Re-imagining assessment in higher education: Creating alternative pathways for inclusive and democratic assessments in Zambian higher education institutions

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates emerging issues and assessment practices within higher education institutions in Zambia. It presents the reflections of a sample of lecturers and students from the country's largest public university on their assessment experiences during and after the COVID-19 pandemic disruptions. Employing a qualitative research framework grounded in critical social theory, the study uncovers the constructions of assessment in higher education and how current assessment practices, particularly the focus on grades, undermine authentic learning experiences and learner motivation. Through in-depth interviews, participants challenge current practices and envision alternative approaches to higher education assessment that prioritize flexibility and creativity. This article gives a voice to the otherwise voiceless students and lecturers whose insights might be critical in transforming higher education assessments for student empowerment, equity, criticality, and lifelong learning.

Introduction

Assessment practices in higher education play a critical role in enhancing student learning experiences and outcomes (Biggs, 2003; Boud & Falchikov, 2007). In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions in Zambia, like many worldwide, have faced unprecedented challenges in maintaining effective and meaningful assessment practices (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). The sudden shift to remote and online learning has necessitated adaptations in assessment methods (Conole & Brown, 2018), highlighting the need to critically examine the emerging issues and practices in Zambian higher education institutions. As institutions grapple with the complexities of transitioning to digital learning environments, understanding the implications for assessment practices becomes imperative (Joint Implementation Supervisory Committee (JISC), 2020). This study aims to explore the constructions of assessment in higher education, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 disruptions, and to investigate how current assessment practices impact learning experiences and learner motivation.

Background

Assessment is an indispensable element of higher education and an integral part of the teaching and learning process (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Hattie & Timperley, 2007). An institution of higher education is recognized by its assessment policies and practices that impact students' activities and achievements (Brown & Knight, 1994; Trow, 2007). However, there are various challenges encountered by faculties and students in conducting assessments in higher learning institutions (Knight & Yorke, 2004). In many parts of the world, particularly in developing countries, a significant challenge facing education systems is the lack of adequate infrastructure to cope with the increasing number of students and conduct assessments (World Bank, 2002). This is due to limited financial resources being allocated to the education sector for infrastructure development, resulting in overcrowded classrooms and inadequate facilities (Carnoy, 2007; Xu & Carless, 2017). Globally, standardized tests are widely used in education (Popham, 1999). These include mastery, objective, competence, certification, criterion, and classroom tests (Montenegro-Rueda, Luque-de la Rosa, Sarasola Sánchez-Serrano & Fernández-Cerero, 2021; Nitko, 2004).

As COVID-19 continued to threaten traditional classroom teaching, many countries turned to online learning as a viable alternative. Due to the pandemic, even the assessment of students was carried out remotely. However, studies have shown that during the COVID-19 pandemic, conducting e-

assessments posed a major challenge due to the lack of computer proficiency among students and lecturers (Watson, 2020; Kundu & Bej, 2021). Montenegro-Rueda et al. (2021) strengthen this argument by highlighting the challenges faced by faculty and students in transitioning to virtual environments. Faculty members often lack training in online assessment techniques, while students commonly face issues of academic dishonesty and misconduct (Gupta, Shree, Chanda & Banerjee, 2023). When these acts occur, they compromise the quality of higher learning institution assessments, negatively impacting graduates (Olt, 2002). Completing the academic year through non-face-to-face assessment poses a significant challenge (Hodges et al., 2020). Several factors contribute to this challenge, including people's natural resistance to change and the technical limitations of computer systems designed for mainly face-to-face activities (Conole & Brown, 2018). Xu and Carless (2017) have highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed multiple challenges for the education sector. The pandemic has further worsened the existing inequalities in educational access and achievement due to the uneven distribution of educational infrastructure and resources (UNESCO, 2020). The lack of proper infrastructure and unpreparedness of both faculty and students have hindered large-scale experimentation in online education (Al Lily, Ismail, Abunasser & Alhajhoj Alqahtani, 2020).

Prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, assessments were typically conducted in a traditional classroom setting, with face-to-face interactions between teachers and students (Wiggins, 1998). This setting allows students to seek clarification on question styles, making assessments more inclusive for students without technological knowledge (Conrad, 2002). Assessment practices in Zambian higher education have centred around quantifying student achievement through grades (Mulkeen, 2010; Kohn, 2011). This grading-centric approach often places undue emphasis on performance outcomes rather than fostering a deep understanding of the subject matter (Kohn, 2011). This overemphasis on grades can hinder students' development of critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and creativity (Brookhart, 2013). Additionally, the heavy reliance on grades may not fully capture the diverse range of students' learning experiences, abilities, and potential (Harris, 2009; Kohn, 2011).

In recent years, educational research and international initiatives have called for a re-evaluation of assessment practices, urging educators to move beyond mere quantification of learning outcomes (Nusche, 2008; Timm, Davis, McKinney & Knerr, 2013). The focus has shifted towards more authentic and learner-centred approaches that foster critical thinking, creativity, and lifelong learning (Laur, 2013; Rippy & Munoz, 2022). However, the COVID-19 disruptions have brought these

issues to the forefront, demanding immediate attention and critical examination of assessment practices in the context of remote and online learning.

It is worth noting that the landscape of higher education in Zambia has undergone significant transformations over the years, with increasing enrolments and a growing emphasis on quality education. However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the educational ecosystem, requiring rapid adaptations to ensure continuity of learning (Mboyonga, 2021; Musonda, 2021). In particular, assessment practices have faced unprecedented challenges as institutions have shifted from traditional face-to-face assessment methods to remote and online modes (Al-Maqbali & Raja Hussain, 2022; Mukwena & Sinkala, 2020). Like many countries worldwide, Zambia implemented nationwide lockdowns and temporary educational institution closures to mitigate the virus's spread (Mupeta & Simungala, 2021; Musonda, 2021). These measures necessitated a swift transition to online and remote learning modalities. However, this sudden shift presented numerous challenges, including adapting assessment practices to the new learning environments. The disruption caused by the pandemic highlighted the significance of assessment as a critical component of the teaching and learning process, requiring careful considerations and adaptations to ensure its validity and reliability.

