessment paradigms in South African higher education using a conceptual framework of positivist and behaviourist, interpretative and constructivist, and socio-constructivist views. Document analysis identifies several notable trends, including a shift in the purpose of assessment away from assessment of learning to assessment for learning and assessment as learning. The paradigm shift is characterised by changes in the approach from a rules-based, with specific prescriptions, to principles and values-based approaches. The growing use of alternative and technology-enhanced online assessment methods, along with the need for flexibility, are more prominent additions to these new policies post-COVID-19. However, being mindful of the South African context, culturally sensitive and fair assessment practices, that consider the diversity of South African learners, and the role of assessment in promoting equity, social justice, and quality learning, are highlighted.

Background

At the turn of the new democratic dispensation in South Africa in 1994, there was a shift in education reform as politicians, policymakers, and administrators opted for a transformative outcomes-based education (OBE) approach. By adopting models from the global North which used integrated education and training systems, South African policymakers selected transformational OBE in response to economic and political imperatives to develop a more skilled and flexible workforce (Cretchley & Castle, 2001). Transformational OBE appeared to be the most attractive choice for South Africa, where rapid social change was demanded.

In the period before 1994, assessment policies emphasised ideological and oppressive aspects of an exclusive system of education in South Africa which led to unequal epistemological access. During this period, assessment was examination-driven and norm-referenced, and was used mainly for summative purposes. Assessment focused primarily on recall of content and was generally viewed as separate from teaching processes (Reddy, Le Grange, Beets & Lundie, 2022). The introduction of OBE signified a radical shift in the delivery of education and training in South Africa, given its emphasis on learner-centred, results-orientated design (Spreen & Valley, 2010). The focus of outcomes-based assessment thus shifted from a system of accountability to measuring of student learning. This shift may have occurred at different times for the countries following this educational approach, but the impetus was the same, namely, the increase in student population leading to the debate over standards or the quality of standards. A significant change in the nature and purpose of assessment in universities came with the incremental introduction of continuous assessment (CASS) into higher education. The stated rationale for CASS was to improve performance of learning and teaching (Reddy et al., 2022).

The formulation of assessment policies for universities after 1994 placed a significant focus on pedagogies built around the needs of the individual learner. The stated intention of outcomes-based assessment was that alternative assessment opportunities would be used throughout the year to assist lecturers and students to work towards achieving the intended learning outcomes. In this way, assessment would form an integral part of both teaching and learning. In order to direct the outcomes-based learning process, criterion-referenced assessment was preferred in different assessment types where a set of pre-determined criteria was used to evaluate students based on the lecturer's judgment on what students knew at that point in time. These were done as a form of group, self-, and peer assessment. Assessment was therefore not only intended to identify problems

but also to provide valid information about the student's level of achievement that could be used to inform teaching and indicate the next steps in order for the student to progress.

In 2016, in a definite move to delegate management and control over assessment to higher education institutions, the Council for Higher Education (CHE) issued higher education institutions with Policies on the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT), and Assessment in Higher Education. These policies provide higher education institutions with appropriate directives and procedures for the development, application, and assessment of the effectiveness of their internal mechanisms in relation to RPL, CAT, and Assessment. The Assessment in Higher Education policy (2016) specifies the directives and procedures for the development, application, and assessment of the effectiveness of the internal mechanisms for assessment, with the request that all higher education institutions ought to develop their own assessment policies (CHE, 2016).

The diversification of the South African higher education student population post-Apartheid, incorporating students from disparate and 'non-traditional' backgrounds of academic unpreparedness brought challenges of retention, attrition, and how to ensure academic success (i.e., throughput and graduation) (Visser and van Zyl, 2013; Mabokela & Mambo, 2017; Maniram & Maistry, 2018). COVID-19 exacerbated these challenges (Maringe & Chiramba, 2022; Menon & Matala, 2022; Theme & Mabasa, 2022). It has been argued that merely increasing physical access to higher education (i.e., access as increased participation) is not enough to bring about the transformation of South African higher education; rather, we need improved epistemological access (i.e., access as increased academic success) (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007; Mabokela & Mlambo, 2017; Maniram & Maistry, 2018). The authors continue to argue for quality assurance frameworks that institutionalise access initiatives (Akoojee & Nkomo, 2007). We believe that this includes assessment policies that centre student learning and success, for, "Assessments and examinations are thus effectively means used to estimate the quantity and quality of epistemological access students may have gained through their courses of study" (Maringe & Chiramba, 2022, p.13).

Higher education institutions in South Africa are autonomous (Zaahedah, Matlala, Sibiya, & Makhoabenyane, 2020). Their assessment policy documents demonstrate how they have interpreted the purpose and fitness of their assessment (Boughey & McKenna, 2021). This paper will explore how three South African universities have interpreted assessment, and what paradigm shifts they have undergone in recent times.

The evolution of assessment within learning and teaching paradigms

The evolution of assessment policies in higher education, at a certain juncture in time, is inextricably linked to the prevailing view on learning and teaching. In reviewing how assessment relates to theoretical positioning, Yorke (2003) points out how the "philosophical" and "theoretical" contexts of assessment are often ignored. It is argued that there is a need for further theoretical development regarding assessment that takes account of: disciplinary epistemology; theories of intellectual and moral development; students' stages of intellectual development; and the psychology of giving and receiving feedback (Yorke, 2003).

This review on how assessment policies, practices, and perspectives evolved makes examining the knowledge base, on which assessment is built, worthwhile. The pertinent paradigms have disparate knowledge-constitutive interests (ontologically, epistemologically, and axiologically disparate) and so their criteria or standards for determining rigour may differ (Le Grange & Beets, 2005b). Table 1 below categorises the evolution of assessment and grounds it theoretically within disparate paradigms. However, like Beets and Le Grange (2005b), we acknowledge the potential risk that any classification scheme may lead to an overly narrow interpretation of the content, whereby assessment appears to be rigidly framed within defined paradigms. The boundaries between different paradigms, and assessment types framed within them, are often blurred and a term may be used to describe assessment but differ in meaning within disparate paradigms. For example: the conventional understanding of validity that 'a test measures what it is supposed to measure', has positivist underpinnings. Drawing on insights from the work of Messick (1989), he notes that the meaning of the term validity has evolved with time and that a more recent understanding of validity concerns the extent to which justifiable inferences can be made on the basis of evidence gathered. Validity as inference is a useful idea because it holds the promise of liberating assessment practices from their behaviourist orientations which were informed by measurement theories of the 1950s. Thus, assessment-based inferences relates to the post-structuralist view of assessment.

