



**FAIRNESS AND AUTHENTICITY OF ASSESSMENT
STRATEGIES USED AT THE NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF LESOTHO
AMID COVID-19: A CASE OF B.ED PRIMARY PROGRAMME**

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Abstract:

During the Covid-19 pandemic, different institutions globally introduced alternative methods such as Online Teaching and Learning (OTL) or home-based learning and testing. Despite the upsurge of Covid-19 and a shift in modality, students' progress needed to be assessed as it determines how much students have learned. Drawing from critical pedagogy, this paper, therefore, explored the fairness and the authenticity of assessment strategies that were employed by one university in Lesotho during the Covid era. The qualitative case study research design was deployed in order to understand the views of students regarding the topic under investigation. The data were collected through a semi-structured interviews telephonically. Our sample was composed of 8 students (n=8) that were selected based on purpose. Overall, it appears that opinions are divided regarding the fairness and authenticity of assessment strategies used by NUL during the Covid-19 pandemic. While some participants did not express concern about being taught online and assessed offline, others maintained that if they were taught online, they expected to be assessed online in order to maintain fairness and authenticity. Considering these findings and the evidence currently attested by the participants of this study, one of the recommendations is that assessment expectations should be clearly communicated to the students in advance.

Keywords: assessment strategies, higher education, online teaching and learning, Covid-19

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1. Introduction

It is undeniable that the Covid-19 pandemic has obliged institutions of higher education across the globe to redefine their operations including teaching and learning as well as assessment strategies (Zhen, Bender, & Lyon, 2021). Consequently, due to the pandemic, different institutions globally introduced alternative methods such as online Teaching and Learning (OTL) or home-based learning and testing. Some countries, such as India, migrated their education system online due to the pandemic. Most importantly, higher education institutions abruptly introduced online teaching and assessment as an alternative (Mokhets'engoane & Malunguja, 2021). What is interesting is that despite the upsurge of Covid-19 and a shift in modality, students' progress needed to be assessed as it determines how much students have learned (Irfan, 2018).

Like other universities all over the world, National University of Lesotho (NUL) was also compelled to switch its operation from face-to-face to online operations since March 2020. This included teaching and learning as well as assessment (Mashinini, 2020). Interestingly, NUL Strategic Plan (2015:13) Goal 1 indicates, "*NUL shall be a medium-sized dual mode university in the service of the country and Africa*". However, evidence borne from different researchers authenticates that the dual mode was practised insignificantly prior COVID-19 (Mashinini, 2019; Mphatsi, 2017; Mokenela, 2015). When COVID-19 hit and brought forth the closure of institutions and lockdowns, NUL had to implement its strategic plan goal 1 unintentionally as the compulsory use of THUTO - the NUL Learning Management System (LMS), became mandatory.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 intensified so much that the adoption of Online Teaching and Learning (OTL) was not enough. This is why Makumane (2021) holds the perception that the escalation of the pandemic needed the utilization of 4IR technologies like the Internet of Things (IoT), LMS and 3D printing. Interestingly, as a result of the pandemic, NUL objective 2.4 of the strategic plan, "*to increase students' technological competences*" (NUL Strategic Plan, 2015: 14) was implemented as students had no other alternative than to use different sorts of technologies to learn.

The shift in modality brought so many challenges to both lecturers and students. For instance, lecturers and students were lacking the skills to operate ICT-based tools. Electricity and internet connectivity were also evident challenges (Oketch-Oboth, 2021). In relation to assessment that was done online, some researchers doubted the authenticity of such assessment. To be precise, Mashinini (2020) stipulated that he doubted the authenticity of the assessment where students are assessed within the context where the lecturers have no control over the assessment environment of the students. He further argues that online assessment is as good as allowing unintended group work, copying, consultation of other digital aids, or worse paying people who write for them and so on. Nonetheless, it is important to highlight that, upon scrutiny of relevant literature there is a dearth of literature regarding the fairness and authenticity of assessment strategies employed in the B.Ed Primary programme amid COVID-19. Therefore, this paper wishes to explore the fairness and authenticity of assessment strategies that were employed at

NUL amid Covid-19. The findings will inform the National University of Lesotho (NUL), and other institutions of higher education in Lesotho and elsewhere to make better decisions on which strategies are feasible, fair, and authentic.