Research on assessment practices in Zambian higher education is relatively limited, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on assessment experiences. Thus, there is a clear research gap that needs to be addressed. This study sought to bridge that gap by exploring the reflections of lecturers and students on their assessment experiences during and after the COVID-19 disruptions. By examining the perspectives of lecturers and students, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges, opportunities, and implications of the recent assessment practices in Zambia's higher education sector.

Research questions

1. How have the assessment experiences of lecturers and students been impacted by the academic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in Zambia's largest higher education institution?
2. How do lecturers and students perceive the current assessment practices in higher education and their impact on learning experiences?

3.   What alternative approaches to higher education assessment do lecturers and students envisage post-COVID-19 academic disruptions?

Theoretical framework

The study was guided by the critical pedagogy theory, which emphasizes the need for education to be transformative, emancipatory, and empowering (Freire, 1970, 1974; Giroux, 2011). According to critical pedagogy theory, education should be a tool for social justice, equity, and democracy. The theory posits that education should transmit knowledge, challenge dominant power structures, and promote critical thinking and action (Serrano, O'Brien, Roberts & Whyte, 2017). This study applied critical pedagogy theory to the need for alternative approaches to assessment practices in higher education that prioritize flexibility and creativity. The theory emphasizes the importance of assessment practices that support learners' ongoing learning and development and promote student empowerment, equity, criticality, and lifelong learning (Giroux, 2011). The study explored alternative pathways for inclusive and democratic assessments in Zambian higher education institutions, which aligned with the critical pedagogy theory's emphasis on social justice, equity, and democracy. It sought to give a voice to students and lecturers whose insights might play a critical role in transforming higher education assessments for student empowerment, equity, criticality, and lifelong learning.

Literature review

This section reviews the literature, highlighting the global perspective on the impact of COVID-19 on education and shedding light on formative and summative assessment in higher education. The section also delves into the effects of COVID-19 on the Zambian education system and demonstrates Zambia's responses.

Global perspectives on the impact of COVID-19 on education

Numerous studies have illustrated the transformative impact of COVID-19 on education systems worldwide. This global shift has prompted not only administrative reforms but also a substantial reimagining of the delivery of educational services within higher education institutions. Montenegro-Rueda et al. (2021) emphasize the pivotal role of online technologies in higher education, citing their

newfound significance in mitigating the adverse effects of the pandemic on education. Institutions across the globe have swiftly transitioned from traditional face-to-face classrooms to remote or online modes of instruction in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19. The pandemic has also stimulated a comprehensive reconsideration of education system design, particularly regarding effective strategies to address technological gaps, notably in the realm of assessment as a fundamental component of the didactic process. Kandri (2020) notes that higher education institutions were compelled to implement online teaching and learning as a consequence of COVID-19's physical restrictions, precipitating a rapid shift from traditional face-to-face to remote learning. As highlighted by Asahi, Unduragga, Valdés & Wagner (2021), the imposition of social distancing measures or school closures aimed at curbing the spread of the pandemic incurred significant social and economic costs. This upheaval particularly affected institutions heavily reliant on students' tuition fees as a primary source of income, underscoring the profound and widespread impact of COVID-19 on various facets of the education system, including the methodologies employed in assessments.

Zambia's response to the impact of COVID-19 on higher education

Zambia's strategic response plan to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic in the education sector, particularly in higher education, is anchored in the pillars of equity, efficiency, access, and equality outlined in the Education Sector and Skills Plan (ESSP). The Ministry of Education (MOE) is committed to allocating additional resources to expand access to primary, secondary, and higher education—a sector widely acknowledged for its role in combating poverty and hunger (Masaiti, Njobvu & Kakupa, 2018).

Within the broader context, one of the nine objectives set by the MOE during the National Implementation Framework III (NIF II) period is the reorientation of the curriculum. This shift emphasizes life skills, labour market dynamics, and self-employment. These changes have profound implications for the assessment methods employed by higher education institutions, aligning with the broader objective of promoting research, innovation, and collaboration between industry and research institutions.

At the university level, the COVID-19 response plan aims to enhance access, participation, and equity in the provision of quality university education. This is achieved through improving equitable access, enhancing program relevance, increasing university involvement in research and development, and

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addressing efficiency and equitable access to technical education, vocational, and entrepreneurship training (TEVET) (MOGE, 2020). Despite these comprehensive efforts, the response from the higher education sector itself was not as clearly articulated. Unlike the well-defined measures implemented for early childhood education (ECE), primary, and secondary levels, higher education institutions were left to devise individual initiatives to ensure continuity in teaching and learning during the pandemic. During the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, colleges and universities underwent a gradual shift to e-learning and later adopted a blended learning approach (Lufungulo, Mwila, Mudenda, Kampamba, Chulu & Hikaambo, 2021; Magasu, Lubbungu, Kamboni, Sakala & Kapanda, 2022). The sudden move to distance and virtual learning posed significant challenges for higher education, where educators had limited time to adapt to new teaching modalities, manage virtual spaces, engage students innovatively, and address assessment issues using virtual platforms (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2020).

As COVID-19 cases reduced, a shift to blended learning was introduced. Presently, all universities and colleges in Zambia are working diligently to enhance peer support, further integrate blended learning, and effectively navigate the educational landscape in the face of ongoing challenges posed by COVID-19.

Formative and summative assessments in higher education institutions

Assessment, a pivotal aspect of education, manifests through the dual lenses of formative and summative evaluations within higher education institutions. As elucidated by Montenegro-Rueda et al. (2021), formative assessment assumes a dynamic role in the educational landscape. Its primary objective lies in continually monitoring a student's progress, offering valuable insights into their evolving understanding of the subject matter. This ongoing evaluation process is instrumental in identifying areas of strength and weakness, allowing educators to tailor their teaching approaches and interventions accordingly.