Despite its limitations, we provide the classification framework as a conceptual tool for advancing arguments and for facilitating thinking/learning, i.e., for heuristic purposes. The assessment policies, practices, and perspectives mentioned are variously explored for a more nuanced understanding of how assessment policies have evolved since 1994.

Table 1. A summation assessment of policy and practices within a paradigmatic framework

ASSESSMENT POLICY, PRACTICES, AND PERSPECTIVES

STRUCTURALISM   POST-STRUCTURALISM

Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
UNIVERSITY			
Institutional perspective			
Transformation			
Purpose of the policy			
Purpose of assessment			
Assessment of/for/as learning			
Validity & Reliability			
Fairness			
Integrated assessment (alignment)			
Competency based assessment			

Different assessment practices link different learning theories or perspectives. Different types of assessment practices appeared to be associated with lecturers' differing views of learning and the relationship of assessment to the process of intervening to support learning, which provides a continuum of possibilities for lecturers.

A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment

The traditional outcomes-based assessment model gave voice to the justification for the scientific management of teaching and learning in a way that establishes a correspondence between behaviourism, positivism, and assessment.

A behaviourist view of assessment

The traditional outcomes-based assessment model has a long and somewhat controversial history, particularly in the United States of America (USA) (Priestley & Humes, 2010). It has its roots in scientific management and behaviourist psychology, finding its first expression in education through the work of Bobbit and maturing via Tyler's Rational Curriculum and Bloom's taxonomy (Tyler, 1949). In the United Kingdom (UK), objectives were utilised in school council projects (Stenhouse, 1975) and later became a fundamental part of competency-based education and training (CBET). CBET is

arguably a strong behaviourist model, where the curriculum states specific outcomes that are designed for assessment purposes.

Ozman and Craver (2003) explain that within the context of this behaviour manipulation, behaviourism is systematic and meaningful conditioning, to bolster desirable behaviour, by means of the extrinsic or intrinsic reward of the learner or, as Beets (2007) describes it, the basic principle that rewarding certain behaviour will make repetition of such behaviour, under similar conditions, likely. Behaviouristic techniques in education are mainly aimed at altering behaviour and guiding it into more desirable directions. Beets (2007) points out that a learner's behaviour is always controlled by external factors and lecturers must apply these spheres of external influence to facilitate learning. Behaviourism looks at the observable actions of students and assesses whether the students are learning as effectively as possible. The central belief of a behaviourist is that students learn through reinforcement and constant feedback that tells them whether what they are doing is right or wrong.

A positivist view of assessment

The conventional and positivist definition of assessment, "a test measures what it is supposed to measure", is informed by measurement theories from the 1950s (Le Grange & Beets, 2005b). A positivist view of assessment, therefore, according to Le Grange and Beets (2005b), employs technical/instrumental reasoning, with predefined ends attained by following known rules and predefined means (e.g., the textbook version of the scientific method). Le Grange and Beets (2005b) describe this kind of knowledge as being informed by technical interest and, as Usher (1996) confirms, this view of assessment is associated with prediction and control. "Outcomes", "verifiable statements of performance" and "performance indicators" appeared in the early 1980s as the outriders of the new technology of control within education (Smyth & Dow, 2006).

Convergent assessment tests whether students can fulfil pre-specified objectives, Torrance and Pryor (2001) explain, whereas divergent assessment tests students' ability to succeed in more open-ended tasks. In convergent assessment it is important to determine if the student knows, understands, or is capable of a predetermined concept. Here the interaction of the student with the curriculum is viewed from a curricular perspective. The theoretical origins of such an approach would appear, at least implicitly, to be behaviourist and derived from the mastery-learning models, involving assessment of the learner by the lecturer (Torrance & Pryor, 2001).

Divergent assessment entails adopting a constructivist view of learning, with the intention to teach in the zone of proximal development (ZDP) (Vygotsky, 1978). Wood (1987) captures the essence of divergent assessment in his discussion on a student's "maximum performance" in the light of Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD. The ZPD is broadly stated as the region between the student's existing problem-solving ability and the ability to solve more complex problems given guidance and support from the lecturer, by proposing active collaboration between the lecturer and the student to produce a best performance. Assessment is thereby jointly accomplished by the lecturer and the student geared towards future development, rather than measurement of past or current achievement. Torrance and Pryor (2001) employ divergent assessment as a heuristic device to explore and expand the boundaries of classroom practice. This view of assessment is more closely related to contemporary theories of learning and accepts the complexity of assessment. The theoretical implications of this more divergent assessment approach are typified by a constructivist view of learning, involving assessment for the learner with the lecturer (Torrance & Pryor, 2001).

In contrast, assessment in the 1980s was viewed as technical, without an understanding of the complexities of universities or how academics view their diverse roles. If unchecked, there is a real danger that the uncritical acceptance of increasingly prescriptive, standardised outcomes will create cynical, instrumental attitudes to learning and remove critical dimensions of student-centredness from higher education. The power of assessment to shape the wider of cultural and social purposes of learning was overlooked.

Interpretive and constructivist views on assessment

The 1990s were characterised by patterns of change, such as contrasting the contemporary and the conventional. This also reflects the shift from a technical paradigm/interest to a practical paradigm/interest for assessment, i.e., from a positivist approach to an interpretivist approach to assessment. A positivist approach to assessment is associated with prediction and control, while an interpretivist approach to assessment is associated with enlightenment, understanding and communication (Usher, 1996). Le Grange and Beets (2005b) point out that the interpretive or hermeneutical sciences employ "practical modes" of reasoning whereby appropriate discussions are conducted in the light of the circumstances of the situation and not on the basis of pre-defined objectives. This epistemological stance can be termed interpretivist.