2. Underpinning Theory

The study adopts critical pedagogy as a theoretical lens to explore the fairness and authenticity of assessment strategies used at NUL amid Covid-19. This theory pioneered by Paulo Freire is aimed at empowering students to become critically aware of their social, political, and environmental issues and take action to address them (Freire, 1970). In the same tandem, this theory challenges the students to have both critical and social consciousness which empowers them to challenge the oppressive systems and structures within their school setting (Tjabane, 2010). Therefore, the researcher found this theory fit since it encourages students to fully engage and not be subjugated to the oppressive systems within their educational institutions. In fact, it empowers students to question their reality and have transformative action toward their academic issues.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Bachelor of Education Primary

Bachelor of Education Primary (B.Ed. primary) is a part-time degree programme offered in the Faculty of Education as a first-degree programme for teachers at National University of Lesotho. The programme's objectives include to elevate the academic and professional competencies of primary teachers in Lesotho and to motivate them in their quest for both professional and personal aggrandizement. Additionally, the programme is not only meant for teachers' professional enrichment but also to equip them with the necessary skills needed for the effective planning and implementation of programmes at the primary school level. Finally, the programme enables teachers to acquire techniques and/or skills essential in assisting them to initiate and produce teaching and learning materials to reinforce quality education at primary school (B.Ed Primary Programme, 2021).

Traditionally, the B.Ed. Primary students come for residential classes when the public schools were closed. They attend lectures and are being assessed at that time then go back to their workplaces not worrying about university work. The national school calendar is used to determine their residential classes whereby the first semester starts in October during Independence holidays and ends during the summer holidays in December or January. The second semester used to start during Easter holidays in April and end in June during the winter holidays. Everything was done fast and students were pampered with a lot of information at the same time so much so that students developed the habit of studying to pass not studying to learn.

3.2 Assessment Strategies at NUL

Normally, learning and assessment at NUL are done physically in the lecture halls whereby students make presentations, write tests, do assignments, and even write examinations until recently when COVID-19 forced learning and assessment at all levels of education to migrate online. Studies conducted at National University of Lesotho show unsatisfactory results when it comes to teaching and assessment practices at NUL. For instance, the study conducted by Mahao (2003) found that NUL struggles to provide quality education due to high student enrolment and scarce teaching and learning resources. Similarly, Tlali and Jacobs (2015) reported that poorly equipped lecture halls and overcrowded classrooms possess a threat to quality education, especially at NUL. This brought attention to many scholars who ended up singing in one voice that the biggest challenge facing Lesotho's higher education is quality learning (Nyabanyaba, 2015; MOET, 2005; CHE, 2010).

This matter becomes worse therefore to the B.Ed. Primary students who are studying part-time. Normally, this group of students attends residential classes when their schools at the workplace are closed and they are expected to cover the semester's work within a time of four to six weeks against the fourteen weeks that is recommended by the university. This means they are taught, given assignments and write examinations within that time. Ever since Covid-19 hit, teaching, learning and assessment were done online, serious challenges were faced by both the part-time lecturers and the students. They were both introduced to the university learning management system for the first time. Most of the students and lecturers are technology ignorant and compulsorily had to be techno-wise.

Learning online to this group of students and their lecturers has proven to be a challenge due to among other things, resistance to change; the geographical location of the students whereby the network connection is poor in their areas, therefore anxiety, fear and worry escalated the fear of online teaching and learning. This argument was further strengthened by Makafane & Chere-Masupha (2021) that online learning is offered under conditions that are not conducive to enhancing the effective participation of students. As per their findings, the students are not receiving quality learning and some students are excluded from learning by the existing digital conditions. However, in this programme, different online platforms are recommended though for assessment only Thuto platform is recommended. The findings of Makafane and Chere-Masupha (2021) seem surprising because under the same conditions, the B.Ed. Primary results became extraordinary when assessed using an online platform.

3.3 Assessment Strategies in the B.Ed. Primary Programme

B.Ed. Primary like other university programmes administered teaching and assessment online. First experience with online examinations started when the number of people testing COVID-19 positive in the country was increasing. Examination dates were from July 11, to July 16, 2020. The examinations were written with the technical support of the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). During exams, there were some technical

challenges experienced on Thuto, NUL Learning Management System. Challenges included the malfunctioning of the system which led to students not able to work through the examination question papers smoothly. Thuto shut them out before the end of exam time and students were not able to upload their completed work. Some of the written work vanished and could not be retrieved. Surprisingly, some of the Thuto Tools like Assignments, Quizzes or Tests were not responding as usual. Power outage in the Roma area/campus hence the difficulty in getting Thuto to run smoothly. This problem of Thuto being unavailable persisted for about almost a week and submissions were extremely late (e.g., up to a day) after exams were finished and it is possible students saw that opportunity and they seized it (Coordinator's Report, 2020).

In the following academic year, 2020-2021, the revision was made regarding the assessment of B.Ed. Primary and the agreement was that they should write physical examinations though they were taught online. Students tried to challenge this move but did not win and had to write physical exams. This brought serious challenges to the students especially those who did not access online learning as expected. Most of the students developed the habit of cut and paste from the internet (Coordinator's report, 2020). When they had to write physically, they showed unpreparedness and started panicking, resulting in examination malpractice which included bringing illegal materials to copy from or even copying using their cell phones. Malpractice is a norm in this institution and some students survive while others become victims. This maybe because even in this twenty-first century, the university depends only on human invigilators though Lefoka (2020) points out many contributing factors such as the status of examination halls; personnel in charge of administration of examinations; printing errors; and non-compliance with regulations.