In essence, formative assessments are not merely evaluative but serve as diagnostic tools, providing a comprehensive understanding of the learning journey (Black & William, 1998). Constructive feedback, a hallmark of formative assessment, becomes a catalyst for improvement. It fosters a symbiotic relationship between educators and students, nurturing a collaborative atmosphere conducive to academic growth (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). The iterative nature of formative assessment aligns with the educational philosophy that perceives learning as an evolving and

adaptive process (Sadler, 1989). On the other hand, summative assessment, a distinct yet complementary counterpart, operates as a conclusive evaluation method (Popham, 2008). Its focal point shifts towards appraising a student's overall performance at the culmination of a course or academic period. The summative assessment process involves assigning grades or scores and facilitating a quantitative comparison of a student's achievements with peers or predefined criteria (Gronlund & Waugh, 2009). These summative evaluations, often conducted at the conclusion of a course, contribute significantly to the determination of academic qualifications.

Together, formative and summative assessments in higher education institutions constitute a symbiotic relationship (Herman, Aschbacher & Winters, 1992). Formative assessments lay the groundwork for continuous improvement and personalized learning experiences (Heritage, 2013), while summative assessments encapsulate the culmination of academic endeavours, providing a tangible measure of educational attainment (Nitko & Brookhart, 2011). This dual evaluative framework captures the intricate aspects of assessment in higher education, addressing the varied requirements of both learners and educational institutions.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the emerging issues and assessment practices in Zambian higher education institutions during and after the COVID-19 disruptions. Qualitative research was particularly suitable for exploring the perspectives, experiences, and insights of lecturers and students in a comprehensive and nuanced manner. Through in-depth interviews, this study aimed to capture the rich and contextualized data necessary to understand the complexities of assessment practices and their impact on teaching and learning.

Research design

This research adopted a qualitative research paradigm with a specific emphasis on the case study design. The decision to employ a qualitative approach was grounded in the works of Creswell (2013) and Stake (1995), who advocate for qualitative research as a suitable strategy for exploring complex phenomena and understanding the experiences and perspectives of participants. Qualitative research allowed for an in-depth and contextualized examination, aligning with the intricacies of assessing the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning practices in higher education.

The justification for selecting a case study design was rooted in the writings of Stake (1995), Creswell (2013) and Yin (2014, 2017), among others, which highlight its suitability for exploring a specific

bounded system in detail. The study focused on one large university in Zambia, aligning with the principles of case study research outlined by Stake (1995, 2006) and Creswell (2013, 2014). According to Stake (1995), a case study design is particularly valuable for gaining an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon within its natural context. This approach allowed for a detailed exploration of the complexities inherent in the assessment practices of the selected university in the context of COVID-19 disruptions.

Additionally, the decision to focus on one large university is consistent with the recommendations of Creswell (2013, 2014) and Yin (2017), who emphasize the importance of selecting a case that provides rich information for the research questions. A focused case study allows for an in-depth examination of a particular phenomenon, ensuring a thorough analysis that goes beyond the surface-level observations possible in broader research designs (Creswell, 2013, 2014; Yin, 2014), contributing to a nuanced understanding of assessment practices in the post-COVID-19 educational landscape.

Participants

The participant selection for this study employed a purposive sampling method for lecturers and a combination of random and convenience sampling for students. Purposive sampling allowed for the intentional selection of lecturers with firsthand experience of COVID-19 disruptions in higher education, ensuring a targeted exploration of their perspectives. In contrast, the student sample was derived through a mix of random and convenience sampling, aiming for both representativeness and practical feasibility. However, this was after setting the inclusion criteria to include only students who were already in the university during the pandemic period.

The participant pool included 20 lecturers (10 males and 10 females) and 50 students (30 females and 20 males) from diverse disciplines, faculties, and academic levels within the largest public university in Zambia. This diversity was deliberately sought to capture a broad range of perspectives and experiences related to the impact of COVID-19 disruptions on assessment practices. The lecturers' ages ranged from 38 to 67 years, while for students they ranged from 21 to 26 years. Since the focus was on COVID-19 assessment experiences, only students who were in the university when the pandemic hit (in 2019) were included. Most of them were in the fourth year of study.
The principle of data saturation guided the determination of sample size. This approach ensures that the sample was sufficient to capture a wide range of perspectives and insights until no new

information or themes emerged from the data (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012). By employing these sampling methods and considerations, the study aimed to create a diverse and representative participant pool, enhancing the depth and comprehensiveness of the exploration into the impact of COVID-19 disruptions on assessment practices in higher education.

Data collection

The data collection process for this study involved a combination of in-depth semi-structured interviews with lecturers and focus groups with students. These methods were chosen to facilitate a comprehensive exploration of the participants' experiences and perspectives regarding the impact of COVID-19 disruptions on assessment practices in higher education.

For lecturers, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted. This method allowed for open-ended discussions, enabling participants to express their experiences and insights in their own words. The semi-structured nature provided flexibility while ensuring that key themes related to COVID-19 disruptions and assessment practices were systematically explored. Students participated in focus groups, creating a dynamic setting for collective discussions. This method encouraged participants to share and reflect on their experiences within the group context, capturing a range of perspectives and fostering interactive dialogue. Both in-person and virtual interviews were utilized for the data collection process. In-person interviews allowed for a more personal and immediate connection with participants. Simultaneously, virtual interviews, conducted through Google Meet video conferencing, provided a flexible option for engaging with the study's remote participants. All interviews with lecturers and focus groups with students were audio-recorded with explicit participant consent. Five focus groups, each comprising 10 students, were conducted in total. Audio recording served as a crucial tool in preserving the richness and depth of participants' responses, ensuring that no nuances were lost during subsequent analysis. Verbatim transcription of the audio recordings was carried out. This detailed transcription process aimed to capture not only the spoken words but also the tone, emphasis, and context of the participants' expressions. Verbatim transcription provided a robust foundation for subsequent qualitative analysis.

Interview and focus group content

For both students and lecturers, the questions and discussion points were developed based on the research questions, aiming to explore experiences, perceptions, and reflections on assessment

practices during and after COVID-19 disruptions. The discussions delved into various topics, including the challenges faced, adaptations made, the impact on teaching and learning, perceptions of current assessment practices, and suggestions for improvement. Probing questions were strategically employed to delve deeper into participants' responses, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of their experiences and perspectives.

