

Editorial

Reframing and re-purposing assessment in higher education in the global South

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ABSTRACT

This special issue focuses on the need for a fundamental reconceptualisation of assessment and feedback practices in higher education in the global south. Drawing on their experiences and assessment practices during the Covid-19 pandemic, the contributions highlight the lessons learnt, and how these may be leveraged to address present and future disruptions as well as ongoing inequities. The key themes running through the seven articles are the social dimension of assessment and feedback, and the urgency to shift towards more flexible and inclusive assessment practices. The message conveyed is the importance of care, connection and inclusive approaches to assessment and feedback in achieving the outcomes necessary for effective graduate participation in a world defined by inequity, complexity and change.

This special edition on reframing assessment emerged out of the global Covid-19 pandemic. Staff and students had experienced the profound anxiety of living through lockdowns and seismic shifts in teaching, learning and assessment. As we now know, the biggest obstacles that staff and students had to face during Emergency Remote Teaching, Learning and Assessment (ERTL&A) were those related to assessments, which were often exacerbated by lingering social inequalities and inequities in South Africa and other countries in the global South.

Despite the challenges, ERTL&A offered new realms of possibilities for transforming assessments, as evidenced in the papers in this special issue. A common thread within the papers included here is the influence of ERTL&A in enabling lecturers and students to rethink and adapt assessment practices specifically with the social dimension in mind. This is despite the heavy emphasis on mechanisms for avoiding cheating and ensuring academic integrity because of the upsurge in occurrences of cheating, collusions, and plagiarism.

The experiences of ERTL&A also foreground the enormous complexity of assessments in higher education, especially considering the multiple crises facing the sector, including increasing massification, decreasing human and fiscal resources, and widening inequalities. This allowed for more nuanced and critical reflections on the philosophy and purpose of assessment in higher education, while presenting opportunities for significant assessment innovative and transformation. Looking back, it may be argued that experiences of ERTL&A left academics better prepared to address the some of the emerging challenges, such as the impact of Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI), which looks set to pose a much bigger disruption to assessment for, and of, learning. The assessment strategies, practices and reflections shared in this special issue support this argument, providing examples of innovative assessments that emerged during ERTL&A, that are now enabling more fluid, flexible, and critical responses to assessment challenges.

Several of the papers in this issue also ask readers to examine the value and relevance of traditional views of quality, and the purposes of assessment that these notions serve. Are these notions of quality still relevant for preparing students for the current and future complexities of society and the rapidly changing world of work? The authors in this special issue argue for a deeper consideration of the purposes and practices of assessment, underscoring the need to re-frame assessment as lever for transformative learning and socially just higher education.

The paper by Hattingh reminds us of the importance of the social dimension in effective assessment and feedback in the context of engineering education in South Africa. Data collected through surveys, interviews and focus groups with students and lectures indicates the important role that the social nature of assessment plays in student identity, confidence and engagement. Given this, Hattingh argues that assessment strategies need to be more participatory and inclusive and that to design such assessments requires collaboration by a collective.

Along similar lines, Jonker offers a critique of assessment practices in higher education within neoliberal conditions. Drawing on the work of Massumi and assessment practices in the arts, Jonker demonstrates the value of enabling practices that are more ethical, response-able and which emphasise processual becomings.

The importance of addressing inequities in the higher education system is a theme in the paper by Masaiti, Kakupa and Mupeta, who report on a qualitative study of the impact of Covid-19 disruptions on students and lecturers' experiences of assessment in a Zambian university. In their paper, the authors provide a compelling argument for a shift away from an overemphasis on grades and outcomes to assessment that is more inclusive, participatory and process oriented.

Sitto and colleagues further reinforce the notion of assessment as an inherently social act through which inclusivity can be achieved, stressing the importance of relationality and relatability in assessment and feedback strategies. Their paper provides an insightful reflection of their positioning as black academics serving as role models for students, and their use of dialogic feedback strategies to build rapport through relatability.

The importance of positioning assessment as a social practice is also argued for in the paper by Huang and colleagues. The authors use Bourdieu's theory of practice as a theoretical lens and, drawing on survey data and examples of assessment redesign during the Covid-19 pandemic, they demonstrate that change in assessment has to take into consideration the complex interplay of capital, habitus of agents and the nature of the field.

Roopchund and Naidoo also explore the social dimension of assessment in their paper on approaches to infusing an ethic of care in feedback practices in three Engineering modules, and their use of student evaluations to improve and enhance their feedback strategies. Also highlighted here are the authors' reflections on their continuous professional learning journey as a key strategy

influencing their attempts to embed an ethic of care in their feedback to students, both during Covid-19 and beyond.

Lastly, the paper by Sims and colleagues discusses the role of assessment policy in facilitating changes towards culturally sensitive and fair assessment practices. The authors highlight the importance of changes to assessment policies (as institutional structures guiding practice), as a mechanism for achieving socially just and inclusive assessments in the South African context characterised by high student diversity.

The emphasis on the social dimension, and the drive towards more flexible and inclusive assessment practices, are thus, very clear in this special issue. The message conveyed is the importance of care, connection and inclusive approaches to assessment and feedback in achieving the types of outcomes that are necessary for effective graduate participation in a world defined by inequity, complexity and change.



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