Constructivists aim for an interpretive understanding of assessment in a theory that has credibility, originality, resonance, and usefulness relative to its historical movement. The aim is to contextually understand assessment as a social phenomenon and to interpret it within a particular context, with due consideration of the influence of social agents on social phenomena. In terms of the contextual nature of assessment as a social phenomenon, Parkinson (2004) explains that learning is considered to be a complex and diverse process in which the student makes sense and meaning of the world through his/her life and worldview. Constructivism emphasises this learning diversity and sensitivity (Beets, 2007).

Socio-constructivist perspectives on assessment

Referring to the dominant epistemological discourses, Delanty and Strydom (2003) point out that positivist and interpretive traditions of assessment do not subsume knowledge that steers the student in the direction of freedom, justice, and democracy. Delanty and Strydom (2003), therefore, isolate a third type of "knowledge-constitutive interest", which links with critical theory, i.e., an emancipatory interest. Emancipatory interest implies an intention to go beyond the current boundaries of knowledge; Yorke (2003) explains that this school of thought believes that education can improve the well-being of society-centred education, whereby lecturers and students should act as change agents by analysing and addressing societal needs. This means that learning is a constructive process in which students are constructing knowledge or making meaning, according to their perception of society. Social (re)constructivism relates to this aspect of schooling, according to Van der Horst and McDonald (2008), where higher education in South Africa is regarded as needed to develop and improve society. The socio-constructivist perspective, mentioned as a philosophical principle of OBE, aims to establish this new kind of society and, as Reynecke (2008) confirms, requires a radical change in existing structures and methods.

A post-structuralist approach to assessment

A post-structuralist approach to assessment implies that systems, such as suggested by the structuralist approach, should be reconsidered. Any endeavour, according to Killen (2003), to distinguish between the different types of assessment (assessment of learning, assessment for learning, assessment as learning) still leads to the conclusion of how inappropriate it is simply to label assessments as absolute in any way (Killen, 2003). Assessment becomes "an ideological tool"

within a post-structuralist view (Delandshere & Petrosky, 1994:16) and a post-structuralist lecturer has an awareness of assessment as a social-political practice.

Socio-constructivist perspectives on learning confirm the assertion that knowledge is socially constructed and context dependent (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). It depicts the interrelatedness between the content and how human mental processes are situated within historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. Gipps (2002) argues in this regard that just as the student and/or lecturer functions within a cultural, social, material, and technological environment that has its problems, but also the resources to solve such problems, assessment also occurs within a socio-cultural milieu in which it could be viewed as either a problem (e.g., the over-emphasis on summative assessment/the final exam) or as a way to support student-centred learning. Rather than regarding assessment as an externally initiated process, formally implemented, it is deemed a social process and product embedded in the social and cultural life of the classroom.

Assessment shifts in the assessment policies along the paradigmatic spectrum

The purpose of this paper is to render a nuanced perspective of the nature of assessment practices and policies at the Stellenbosch University (SU), the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of the Western Cape (UWC), and the extent to which such practices are in agreement with the policy changes that underpin a shift along the paradigmatic spectrum (see appendices).

The document analysis conducted across the three universities served to identify policy changes that underpin a shift along the paradigmatic spectrum from:

- A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment to an interpretative and constructivist view on assessment
- An interpretative and constructivist view on assessment to a socio-constructivist view of assessment.

The approach was initially explorative and then became more descriptive and explanatory in nature.

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Assessment shifts in Stellenbosch University assessment policy along the paradigmatic spectrum

From a positivist and behaviourist view on assessment to an interpretative and constructivist view on assessment

The analysis of the institutional perspective revealed a shift from a positivist focus on the criteria for excellent practice to a more flexible and interpretive approach in applying the guidelines and principles within the context of the faculties. SU recognizes that assessment is an integral part of learning and teaching. The higher educational context is dynamic and complex, and SU accepts that assessment practices are contextual. In terms of the contextual nature of assessment as a social phenomenon, there is a clear shift towards an interpretative view on assessment (Parkinson, 2004). This policy (2022), in contrast with the 2012 policy, does not propose to be prescriptive about assessment strategies; instead, it leaves lecturers room to make justifiable choices regarding assessment within their own environments. The 2022 policy advocates a flexible assessment approach, i.e., one that encourages faculties and responsibility centres to do various assessments throughout the module.

The purpose of the current assessment policy is to provide a flexible assessment framework that delivers robust assessments across all programmes and modules, and a system that effectively promotes students' learning at SU, and beyond as well, as it evaluates students' achievements for certification (SU, 2022). Assessment can be applied for diagnostic, formative assessment (assessment for learning), summative assessment (assessment of learning), and assessment for quality promotion. A sufficient number of appropriate formative assessment opportunities to allow students to judge their own progress is mentioned but without reference to assessment as learning.

From an interpretative and constructivist view on assessment to a socio-constructivist view of assessment

This next shift is demonstrated in the University's Teaching and Learning Policy (SU, 2018:2), in the spirit of "quality teaching and learning that embraces the rich potential of an increasingly diverse student body and the need for graduates who can contribute to a complex society." Of special importance here is strategic theme 1: "A transformative student experience" (SU, 2019:20) and theme 2: "Networked and collaborative teaching and learning", both of which relate to the socio-

constructivist view of assessment. More specifically, the assessment policy emphasises the relationship between student and lecturer and the importance of bi-directional feedback dialogues. Such shifts have been recommended, especially post-COVID-19 (Dison & Padayachee, 2022), and align with strategies to enhance epistemological access (Maniram & Maistry, 2018).