Focus group discussion guide

The researchers used the following schedule for each focus group with students:

> (1) Can you tell me about what you do in school: What courses are you taking? Are you involved in other activities? What are they?
>
> (2) Do you find school enjoyable/fun?
>
> (3) What do you think of assessment in higher education?
>
>> a. What is the purpose?
>>
>> b. How important is assessment?
>>
>> c. How does your school/faculty conduct assessments? What is emphasized?
>
> (4) Reflect on your experiences during the COVID-19 disruptions.
>
>> a. How were assessments conducted?
>>
>> b. How did you find them?
>>
>> c. Did anything change in the way assessment was conducted?
>>
>> d. Fast forward to 2023; has anything changed in the way you are assessed?
>>
>> e. If yes, what has changed? If no, what do you think should have changed?
>
> (5) Some people say student grading and assessment in general causes panic, stress, and anxiety and should be reformed to enhance students' learning experiences. What do you think?
>
> (6) Should there be a focus on fairness, inclusivity, and democracy in assessments? How?
>
> (7) Is the focus on exams and grades a problem? Does it take away from other things?
>
> (8) Are there other ways you wish assessments were conducted?
>
> (9) Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Semi-structured interview guide

The following schedule was used during interviews with individual lecturers:

(1) Can you tell me about your work in this university: How long have you been in this school?

(2) What courses do you teach? What other activities are you involved in?

(3) What do you think of assessment in higher education?

    a. What is the purpose?

    b. How important is assessment?

    c. How do you conduct assessments? What do you emphasize?

(4) Reflect on your experiences during the COVID-19 disruptions.

    a. How were you conducting assessments?

    b. Did anything change in the way you conducted assessments?

    c. Fast forward to 2023; has anything changed in the way you assess students?

    d. If yes, what has changed? If no, what do you think should have changed?

(5) Some people say student grading and assessment in general causes panic, stress, and anxiety and should be reformed to enhance students' learning experiences. What do you think?

(6) Should there be a focus on fairness, inclusivity, and democracy in assessments? How?

(7) Is the focus on exams and grades a problem? Does it take away from other things?

(8) Are there other ways you wish assessments were conducted?

(9) Is there anything else you want to talk about?

Data analysis, credibility, and ethics

Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the qualitative data obtained from the interviews. Thematic analysis involves systematically identifying, coding, and analyzing patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The data were transcribed and read multiple times to gain familiarity and develop an initial coding framework. Coding, in this case, involved identifying meaningful data units and assigning descriptive codes to them. These codes were refined and organized into preliminary themes. The themes were reviewed and refined through an iterative process, ensuring that they accurately captured the key issues and insights related to assessment practices in Zambian higher education. The final themes were further examined and supported by relevant interview quotes, providing a rich and detailed account of participants' perspectives.

Several strategies were employed to ensure the validity and reliability of the findings. Firstly, member checking was conducted, where participants were allowed to review the preliminary

findings and provide feedback, thus enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of the data. Secondly, triangulation was employed by collecting data from multiple sources (lecturers and students) and using multiple data collection methods (interviews). This enhanced the comprehensiveness and depth of the findings.

Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's purpose, procedures, and rights to withdraw at any time. Participants' confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through pseudonyms and secure data storage. Institutional ethical clearance was obtained before data collection to ensure compliance with ethical guidelines and protocols.

Findings and results

In the following sections, the paper presents findings regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on assessment experiences in Zambian higher education institutions. Shaped by the lens of critical social theory, these findings reveal the multifaceted challenges and opportunities encountered by both lecturers and students. The paper begins with an examination of the systemic inequities laid bare by the pandemic, where disparities in internet connectivity and digital access have significantly influenced online assessments. It further navigates through the perceptions of lecturers and students regarding the prevailing emphasis on grades, revealing the tensions between traditional assessment practices and the collective desire for authentic learning experiences. Culminating in the discussion is the articulation of a collective vision by lecturers and students—an envisioning of alternative approaches that promote flexibility, creativity, and the empowerment of learners.

Assessment experiences of lecturers and students during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted higher education in Zambia, leading to substantial changes in assessment experiences for lecturers and students. With the sudden shift to remote and online learning, traditional assessment methods such as in-person exams and assignments had to be adapted or replaced. Lecturers and students faced challenges adjusting to these new assessment formats, including technical difficulties, limited access to reliable internet connectivity and devices, and unfamiliarity with online assessment platforms.

For lecturers, the transition to online assessments required them to re-evaluate and redesign their assessment strategies to ensure they were still valid, reliable, and aligned with the learning outcomes. They had to explore alternative methods such as online quizzes, essays, and project-based assessments. Additionally, they had to find ways to provide timely feedback to students remotely, which was crucial for their learning and growth. One lecturer had this to say:

> Moving to online assessments prompted us to reassess our strategies. We had to find ways of ensuring that the integrity and reliability of assessments remained intact while adapting to the virtual format. It involved resorting to alternative methods, such as online quizzes, while navigating the challenge of providing timely and constructive feedback. [Lecturer 9, Individual Interview]

On the other hand, students faced various challenges in engaging with online assessments. They had to adapt to new learning environments, manage their time effectively, and navigate the technical requirements of online assessments. Some students faced difficulties in accessing necessary resources and struggled with self-directed learning. The absence of face-to-face interaction with lecturers and peers also impacted their motivation and sense of belonging in the academic community. During the focus group discussion, students revealed that:

> Adjusting to online assessments presented several challenges. We had to get used to different online learning platforms, manage our time efficiently, and figure out the technical aspects of online assessments, especially timed quizzes. Accessing essential resources became a huge challenge for most of us, and the lack of direct interaction with lecturers and coursemates worsened our motivation. [Student, FGD]

The assessment experiences of lecturers and students in Zambian higher education institutions have been profoundly affected by the academic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to remote learning brought about significant changes in the assessment landscape and required educators and students to adapt to new modes of evaluation.