3.4 Lecturers and Online Assessment Strategies

Online assessment can have both positive and negative effects on lecturers. One of the positive effects of online assessment is that students get feedback instantly as assessment results are processed and calculated by computer automatically. The importance of giving students immediate feedback gives a sense of how well they have performed or provides information on areas they need to improve or work on. In the same vein, Mokhets'engoane and Pallai (2023) attest that immediate feedback increases the students' level of engagement with different courses. Also, it has been reinforced by different scholars that there is an automatic correction to virtual activities (Almeida & Monteiro, 2021).

However, there are also negative effects. To prove this, not all teachers were at the same level of preparation for online learning and assessment. Migration to online learning was not planned, nor there was enough time for planning and training as everything happened fast therefore some lecturers with lower technological knowledge felt a little bit lost (Makafane & Chere-Masupha, 2021)

3.5 Students and Online Assessment Strategies

Most of the B.Ed. Primary students do not possess devices to access online learning. Those who have, own smartphones but the smartphones are mainly used for informal digital platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook hence Makumane (2021) recommends their integration in online learning. Furthermore, Mokhets'engoane & Pallai (2023) highlights the problem of technical resources to access online classes as a challenge even in other places than Lesotho such as in India. As a result, access to internet to many B.Ed. Primary students is a challenge due to the geographical structure of Lesotho. Surprisingly, the same students are against online learning but prefer to be assessed online.

The reason of preferring to be assessed online might be because this type of assessment allows flexibility. Thus, it allows students accessibility to content and instruction at any given time, from anywhere as Makumane (2021) postulates. Online assessment thus casts off the inflexibility that is seen in a face-to-face assessment environment, as students are not subjected to the surveillance of the invigilators. Though some studies view teaching and assessing online as beneficial since students learn at their own space and pace, as well as permitting them to use their chosen learning strategies, thereby promoting personal growth (Mpungose, 2020; Mokhets'engoane & Malunguja, 2021), Mashinini (2020) sees online assessment as formally allowing unintended group work, copying, consultation of other digital aids or worse paying people who write for them and so on. Truly, online assessment has promoted academic dishonesty among the B.Ed. Primary students. This is seen by the increasing number of malpractice cases in this group of students.

4. Materials and Methods

In conducting this case study, a qualitative research design was employed. Experts on the authenticity of assessment strategies that are used to assess B.Ed. Primary part-time students at National University of Lesotho were engaged. Case study was preferred because according to Yin (2018), case studies allow an empirical inquiry on a given phenomenon in its real-life context. This case study used the critical theory as a lens to view how assessment is conceptualised in the chosen institution of higher education.

In relation to sampling, eight (8) B.Ed Primary students were interviewed using semi-structured interviews telephonically. The students were also purposively sampled; two from First Year, two from the second year, two from the third year and another two from the fourth year which is the final year. In this group of students, some came from the highlands and some came from the lowlands. The geographical structure of Lesotho is divided into three geographical hills: Lowlands, Foothills and Highlands. The highlands occupy three-quarters of the country and are the mountainous part of the country and is very rural and inaccessible while the lowlands are mostly the urban part of the country (Pietro Del Sette, 2016). Developments like electricity and network

connections are poorer in the highlands than in the lowlands hence the mixture of students from both the lowlands and highlands when choosing the participants.

All participants were advised to be free to share their experiences and were also assured anonymity. To ensure anonymity, names used in this academic piece are not their real names. Furthermore, participants were made aware that they were participating in this study free of charge and were free to withdraw from participation whenever they feel like withdrawing.

5. Findings and Discussions

The findings of the study provide confirmatory evidence that it was unjust to several participants of the study to be assessed offline although the entire teaching–learning process was done online throughout the entire semester. Their argument was that; if they were taught online, they should be assessed online. Most importantly, this shift in modality as reported by the participants, has caused inconveniences that affected their academic achievement seriously.

Remarkably, Participant 1 raised a worrisome concern that due to abrupt shifting in the mode of assessment, most of the students engaged in examination malpractices as they were not familiar and ready for adjustment to the 'new' environment where they were assessed. Participant 1 stated succinctly;

"Most of the students were caught cheating... I think it was for the first NUL that had such a huge number of students that copied in the exams."