Moreover, the definition of fairness in the policy stipulates that assessment systems should be equitable, in that all students are treated fairly, without prejudice, and with the necessary assistance to overcome inability or disadvantage. Assessment assignments are of such a nature that they can be suitably understood and interpreted by students from different backgrounds. This definition conforms to the socio-constructivist perspective on assessment.

We further speculate that, along with more recent flexibility recommendations, the encouragement of multi-modal assessments may reflect changed assessment praxis post-COVID-19 practice and its many assessment challenges (Badat, 2020; Czerniewicz, Agherdien, Badenhorst, Belluigi, Chambers et al., 2020; du Preez & le Grange, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020; Walwyn, 2020; Menon & Motala, 2022).

Assessment shifts in the University of Cape Town (UCT) assessment policy along the paradigmatic spectrum

From a positivist and behaviourist view on assessment to an interpretative and constructivist view on assessment

The (draft) UCT assessment policy (2022) stipulates that the soundness or validity of assessment judgments can be measured against a number of criteria, which conforms to the positivist view of assessment. Criterion-referenced assessments are rooted in a positivist and behaviourist perspective, as they describe correlation between assessment results and a future criterion measurement.

The continuous model of assessment recommended by the UCT policy foregrounds formative assessments in driving performance in summative assessments relates to the constructivist view on assessment. Formative assessment, according to the policy, involves assessment tasks that serve primarily to enhance the learning process by giving students the opportunity to develop the valued

knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the discipline through constructive feedback and opportunities for revision and improvement of an assessment.

This continuous assessment model reflects piecemeal principles of a somewhat recent assessment paradigm shift and innovation: programmatic assessment (Schuwirth & van der Vleuten, 2011; 2020; Ellis & Hogard, 2016; Harrison, Konings, Schuwirth, Wass & van der Vleuten, 2017). Briefly, this model seeks to maximise the quality assurance, validity and reliability, and educational impacts of assessment. However, it is a resource-heavy model of assessment (van der Vleuten & Heeneman, 2016), one that is largely unfeasible in many resource-constrained settings of the global South. Yet, the essence of formative-heavy assessment is present and indicates a constructivist view.

The (draft) UCT assessment policy (2022) also promotes the use of multiple assessment methods to enable students to express their knowledge and skills in different ways. This supports a divergent assessment approach by preventing students from being disadvantaged by the extensive use of particular assessment formats. Divergent assessment entails adopting a constructivist view of learning, with the intention to teach in the ZPD (Wood, 1987).

An interpretative and constructivist view on assessment to a socio-constructivist view of assessment

The (draft) UCT assessment policy (2022) conforms to the interpretive view on assessment in not prescribing particular philosophies or methods of assessment. The assumption is that lecturers know best in terms of what and how to assess within their disciplines. The intention of this policy is to provide faculties with a set of criteria for critical self-evaluation of their own assessment systems.

Although the (draft) UCT assessment policy (2022) does not refer directly to assessment as learning, it encourages students to take responsibility for their learning. Opportunities should be provided for students to evaluate their own and their peers' work, including assessment of work by teams and individuals. Providing students with the opportunity to develop their own assessment tasks as well as evaluate their own and their peers' work encourages students to take responsibility for their learning relates to the constructivist view of assessment.

There is, however, a shift from an interpretative and constructivist view on assessment to a socio-constructivist view of assessment. The UCT institutional perspective highlights the need for all those

involved in assessments to be aware of the social constructs, the underlying knowledges and practices that are valued and assessed through assessments. The policy endorses assessment practices that are diverse and inclusive, practices that can contribute towards producing a more equitable and sustainable social order. For example, the (draft) UCT assessment policy (2022) cross-referenced their language policy (also in development), indicating the necessity of taking the challenge of language into account in seeking to facilitate epistemological access (Maniram & Maistry, 2018; Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Cele, 2021; Xulu-Gama & Hadebe, 2022).

Assessment shifts in the University of the Western Cape (UWC) along the paradigmatic spectrum

From a positivist and behaviourist view of assessment to an interpretative and constructivist view on assessment

The approach to assessment in the 2012 assessment policy, where a learner's performance is measured against pre-determined and pre-stated expectations of achievement and competence, relates to the positivist and behaviourist view of assessment. It is stipulated that expectations of any assessment task, including the specific criteria by which such a task will be judged, shall be made clear to students from the outset, to ensure transparency in the process of assessment decision-making (UWC, 2012).

There is a shift towards an interpretive view on assessment where it is stipulated that assessment practices will vary from discipline to discipline, and it is therefore inappropriate for UWC to prescribe specific forms of assessment. However, all assessment practice should be based on the set of principles specified. Individual lecturers are required to ensure and be able to demonstrate that these principles are reflected in practice (UWC, 2021). There is therefore a clear shift from a rules-based assessment approach towards a principles-based approach.

Principles-based assessment means moving away from reliance on detailed, prescriptive rules and relying more on high-level, broadly stated rules or principles to set the standards by which the institution must conduct assessment. In contrast to the setting of behavioural standards or standards of conduct, performance standards specify the outcome required but leave the specific measures to achieve that outcome up to the discretion and interpretation of the lecturer and student.

The UWC assessment policy (2021) stipulates that all disciplines assessment shall be both formative and summative. The purpose of summative assessment is to judge students' performance, to allocate grades, and to pass or fail students. The purpose of formative assessment is to provide regular feedback to students on their progress, and such feedback should identify strengths and weaknesses and ways to improve. This binary, according to Orr (2007), relates to positivist and interpretivist perspectives (among others).

In contrast to the previous traditional and positivist 'one-size-fits-all' approach, the flexibility in the UWC Assessment policy (2021) to include multi-modal or multi–methods embody the diversity and inclusivity of the policy. Constructivism, according to Beets (2007), emphasises diversity and sensitivity. Such diversity of student needs and styles will enable the lecturer to move away from the 'one-size-fits-all' approach to one that employs alternative teaching, learning, and assessment opportunities.