One of the immediate impacts of the pandemic was the technological divide among students. Many students faced challenges accessing reliable internet connectivity and lacked the necessary devices to participate effectively in online assessments. This digital divide created inequalities in students' ability to fully engage in the assessment process and demonstrate their knowledge and skills. Furthermore, students already marginalized or economically disadvantaged faced even more significant barriers in accessing online assessments, exacerbating existing disparities in educational opportunities.

> During COVID-19 period, there was no equity at all in the way we were assessing students because some students had challenges with internet connectivity. You would find that you set an online quiz, but half the class is not able to take it for various reasons, such as lack of electricity, mobile connectivity, and internet bundles. Some of them did not even have a smartphone, let alone a laptop! [Lecturer 1, Individual Interview]

The transition to remote assessments necessitated adjustments in the nature and format of assessment tasks. Traditional assessment methods, such as in-person exams or practical assessments, had to be replaced with alternative approaches that could be conducted online, such as timed assessments, online quizzes, or take-home assignments. Lecturers had to redesign their assessments to ensure that they remained valid, reliable, and aligned with the learning outcomes of their courses in the new remote learning environment. This shift required lecturers and students to adapt to new assessment formats and develop the necessary skills to navigate online platforms and technologies.

> The transition to online learning necessitated a significant overhaul of our assessment methods. Traditional approaches like in-person exams and practical assessments became impractical in the online setting. We had to explore alternative methods that could be conducted effectively online. [Lecturer 4, Individual Interview]

When asked about how the shift to alternative assessments impacted the design of assessments to ensure they remained effective, the lecturers explained that they revisited the learning outcomes of their courses to ensure that assessments still accurately measured what students were expected to achieve. They adjusted the format of questions to suit online delivery, paying attention to factors such as question clarity and fairness.

> Ensuring the reliability of assessments was vital, so we focused on consistency and fairness in grading across different online platforms. The challenge was to adapt these assessments to the online environment without compromising their integrity. It required careful consideration of how to assess students' knowledge and skills in a virtual setting. [Lecturer 2, Individual Interview]

Furthermore, the social and emotional aspects of assessment experiences were significantly impacted by the disruptions caused by the pandemic. The loss of face-to-face interaction and the transition to virtual classrooms limited opportunities for collaborative learning, immediate feedback, and personal interaction with lecturers and peers during the assessment process. The absence of these crucial elements may have resulted in decreased motivation, engagement, and a sense of belonging for students, potentially affecting their overall assessment experiences and academic performance.

> The transition to online learning indeed posed challenges to collaborative learning. The loss of face-to-face interactions reduced opportunities for students to engage in group discussions, peer collaboration, and joint problem-solving. Collaborative aspects that were once integral to the assessment process became more challenging to facilitate in the virtual setting. The diminished collaborative and interactive nature definitely compromised the sense of belonging, thereby leading to decreased motivation and engagement and negatively impacting our students' overall assessment experiences and academic performance. [Lecturer 1, Individual Interview]

The health concerns, economic hardships, and changes in living situations resulting from the pandemic further created additional stressors for students, impacting their ability to concentrate on assessments and perform at their full potential. The emotional toll of the pandemic on students' well-being had repercussions on their overall engagement, resilience, and academic outcomes. "A lot of us could not focus. Psychologically, we were defeated. Having to learn from home, with all those house chores and the disturbances at home, just made the whole arrangement stressful." [Student, FGD]

Participants' perceptions of the current assessment practices in higher education

Lecturers and students held varying perceptions regarding the prevailing assessment practices, particularly the emphasis on grades. While some lecturers and students recognized the importance of grades as a measure of academic achievement and a means of evaluating student performance, others expressed concerns about their limitations and impact on authentic learning experiences. Many lecturers acknowledged that focusing on grades, especially in a high-stakes assessment environment, could lead to a narrow emphasis on rote memorization and the regurgitation of information rather than fostering deep understanding and critical thinking. This perception was reinforced by the prevalent use of traditional assessment methods, such as objective (multiple-choice) quizzes and tests, that often prioritized recall of factual knowledge rather than higher-order thinking skills.

> Some of us see grades as a valid measure of academic success and a way to evaluate how well a student is performing, but there's a growing concern within the university that this emphasis on grades, especially in high-stakes assessments, tends to narrow our focus to memorization and regurgitation rather than promoting deep understanding and critical thinking. [Lecturer 3, Individual Interview]

The overemphasis on grades created a culture of competition among students, where the primary goal became achieving high marks rather than a genuine passion for learning and personal growth.

> Some of us feel that the emphasis on grades has led to a culture of competition among students, where the main goal is to get high marks rather than genuinely enjoying the learning process and personal growth. [Student, FGD]

This perception was further exacerbated by the grading practices that predominantly focused on performance outcomes rather than the learning process. Students felt pressured to conform to the expectations of the grading system, which sometimes hindered their creativity, exploration, and intellectual curiosity.

Furthermore, the focus on grades hindered the development of critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as it often reduced complex concepts and real-world challenges into simplistic quantifiable measures. This perception was particularly relevant in disciplines that required higher-level cognitive abilities, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Lecturers and students desired assessment practices to better capture their ability to think critically, apply knowledge in real-life contexts, and demonstrate their overall understanding of the subject matter.

> I think many of us students are really seeking assessment methods that go beyond just assigning grades. We want something that truly reflects our ability to think critically, apply what we've learned in real-life situations, and show a deep understanding of the subject matter. [Student FGD]

> From the perspective of lecturers, there's a shared desire for assessment practices that extend beyond the traditional grading system. Right now, there is a curriculum review going on in our school. We are looking for methods that can authentically capture the students' capacity to think critically, apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts, and demonstrate a profound understanding of the material. [Lecturer 8, Individual Interview]

In terms of learner motivation, the heavy reliance on grades was viewed by some lecturers and students as an extrinsic motivator that overshadowed intrinsic motivation and the joy of learning. The pressure to achieve high grades for academic success and future opportunities often led to a focus on performance-driven goals rather than a genuine passion for knowledge acquisition and personal development. This perception highlighted the potentially detrimental effects on intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and student engagement of overemphasizing grades.