Similarly, there is ample sustenance to the above claim by Participant 3 who further accentuates that, the assessment was not fair because there has never been a physical interaction with their peers the entire semester. As a result, this has limited their participation and denied them a chance to collaborate with their peers through group discussions and peer learning. On these grounds, one can argue that denying students an opportunity to engage with others is a recipe for disaster. King (2016) further upholds this argument by giving an emphasis that peer learning is indispensable as students can develop critical thinking, and communication skills and leads to better retention of the course material. Additionally, Barkley (2019) is agreeable to the view that discussions are also vital as they help in retaining the information that might be needed at a later stage, particularly in the examination hall.

Participant 3 further reported that when confronted with a different environment (offline), there were frustrations among the students that compelled them to resort to illegal ways to pass the exam. These findings seem quite interesting as they corroborate Lefoka's (2020) findings that due to society-related factors that put a lot of pressure on students, they end up engaging in examination malpractices. Such factors include issues of funding and the quest for better grades.

Another important finding of the study was that due to a lack of ICT and network facilities, students had a challenge in attending online classes regularly. Undoubtedly, this has affected their teaching–learning negatively as they missed lectures and content covered. Based on the finding conveyed, it is possible to conclude that students were not mentally prepared for the offline examinations given the situation already articulated. To support this, participant 4 put it as thus;

“In most of the lectures, I was not able to attend due to bad network as I live in deep, rural areas of Semonkong where there is no electricity. I had to travel every day to a place where there is a stable connection which caused inconvenience...”

The above utterances by Participant 4 strengthen Ayanwale, Mosia, & Molefi (2023) and Nkhi, Mofana & Moqasa (2023) conclusions that lack of OTL tools could hamper the quality of Higher Education in Lesotho. Supporting this view, Henaku (2020) and Dube (2020) concur that poor internet connection possess a severe challenge for students leaving in remote areas. The researchers further argue that poor internet connection slows down students' participation which eventually leads to poor academic performance. Even in the context of South Africa, poor internet connection was seen by Mpungose (2020) as a major challenge facing Higher Education Institutions. As a result of these challenges, online teaching and learning were affected and students did not capture a lot of content hence affecting their examination outcome.

Participant 5 was also in accord with Participant 1, 3 and 4 that as a result of offline assessment in their final examinations, there were also many students who had to supplement some courses. To them, the main contributing factor, as already articulated was the frustrations brought by the new environment in which they were not so conversant. This above articulation signifies that the end-of-term assessment strategy adopted by the university was not reliable.

Nevertheless, there are participants who seemed not having a problem with the shift in the mode of assessment. To be precise, it has been indicated by Participant 2 that there was no problem with whichever method of assessment was used. He further articulated that he never missed any online classes so he was ready for any form of assessment. For him, online learning and assessment were the best options as he was to get ready for the examination while comfortably seated at his home. This view is also supported by various scholars. For example, Dhull & Sakshi (2017) indicate that with online learning, learners can learn anywhere and at any time convenient to them. Others (Mokhets'engoane & Malunguja, 2021; Alsayed & Althaqafi, 2022) reported in their studies that online learning is flexible and less costly as there are no expenses in terms of travelling to class and printing of materials. Considering the above, one could conclude that this participant had a smooth online learning environment where challenges were limited. The challenges raised by others such as poor internet connectivity and lack of data were not part of this participant. When accentuating his views, participant 2 vocalised,

"I enjoyed learning at the comfort of my home and was able to learn at my own pace... this has helped me to prepare well in advance and be ready for exams."

The above articulation of Participant 2 strengthens that there was no problem with the way they were assessed. Another important highlight of the study was observed by Participant 6 when she further supported the perception highlighted by Participant 2. She also believes that there was no problem with that shifting. The argument was that the coordinator informed them well in advance that the final examinations will not be conducted online. Therefore, they had ample time to prepare and get ready for the examination. Apart from that, the remaining participants; 7 & 8 were also adamant that there were fewer constraints during the OTL process. However, they managed to cope up and they were ready for offline assessment.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, it appears that opinions are divided regarding the fairness and authenticity of assessment strategies used by NUL during the Covid-19 pandemic. While some participants did not express concern about being taught online and assessed offline, others maintained that if they were taught online, they expected to be assessed online in order to maintain fairness and authenticity.

Therefore, the results suggest that there may be a disconnect between students' expectations and assessment strategies employed by NUL during the pandemic. This may be due to the integration of both OTL and offline assessment which may have led to confusion and uncertainty among students about what constitutes a fair assessment.

Considering these findings and the evidence currently attested by the participants of this study, it is recommended that assessment expectations should be clearly communicated with the students in advance. This can help alleviate any confusion and ensure that students understand what is expected of them. Furthermore, assessment strategies should be ensured that they align with learning outcomes. This can ensure that assessments maintain a high level of validity and are relevant measures of student learning. Another important element is to consider alternative assessment strategies that are better suited to online learning environments.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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