From an interpretative and constructivist view on assessment to a socio-constructivist view of assessment

There is a definite shift towards transformation in the UWC assessment policy (2021) that conforms to the socio-constructivist view of assessment. The transformative trajectory of UWC hinges on both curriculum transformation to ensure pedagogical renewal and enhanced assessment practices. There is a radical break from a conventional, positivist and behaviourist definition of validity, more towards a socio-constructivist view of assessment - not to validate a test, but to validate the inference. This approach is evident in the UWC assessment policy (2021). This policy stipulates that assessment must be valid or fit for purpose. That is, it must measure predetermined outcomes, using appropriate and contextually relevant assessment methods, by considering the language and cultural context of the student. The UWC Assessment policy (2021) also includes several types of validity, among others:

Face validity - This means that the assessment should be perceived to be fair, giving students a reasonable opportunity to show what they know and what they have mastered. For example, any suggestion of bias that may be to the detriment of some would reduce face validity for students (e.g., gender or ethnic bias). Assessment is equitable when it takes into account the instructional context and the background of students (e.g., prior knowledge, cultural experience, language proficiency, cognitive style, and interests).

Construct validity - This refers to the extent to which assessment succeeds in measuring and evaluating the theoretical or practical 'constructs' linked to students' abilities that it intends to assess. Measurements used to determine construct validity must be contextually and culturally sensitive and relevant.

The UWC Assessment policy (2021) specifies that assessment activities should be cognisant of the socio-cultural realities learners bring with them to the classroom. According to the policy, assessment should be as direct as possible. That is, it should be directly related to the real-life use of the knowledge and skills outside educational settings and must take into account the student's language, values, and beliefs, to ensure that teaching and learning is culturally and contextually sensitive, and to avoid unfair assessment practices (Leibowitz, Bozalek, van Schalkwyk & Winberg, 2014; Boughey & McKenna, 2021)

Cross-case synthesis of the three universities capturing the findings according to the uniform categories

The organisational logic model served to analyse the case study data (Yin, 2014:162). It entailed matching the empirically observed events to the theoretical predicted events. This array also permitted the analysis to probe whether the three universities' assessment policies practices and perspectives appear to correspond or differ along the paradigmatic spectrum.

From a positivist and behaviourist view of assessment to an interpretative and constructivist view on assessment

Although the interpretation of validity is claimed in the three universities' assessment policies to be distinctive in that it explicitly moves away from the measurement model towards a model that reflect a post-modern assessment culture that is student-centred, it fails to demonstrate the evolvement of this assessment principle. Notwithstanding the policy transformative intentions, the assessment policies still favour a measurement approach in the classroom which hinders a shift towards student-centred assessment approach (Kanjee & Sayed, 2013). The conventional and positivist definition of validity and the strong emphasis on accuracy for effective assessment relates to the positivist view on assessment, which contradicts the acknowledgement in the policy that assessment practices are contextual. The purpose of assessment is to enhance the effectiveness of

assessment, striving for explicitness and clarity. When the purpose of assessment is to focus on the accuracy of assessment, various strategies are applied to safeguard impartiality and neutrality.

Drawing on insights from the work of Messick (1989), as indicated earlier in this paper, he notes that the meaning of the term validity has evolved with time and that a more recent understanding of validity concerns the extent to which justifiable inferences can be made on the basis of evidence gathered. The interest therefore is not to validate a test, but to validate the inference that can be drawn from the learner's results in the test or assessment task. Validity as inference is a useful idea because it holds the promise of liberating assessment practices from its behaviourist orientations. Therefore, we argue that a more nuanced understanding of validity as inference may be possible if we invoke the notions of validity that are discussed above.

Fulfilling the key purpose of higher education of facilitating the autonomy of students in a world of life-long learning, the three universities' assessment policies contain a significant proportion of divergence.

The shift towards divergent assessment approaches centres on discovering the students' knowledge, comprehension, and capability, rather than the intentions of the lecturer. It is characterised by less-detailed planning, where open questioning and tasks are more relevant. Torrance and Pryor's (2001) further investigation of divergent approaches reflects divergent assessment as potentially more powerful in fostering the social and intellectual conditions in the classroom that would lead to enhanced learning. Divergent assessment entails adopting a constructivist view of learning, with the intention to teach in the ZPD. Wood (1987:242) captures the essence of formative assessment in his discussion on a student's "maximum performance" in the light of Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD, by proposing active collaboration between the lecturer and the student to produce a best performance. Assessment is thereby jointly accomplished by the lecturer and the student geared towards future development, rather than measurement of past or current achievement. This reflects a sustainable assessment approach (Boud, 2000; Boud & Soler, 2015). In the three assessment policies it is evident that they employ divergent assessment as a heuristic device to explore and expand the boundaries of learning and teaching.

A shift from an interpretative and constructivist view on assessment to a socio-constructivist view of assessment

Although all three universities' assessment policies stipulate that formative and summative assessment should be viewed as combined, there is still an emphasis on the 'formative' instead of the 'summative'. This could be viewed as a reversal which still works within the framework of assessment for learning versus assessment of learning' as polar opposites (Usher, 1996).

From a socio-constructivist view of assessment, changes in approaches to assessment should not be represented in binary terms of summative/formative, single-measure/multiple-measure etc., but rather seen as occupying a continuum of change from traditional to more authentic forms of assessment (Beets & Le Grange, 2005a). Post-modernism seeks to subvert this dichotomy and suggest alternatives, which wholly challenge dominant epistemological discourses in all their different forms (Usher, 1996).

In contrast to this binary of formative assessment versus summative assessment, UWC defines a third purpose of assessment, namely assessment as learning. Assessment as learning is the use of ongoing self-assessment by students to monitor their own learning, which is characterized by metacognition through students reflecting on their own learning, and making adjustments so that they achieve deeper understanding. Assessment as learning is crucial for developing and sustaining students' own assessment abilities for long-term learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). This form of assessment advocates the student taking responsibility for his/her own learning, i.e., self-directed learning. Furthermore, the assessment practice shifts from being a product/outcome to assessing the process of the learning activity.