> In terms of motivating learners, there's a concern that the heavy reliance on grades may act more as an external motivator at the expense of the intrinsic joy of learning. The pressure to outperform peers can sometimes shift the focus towards performance-driven goals. [Lecturer 10, Individual Interview]

> For some of us students, the constant emphasis on grades seems more like an external push rather than something that comes from a genuine interest in learning. [Student, FGD)

However, the participants, especially students, acknowledged a positive development resulting from COVID-19 disruptions —the introduction of supplementary exams across all schools, allowing students who failed exams to resit their failed courses without the need to repeat the entire year. Before the pandemic, only a few schools had such a practice. Therefore, a lot of students were made to repeat courses, and some were even placed on part-time status to repeat an entire academic year if they failed their courses. Adopting supplementary exams in all schools gave students a second chance and ensured a smooth academic progression. Students widely acknowledged and welcomed this change as it promoted fairness, reduced academic setbacks, and facilitated their educational journey. A student had this to say:

> …[In the past] if we failed our exams, we would have to repeat the entire course or, in some cases, the whole year. It was demoralizing and often resulted in delays in graduation. However, we now have a chance to resit our failed courses without the fear of being referred to part-time and hence losing one's scholarship. This has really brought us hope. It promotes fairness and relieves the pressure and anxiety associated with failing a course. [Student, FGD]

For some lecturers, however, this was an extra task they were not ready to continue executing, as can be seen from this response below:

> I hope this is the last time we are asked to prepare supplementary exams. We are tired! We need to reset and revert to the normal. When they introduced them, they told us we had to do this for our students who failed exams mainly due to online learning challenges during the pandemic. Three years later, we are still talking about sups! Honestly, it is too much for us. We already prepare the normal exams, deferred exams, distance exams, and now supplementary exams! [Lecturer 5, Individual Interview]

All in all, the perceptions of lecturers and students regarding the current assessment practices in higher education, specifically the focus on grades, were diverse. While some recognized the significance of grades as an evaluation tool, others expressed concerns about their impact on authentic learning experiences and learner motivation. The desire for assessment practices that promote critical thinking, creativity, and intrinsic motivation highlights the need for a broader and more holistic approach to assessment in higher education. Moving beyond a singular focus on grades and exploring alternative methods that assess the learning process, foster intrinsic motivation, and promote deep understanding can contribute to a more authentic and engaging learning environment for both lecturers and students.

Envisioned alternative approaches to higher education assessment

When asked about alternative approaches to higher education assessment, lecturers and students in the two universities envisioned a number of alternative approaches that prioritized flexibility and creativity and promoted student empowerment, equity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. These alternative approaches should address traditional assessment practices' limitations and create a more inclusive and meaningful learning environment. The following answers provide a detailed exploration of these envisioned alternatives:

Project-Based Assessments: Lecturers and students recognized the value of project-based assessments, where students could engage in real-world tasks and apply their knowledge and skills to solve authentic problems. This approach could provide opportunities for creativity, critical thinking, and the development of practical skills relevant to students' future careers. Students could showcase their abilities holistically and contextually by working on projects individually or collaboratively.

> I kind of like the idea of project-based assessments. It goes beyond just chasing grades; it's about applying what we have learned to real-world tasks. Working on projects individually or with others could add a practical and collaborative aspect to our learning, allowing us to showcase our abilities in a more meaningful way. [Student, FGD]

> Project-based assessments offer a valuable shift from traditional methods, providing students with opportunities to engage in real-world projects and apply their knowledge to solve real problems. It's about fostering skills that are essential for their future careers. [Lecturer 3, Individual Interview]

Performance Assessments: The idea of performance assessments, such as presentations, debates, and simulations, was also proposed by lecturers and students. These assessments provide a platform for students to demonstrate their understanding, communication skills, and ability to think critically in real-time situations. Several lecturers who had used performance assessments noted that these assessments encouraged active engagement, creativity, and personalized expression of knowledge and ideas.

> …It's not just about what you know; it's about demonstrating your solid comprehension, communication skills, and critical thinking. Activities such as debates and presentations provide a platform for us to be creative. [Student, FGD]

> I've explored the use of performance assessments like presentations and simulations, and it has been quite impactful. These assessments go beyond testing rote knowledge; they provide

a platform for students to showcase their knowledge and skills in a much better way. [Lecturer 7, Individual Interview]

Peer and Self-Assessment: Lecturers and students embraced the concept of peer and self-assessment to foster student empowerment and enhance critical thinking skills. This approach involved students evaluating their work and providing feedback to their peers based on established criteria or rubrics. Peer and self-assessment were reported to encourage active engagement, collaboration, and the development of evaluative judgment while promoting a sense of ownership and responsibility for learning outcomes. For example, one senior lecturer observed that from his over 20 years of experience, "Students take ownership and feel a sense of responsibility for their learning outcomes when they know they will be assessed by their peers, creating a more enriched and participatory learning environment." [Lecturer 6, Individual Interview)

Authentic and Context-Based Assessments: Lecturers and students emphasized the importance of assessments that mirrored real-life situations and challenges. Students could apply their knowledge and skills meaningfully by designing contextually relevant assessments aligned with professional practice. Authentic assessments, such as case studies, simulations, or fieldwork, were believed to provide opportunities for critical thinking, problem-solving, and decision-making within specific disciplinary or professional contexts.

> Absolutely! Authentic assessments are key in preparing students for the demands of the 21st century. While cognitive skills are important, the ability to communicate, collaborate, and solve real-world problems is equally, if not more, crucial. Authentic assessments provide a platform to evaluate these skills, giving us a better understanding of a student's preparedness for the challenges they'll face in their future careers. [Lecturer 4, Individual Interview]

For students too, "traditional assessments often miss out on these vital aspects [skills such as communication, collaboration, and problem-solving], and authentic assessments provide a more holistic view of our abilities." [Student, FGD]

Flexible Assessment Formats: Students recognized the need for flexibility in assessment formats to accommodate different learning styles and preferences. This involved offering a range of assessment options, such as written essays, oral presentations, or practical demonstrations. They particularly believed that flexible assessment formats allowed them to showcase their strengths and talents, promoting inclusivity and recognizing diverse forms of intelligence. In addition, they bemoaned the rigidity of current assessment practices, where they are not allowed to redo or resubmit assignments, especially in cases of poor performance on the initially submitted tasks.

> …. This kind of flexibility promotes inclusivity and recognizes that intelligence comes in many forms. It is frustrating when assessment practices are rigid and don't allow us a chance to redo or resubmit assignments, especially if we didn't do well the first time. It feels like we are not given the opportunity to learn and improve from our mistakes. [Student, FGD]

All in all, lecturers and students in Zambian higher education institutions envisioned alternative approaches to assessment that prioritized flexibility and creativity and promoted student empowerment, equity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. These approaches included project-based assessments, performance assessments, portfolios and reflective journals, peer and self-assessment, authentic and contextualized assessments, and flexible assessment formats. By embracing these alternatives, higher education institutions can create a more dynamic and inclusive assessment environment that encourages active learning, fosters creativity, and prepares students for lifelong success.

Discussion

The assessment experiences of lecturers and students in Zambian higher education institutions have been significantly impacted by the academic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden shift to remote learning and the adoption of online assessment methods have posed various challenges and opportunities for both lecturers and students. Drawing upon critical social theory, which examines the impact of social structures and power dynamics on education (Freire, 1970; Apple, 1995), this discussion explores how lecturers and students perceive the current assessment practices in higher education and envisions alternative approaches that prioritize flexibility, creativity, and promote student empowerment, equity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning.

The findings indicate that the COVID-19 pandemic significantly impacted the assessment experiences of lecturers and students in Zambian higher education institutions. The disruptions exposed existing inequities, raised concerns about the authenticity and validity of online assessments, and highlighted the importance of social interaction and holistic approaches to assessment. The pandemic-induced academic disruptions brought to the forefront the existing inequalities within the Zambian higher education system. Access to reliable internet connectivity, digital devices, and conducive learning environments varies among students (Mukosa & Mweemba, 2019), resulting in differential experiences and outcomes in online assessments (Musonda, 2021; Rippy & Munoz, 2022). This study highlights the systemic disparities within the Zambian higher education context. The digital divide exposed during the pandemic becomes a manifestation of broader socioeconomic inequities, aligning with critical pedagogy's emphasis on challenging dominant power structures and promoting

social justice through the adoption of educational practices that are truly inclusive and equitable (Freire, 1970).

Both lecturers and students perceive the focus on grades in current assessment practices as potentially undermining authentic learning experiences and learner motivation. The overemphasis on grades can create a culture of competitiveness and compliance, where students are primarily driven by the pursuit of high grades rather than a genuine passion for learning (Deci, 2000; Stipek, 2002; Serrano et al., 2017; Rippy & Munoz, 2022). This aligns with critical social theory's critique of education systems reproducing social inequalities and reinforcing hegemonic power structures (Giroux, 2011). The overemphasis on grades mirrors the reproduction of power structures criticized by critical pedagogy theorists such as Giroux (2011). These findings emphasize the need to shift the focus from grades to a more holistic approach that values the learning process, encourages critical thinking, and promotes student empowerment (Boticki, 2019).

Lecturers and students envision alternative approaches to higher education assessment that prioritize flexibility and creativity and promote student empowerment, equity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. One possible alternative approach is the adoption of authentic assessments that mirror real-world contexts and challenges (Herrington, Reeves & Oliver, 2010). Authentic assessments require students to apply their knowledge and skills in practical situations, promoting critical thinking, creativity, and the development of transferable skills (Laur, 2013; McFarlane, 2015; Mertler, 2016). By engaging in authentic assessments, students become active participants in their learning, connecting theory to practice and developing a deeper understanding of the subject matter. This approach reflects the core principles of critical pedagogy in promoting a deeper, more meaningful understanding of the learning process.

Furthermore, lecturers and students envision the importance of adopting alternative assessment methods that go beyond traditional exams and focus on competency-based assessments. This approach aligns with critical social theory's emphasis on addressing social inequities and empowering students with diverse talents and abilities (Young, 2008). Competency-based assessments shift the focus from memorization to demonstrating specific skills and abilities relevant to students' discipline or profession (Boticki, 2019). By emphasizing competencies, students are empowered to take ownership of their learning, engage in meaningful tasks, and develop transferable skills in real-world contexts.

In addition, the findings suggest that lecturers and students value flexible assessment formats that accommodate diverse learning styles and preferences. Flexible assessment formats give students choices in assessment tasks and allow them to demonstrate their knowledge and skills through different mediums, such as written assignments, oral presentations, multimedia projects, or practical demonstrations. This approach acknowledges the individuality of learners and promotes creativity, engagement, and personalization of learning experiences (Wiggins, 1993).

Moreover, lecturers and students recognize the importance of assessment practices that promote critical thinking and reflection. Critical social theory emphasizes the development of critical consciousness and transformative learning (Brookfield, 1995). By incorporating self-assessment and reflection, students are encouraged to critically examine their learning processes, assumptions, and biases (Moon, 2008). This approach promotes metacognition, self-directed learning, and the development of critical thinking skills (Sinclair, 2018).

By incorporating these alternative approaches to higher education assessment, Zambian institutions can foster a more inclusive, engaging, and transformative learning environment that promotes social justice and empowers students to become critical and active participants in their education. These alternative approaches align with critical social theory's call for transformative change in education by challenging the traditional power dynamics, promoting student empowerment, and fostering critical consciousness (Giroux, 2011; Serrano et al., 2017).

Furthermore, adopting these alternative approaches to assessment can contribute to developing lifelong learners who possess the necessary skills and competencies for success in a rapidly changing world. By prioritizing flexibility, creativity, and critical thinking, students are better equipped to adapt to new challenges, think critically about complex issues, and continue their learning journey beyond the boundaries of formal education (UNESCO, 2015).