Dann (2002) points out that assessment as learning recognises that the student is central to learning and that processes of self-direction and understanding are fundamental to learning. She writes:

> "Whereas much research and discussions have linked formative assessment to ways in which lecturers have tried to inform their own practice so that students' needs are more specifically met, there has been little or sustained analysis of the ways in which students participate in this process…students are often incorporated into the discussion on assessment as users of assessment information – through processes of feedback. There is little account taken of the ways in which assessment processes (rather than outcomes) influence learning processes."

Important insights emerge from Dann's (2002) discussion on understanding assessment as a technology and yet Dann (2002) fails to take the debate far enough, because her discussion remains framed within an individualistic paradigm. Beets and Le Grange (2005a) raise two points of criticism:

- It is not only students' participation in assessment processes that is crucial, but also,
- what they bring to such processes, i.e., their prior knowledge informed by their socio-cultural backgrounds.

Assessment as learning that invokes notions such as self-assessment and self-direction may be blind to the centrality of learning in relationship to another's and others' roles in learning. Lived experiences are based on communalism and assessment of/for/as learning should crucially be informed by the socio-cultural background of the student.

In the design and administration of the three assessment policies, there is sensitivity to issues of language and cultural diversity, which relates to the socio-cultural approaches. Socio-cultural approaches take both the individual and the social aspects of learning into account and explain the relationship of the cultural, institutional, and historical milieus in which functioning occurs. Learning would therefore include both individual meaning creation and the socially given features and realities of the university. Assessment focuses on the individual student, with their socio-cultural dimensions, represented in the planning, execution, and feedback phases. The socio-cultural attributes that both the lecturer and the student(s) bring to the classroom are taken into account.

Central to creating the conditions for transformation, the three assessment policies view assessment as a social practice. This premise supposes that assessment is socially constructed, grounded in particular social, cultural, economic, and political contexts. This insight regarding the catalytic paradigm invites a review of the interpretation of "what has been learned" or the meaning of "know", when an outcome is defined as students' knowledge and skills. In this sense catalytic assessment concerns the extent to which assessment practices are catalysts for change, emancipation, and empowerment. In other words, the inferences drawn here relate to whether assessment practices have developed a heightened consciousness of how particular assessment practices are oppressive and others liberating. For example, students may (not) understand how assessment tasks or tests are gender, race, or culturally biased. Clearly, the view of knowledge referred to here is distinctly different from that of what constitutes propositional knowledge, which is knowledge expressed as statements, facts, or theories (Beets & Le Grange, 2005b).

Limitations of this research include a lack of engagement with key stakeholders, for instance, those involved in the development of said assessment proposals. At the time of writing the first draft of this paper, all authors were employed at UWC. Consultation of staff, and students, involved in the development of the policies at SU and UCT would have enriched our analysis. Moreover, how these stakeholders have received and potentially implemented these policies was not explored. In contrast to the stages of policy lifecycle (Paine & Sadan, 2015) none of the universities had explicitly designed practical assessment interventions nor stated how exactly staff should operationalize the principles. Yet the democratization displayed in the development and content of the policies reflects a more transformative approach to policies and a sense that ownership lies with all stakeholders. That being said, while compliance is not the goal, rather meaningful change in assessment thinking and practice, clarity on capacity building, effective leadership (centralised accountability) and management (decentralised responsibility), along with creating a conducive assessment culture, would likely have supported policy interpretation and implementation (Paine & Sadan, 2015; Mzangwa & Dede, 2019), especially as sustaining assessment innovation requires ongoing support and the professionalisation of lecturers (Dison & Padayachee, 2022). Future research should explore assessment policies from other South African universities, as well as evaluate their implementations (or lack thereof).

Conclusion

This paper considered how the assessment policies, practices, and perspectives from three differently placed higher education institutions in South Africa have evolved by comparing recent and past policies. The shifts in their paradigms are encouraging, as they illustrate transformed thinking. It is clear that each institution deeply considered the diverse student population and inextricably positioned the ontological, epistemological, and axiological stances within their policy standards. Although more research could be conducted including more institutions, this review was set out to reflect on best practices for assessment from the perspectives of policy development for the enhancement and facilitation of meaningful learning.

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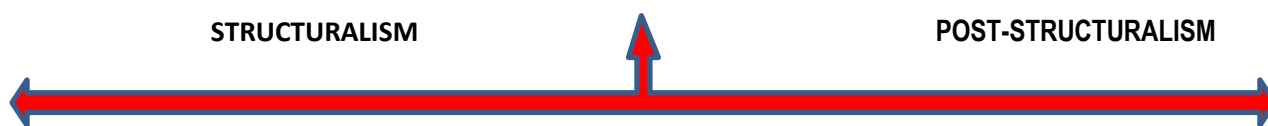Wood, R. 1987. *Measurement and Assessment in Education and Psychology: Collected Papers 1976-1987.* London: Falmer.

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Appendices

ASSESSMENT POLICY, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES: STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSITY

STRUCTURALISM   **POST-STRUCTURALISM**
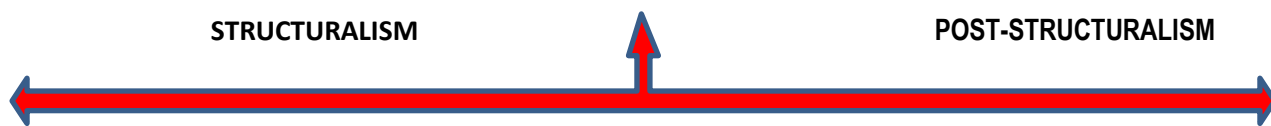
Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
STELLENBOSCH UNIVERSTITY			
Institutional perspective	*The policy focuses on the criteria for excellent practice in assessment, of which the detailed regulations, rules, and practices are subject to the policy. All institutional and faculty-specific documents that have a bearing on assessment therefore resort under this overarching assessment policy and meet its requirements (2012)*	Stellenbosch University (SU) recognizes that assessment is an integral part of learning and teaching. The higher educational context is dynamic and complex, and SU accepts that assessment practices are contextual. Therefore, this policy does not propose to be prescriptive about assessment practices; instead, it allows for flexibility in applying the guidelines and principles for excellent practice regarding assessment. Although SU supports a unified assessment system, it does not propose a unified approach in applying the guidelines and principles set out in this policy. Also, the University acknowledges that decisions regarding assessment that promotes student learning will differ from one faculty to the next (2022)	
Transformation			*In the spirit of "quality teaching and learning that embraces the rich potential of an increasingly diverse student body and the need for graduates **who can contribute to a complex society"**, as stated in the University's Teaching and Learning Policy (SU, 2018:2), this policy is intended to align assessment practices at SU to the institutional Vision 2040 and Strategic Framework 2019-2024 (SU, 2019). Of special importance here is strategic theme 1: A **transformative student experience** (SU, 2019:20) and theme 2: Networked and collaborative teaching and learning.*
Purpose of the policy	*The purpose of this policy is therefore to provide a framework within which assessment practices at the University* • *can be valid, reliable and justifiable, and* • *can be directed and evaluated within faculties on*	*This policy does not propose to be prescriptive about assessment strategies; instead, it leaves lecturers room to make justifiable choices regarding assessment within their own environments.* *The purpose of the policy is to provide a flexible assessment*	

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Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
	the basis of clear criteria (2012)	*framework that delivers robust assessments across all programmes and modules, and a system that effectively promotes students' learning at SU **and beyond** as well as evaluates students' achievements for certification (2022).*	
Purpose of assessment		***Assessment can be applied for a variety of functions**. Assessment for **diagnostic purposes** takes place when the strong and weak points of students in the academic sphere are determined in order to, for example, make suitable remedial actions, selection, admission and placement possible. **Assessment for formative** (i.e. assessment for learning) purposes primarily serves the learning process by offering students an opportunity to develop the desired knowledge, skills and attitudes with the aid of timely feedback. **Assessment for summative** (i.e. assessment of learning) purposes serves to elucidate decisions and findings on the progress of students, e.g. for promotion or certification, during which value judgements are made on students' performance. Assessment can form part of the information that is used for feedback purposes (i.**e. assessment for quality promotion**) to evaluate the quality of a learning and teaching programme (2022).*	
Assessment of/for/as learning		*A sufficient number of appropriate formative assessment opportunities to allow students to judge their own progress before final summative assessment. Key in the process of formative assessment is adequate learning-centred feedback to inform future decisions. This feedback need not be one-to-one or lecturer generated, but can also be automated, self- or peer generated.*	
Validity & Reliability	*The assessment **measures what it is supposed to measure** and the deductions and actions that are based on the results of the assessment are appropriate and accurate (2022).*		
Fairness			*Fairness In a fair assessment system, all students are treated without prejudice or discrimination. Assignments for assessment must be formulated so as to be understood and interpreted correctly by students*

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Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
			from different backgrounds, and must integrate the provisions of SU's Language Policy (2016).
Integrated assessment (alignment)		*Stellenbosch University (SU) recognizes that assessment is an **integral part of learning and teaching**. The higher educational context is dynamic and complex, and SU accepts that **assessment practices are contextual**. Therefore, this policy does **not propose to be prescriptive** about assessment practices; instead, it allows **for flexibility** in applying the guidelines and principles for excellent practice regarding assessment (2022).*	
Competency based assessment (Authenticity/relevancy)		***Authentic assessment practices** are closely aligned with activities that take place in real-world settings, thereby requiring students to apply relevant skills and knowledge (2022).*	

ASSESSMENT POLICY, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES: UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN

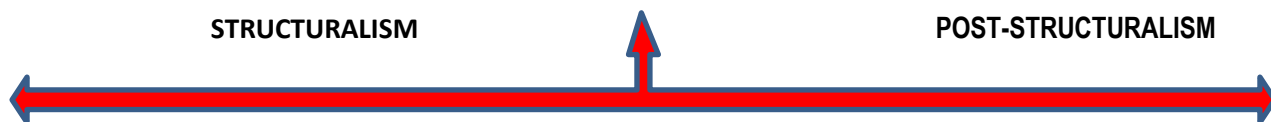**STRUCTURALISM**   **POST-STRUCTURALISM**

Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN			
Institutional perspective			*Central to creating the conditions for transformation is understanding that assessment is a social practice. This premise supposes that assessment is socially constructed, grounded in particular social, cultural, economic and political contexts. It highlights the need for all those involved in assessments to be aware of the social constructs, the underlying knowledges and practices that are valued and assessed through assessments. The policy endorses assessment practices that are diverse and inclusive, practices that can contribute towards producing a more equitable and sustainable social order.*
Purpose of the policy			*The intention of UCT assessment policy is not to **prescribe particular philosophies or methods of assessment**. The assumption is that academics know best what and how to assess within their disciplines. The intention of this policy is to provide faculties with a set of **criteria for critical self-evaluation of their own assessment systems**. The central requirement of the policy is that departments and faculties have **validating mechanisms** which are appropriate and effective in ensuring on-going critical self-evaluation based on these **criteria.***
Purpose of assessment		*Model of assessment that foregrounds **formative assessments in driving performance in summative assessments**. Formative assessment involves assessment tasks that serve primarily to enhance the learning process by giving students the opportunity to develop the valued knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the discipline through constructive feedback and opportunities for revision and improvement of an assessment.* *While **summative assessments** have an evaluative function, formative assessments have a*	