However, it is essential to acknowledge that implementing these alternative approaches may encounter various challenges. For instance, incorporating authentic assessments and flexible formats requires careful planning, resources, and support from higher education institutions (Cooper, 2015; Mertler, 2016). The shift from a grade-focused system to one that prioritizes holistic development and competencies may require a paradigm shift in the mindset of lecturers, students, and other stakeholders (Clarence, Quinn & Vorster, 2015; Boticki, 2019). Overcoming these

challenges will require collaborative efforts and a commitment to transformative change at all levels of the education system.

The findings of this study indicate that lecturers and students in Zambia envision alternative approaches to higher education assessment that prioritize flexibility, creativity, student empowerment, equity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. These alternative approaches, inspired by critical social theory, challenge the dominant assessment practices, and hold the potential to transform the educational landscape. By adopting authentic assessments, flexible formats, and a competency-based approach, higher education institutions in Zambia can create a more inclusive, empowering, and socially just assessment environment where students actively participate in their education and develop the skills and competencies needed for success in the 21st century.

Conclusion and future research directions

The assessment experiences of lecturers and students in Zambian higher education institutions were significantly impacted by the academic disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden shift to online learning and remote assessment modalities presented various challenges and changes in the assessment landscape. Lecturers and students faced difficulties in adapting to the online assessment formats and technological limitations. The transition to virtual assessments required adjustments in assessment design, delivery, and feedback mechanisms. Some lecturers and students encountered challenges in accessing reliable internet connectivity, appropriate devices, and necessary software, which affected their ability to participate fully in assessments. The COVID-19 pandemic also raised concerns about the integrity and fairness of online assessments. Both lecturers and students were apprehensive about potential cheating and academic dishonesty issues in remote assessment settings. The absence of direct supervision and invigilation created new challenges in ensuring the authenticity and reliability of assessment outcomes.

Regarding the perceptions of current assessment practices in higher education, both lecturers and students expressed mixed opinions about the focus on grades and their impact on authentic learning experiences and learner motivation. While some acknowledged the importance of grades as a measure of achievement and a motivational factor, others criticized the overreliance on grades as a narrow indicator of student abilities. Lecturers and students perceived that the emphasis on grades could lead to a superficial focus on memorization and regurgitation of information rather than fostering deep learning and critical thinking. They highlighted the need for assessment practices that

encouraged holistic development, creativity, and the application of knowledge in real-world contexts.

In envisioning alternative approaches to higher education assessment, lecturers and students emphasized the importance of flexibility and creativity and promoting student empowerment, equity, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Some alternative approaches they envisioned included project-based assessments, performance assessments, peer and self-assessments, authentic and contextualized assessments, and flexible assessment formats. These alternative approaches can provide more meaningful and authentic assessment experiences that align with students' diverse needs and learning styles. They emphasized the importance of assessing not only the outcomes but also the process of learning, encouraging students' active engagement, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills.

In general, the findings of this study suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the assessment experiences of lecturers and students in Zambian higher education institutions. It has highlighted the need to re-imagine traditional assessment practices and explore alternative approaches prioritizing flexibility, creativity, and student empowerment. The study concludes that a shift toward more authentic and learner-centred assessment practices can enhance the quality of higher education and promote lifelong learning. Institutions can create a more inclusive, engaging, and equitable assessment environment by considering the perspectives of lecturers and students and incorporating their insights into assessment redesign.

Based on these findings, future research directions could include exploring the implementation and effectiveness of alternative assessment approaches in real-world educational contexts. Additionally, investigating the impact of technology-supported assessments, innovative feedback strategies, and inclusive assessment practices on student engagement and learning outcomes would be valuable. Also, investigating the professional development needs of lecturers in adopting and implementing alternative assessment strategies can enhance their pedagogical practices. Furthermore, future research should also consider the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on assessment practices and explore strategies to enhance assessment resilience and adaptability in times of crisis.

Limitations

The study acknowledges several limitations that may influence the interpretation and generalizability of its findings. First, the sample size, comprising 20 lecturers and 50 students from one public university in Zambia, might not fully represent the diversity of experiences within the country's higher education institutions (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2014). This limitation could impact the broader applicability of the study's results, as specific institutional contexts may vary.

Additionally, the contextual specificity of the research, conducted solely within Zambia, raises concerns about the transferability of the findings to different socio-cultural or educational settings (Yin, 2014). The unique characteristics of the Zambian higher education system might limit the extent to which the study's conclusions can be extrapolated to an international context.
The reliance on subjective reflections and perceptions of lecturers and students constitutes another limitation (Merriam, 2009). Participants' interpretations of their assessment experiences and preferences for alternative approaches may be influenced by individual perspectives, introducing potential bias into the study.

The study also faced constraints related to the timeframe of data collection, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 disruptions. A more extended study period could have facilitated a more comprehensive exploration of the evolving dynamics in assessment practices.
Despite efforts to maintain objectivity, the potential for researcher bias remains a concern. The researcher's background and perspectives could inadvertently influence the interpretation of data, and although reflexivity was employed to mitigate this bias, it remains a potential limitation (Yin, 2014).

The reliance on a single-method approach, primarily in-depth interviews, is another limitation (Merriam, 2009). While this method provided rich qualitative data, incorporating a broader methodological toolkit, such as surveys or observations, might have offered a more comprehensive understanding of assessment practices.

Furthermore, the study primarily focused on the voices of lecturers and students, neglecting perspectives from other stakeholders such as administrators or policymakers (Stake, 2006). Including these perspectives in future research could provide additional dimensions to the understanding of assessment practices in higher education.

Finally, the study explores assessment experiences during and after the COVID-19 disruptions. However, the rapid evolution of post-pandemic educational landscapes might introduce new dynamics that were not fully captured in the study (Yin, 2014). Despite these acknowledged limitations, the study has yielded significant findings that shed light on the experiences of lecturers and students, particularly in the context of assessment practices during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

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