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Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
		diagnostic function. Formative assessment can be used to provide insight into how students have learned, their strengths and weaknesses.	
Self –directed learning Assessment as learning			*Opportunities should be provided for students to evaluate their own and their peers' work, including assessment of work by teams and individuals. Providing students with the opportunity to develop their own assessment tasks as well as evaluate their own and their peers' work encourages students to take responsibility for their learning.*
Validity & Reliability		*The **soundness or validity of our assessment judgments** can be measured **against a number of criteria**. These criteria encompass the principles which inform good assessment practice (as noted above) but extend in scope beyond these concerns; they serve as the basis upon which we can be confident that our judgments about student performance are sound (2012).*	
Fairness			*In the design and administration of the assessment there is **sensitivity to issues of language and cultural diversity**. Assessment administration ensures that students with particular disabilities are adequately catered for. Precaution has been taken to minimize conscious and unconscious **discrimination for or against students on the basis of race, gender or any other form of prejudice.***
Alternative assessments			***Multiple assessment methods** should be promoted and used to enable students to express their knowledge and skills in different ways. This supports an inclusive approach to assessment by preventing students from being disadvantaged by the extensive use of particular assessment formats.*
Integrated assessment (alignment)		*There must be alignment among programme and course objectives/aims, the teaching activities (teaching methods and materials), and the assessment practices (methods, criteria, feedback). Individual items within an assessment should also be relevant to the content area.*	

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Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
Competency based assessment (Authenticity)		*To apply the principle of **authenticity,** there is need to consider the following:* **Application**: *Where appropriate to the discipline, students need to be given opportunities to apply what they have learned through tasks that assess students' ability to effectively use their knowledge or skills in realistic and live contexts.*	

ASSESSMENT POLICY, PRACTICES AND PERSPECTIVES: UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE

STRUCTURALISM   **POST-STRUCTURALISM**

Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
UNIVERSITY OF THE WESTERN CAPE			
Institutional perspective	This is proposed as an approach to assessment where a learner's performance is measured against **pre-determined and pre-stated expectations** of achievement and competence. The expectations of any assessment task, including the **specific criteria by which such a task will be judged**, shall be made clear to students from the outset, in order to **ensure transparency** in the process of assessment decision-making (2012).	*Assessment practices will vary **from discipline to discipline and it is therefore inappropriate** for the University to prescribe specific forms of assessment. However all assessment practice should be based on the **set of principles specified** in the next section. Individual lecturers are required to ensure and be able to demonstrate that these principles are reflected in practice (2012).*	
Transformation			*The transformative trajectory of the University hinges on both curriculum transformation to ensure pedagogical renewal and enhanced assessment practices. The UWC as an egalitarian organisation intends to lead in pedagogical and assessment practices which are experienced as exclusionary, flexible learning pathways that promote student success and retention. This will be done through acknowledging diversity of linguistic, cultural and social capital of students.*
Purpose of assessment		*It is expected that in all disciplines assessment shall be both formative and summative. The purpose of summative assessment is to judge students' performance, to allocate grades and to pass or fail students. The purpose of formative assessment is to provide regular feedback to students on their progress, and such feedback should identify strengths and weaknesses and ways to improve. Formative assessment therefore performs a powerful educative role in contributing to students' learning and also in assisting the lecturer to evaluate the success of the learning programme or module itself.*	
Assessment of self-directed learning Assessment as learning			**Assessment as learning** is the use of ongoing self-assessment by students to monitor their own learning, which is characterized by metacognition through students reflecting on their own learning

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Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
			and making adjustments so that they achieve deeper understanding
Validity & Reliability	*Validity means the extent to which the assessment **measures** what it has been developed to measure. Care must be taken to ensure that the assessment methods chosen and the assessment tasks designed **accurately** match what is being assessed, be it knowledge, understanding, subject content, skills, information, behaviour, etc. For assessment to be valid, it must accurately measure what it claims to be measuring (2012).*		*Assessment must be valid or fit for purpose. That is, it must measure predetermined outcomes, using appropriate and contextually relevant assessment methods (e.g. considering the language and cultural context of the student).* ***Face validity** - This means that the assessment should be perceived to be fair, giving students a reasonable opportunity to show what they know and what they have mastered. For example, any suggestion **of bias that may be to the detriment of some would reduce face validity for students (e.g. gender or ethnic bias).*** *Tuition and assessment are equitable when they take into account the instructional context and the **background of students** (e.g. **prior knowledge, cultural experience, language proficiency, cognitive style and interests**).* ***Construct validity** - This refers to the extent to which assessment succeeds in measuring and evaluating the abilities (theoretical or practical 'constructs') that it intends to assess. Measurements used to determine construct validity must be **contextually and culturally sensitive and relevant.***
Fairness			*Assessment should be as direct as possible. That is, it should be directly related to the real-life use of the knowledge and skills outside educational settings and must take into account the student's language, values and beliefs, to ensure that teaching and learning is culturally and contextually sensitive, and to avoid unfair assessment practices.*
Alternative assessments		*Assessment practices should be **multi-modal or multi–method and flexible** enough to accommodate the scope of knowledge and skills covered by the assessment criteria, variations in context, the range of needs and the personal circumstances of all potential students.* ***Expanded assessment opportunities** - adjustments to assessment tasks Students with learning barriers may apply for reasonable adjustments to assessment tasks. A student who seeks such variation on the basis of his/her learning challenge may make a request to the lecturer before the assessment is conducted.*	

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Key components	A positivist and behaviourist view of assessment	Interpretative and constructivist view on assessment	Socio-constructivist view of assessment
		Extended assessment opportunities *- additional assessment opportunities No student will be excluded from any assessment during the period of crisis.*	
Integrated assessment (alignment)		***Integrated assessment*** *refers to ways of **ensuring that theory and practice are assessed together,** and that outcomes from different modules or parts of the curriculum are assessed within a particular assessment exercise. Having integrated assessment allows for the revisiting of previous learning that occurred in earlier modules. It is recommended that where appropriate, academics design capstone modules that bring together the learning objectives of diverse but connected modules for the main purpose of assessing these in an integrated way. Such modules could appropriately be offered at the end of a year or at the end of a learning programme*	
Competency based assessment (Authenticity)		*Focus on the ability to transfer knowledge to new contexts and to apply knowledge in specific contexts in line with the NQF level descriptors and other taxonomies of learning.*	