Perspectives on Online Assessment: Reflecting on the Voices of Students and Academics Amidst the COVID-19 Era

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Abstract

The unprecedented change in the education system brought by COVID-19 has affected both students and academics in higher education institutions in many ways, including how assessment was conducted. The methods used to assess students shifted from in-person to virtual platforms. The sudden change from conventional classroom learning to online education has significantly influenced the evaluation processes and the strategies employed for student assessment. Hodges et al. (2020) define emergency online teaching methods as a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances. It involves the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction or education that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face or as blended or hybrid courses and that will return to that format once the crisis or emergency has abated. This transition has brought about various challenges in maintaining fairness and accuracy in evaluations, emphasizing the importance of modifying assessment approaches to suit the evolving educational setting. The impact of the pandemic on learning and teaching in South Africa varies across different societies because of the social, economic, political, and cultural statuses.

During the COVID-19 induced lockdown, students in many rural areas faced significant challenges with online assessment systems, primarily due to limited and unreliable internet access. The digital divide has posed significant obstacles for rural based students, making it difficult for them to engage in assessments fully. This has often impacted on their academic performance and resulted in an unequal learning experience compared to students in urban areas. This paper explores the challenges and experiences faced by students during online assessments amidst the COVID-19 era, particularly as they navigated emergency online teaching methods. Hence this review critically examines various assessment methods used in virtual mode. The focus of this paper employs the qualitative research approach, using convenient sampling to select and interview academics and students in higher education institutions. A case study research design approach was applied, and data collected using focus-group and semi-structured interviews. Data was analysed using the thematic analysis process. One of the significant issues the study found, reveals that the quality and integrity of assessments have been somewhat compromised. It transpired during data presentation that; students did cheat because they were not supervised. In solving the problem of online assessment dishonesty, it was recommended that implementation of online proctoring software programs be used as an effective tool to minimize academic dishonesty in online exams.

Keywords: Amidst, COVID-19-, Online Assessment, Reflecting, Students

1. Introduction

Assessment is undeniably a crucial component of the teaching and learning process, serving not only as a tool for measuring student progress but also as a means of enhancing the overall educational experience. According to Joshi et al., (2020) assessment is universally recognised as one of the most important and powerful elements of an educational experience, as it provides observable evidence of learning, determines student progress and demonstrates understanding of the curriculum. Assessments, when utilized effectively, serve as powerful tools for uncovering students' strengths and pinpointing areas requiring improvement. They not only inform instructional strategies but also promote a richer and more comprehensive understanding of the subject matter, enhancing both teaching and learning experiences. Thus, assessments should be designed and implemented thoughtfully, with a focus on promoting continuous learning and growth. Educational assessment, as a practice, has assumed

unprecedented relevance in the current crisis of Covid-19. In some rural communities, there is still the problem of network which is mainly caused by the poor technology advancement; hence, students are unable to access internet easily in the villages. Even though online assessments offer ease and are more cost-efficient compared to physical assessments, there are still many infrastructural barriers. A stable internet connection, electric connection, and other infrastructural issues must be considered when universities consider the audience of the online exam (Hoarder, 2020). For many institutions, especially those located in rural areas who are poorly resourced, the rapid and unexpected shift to online teaching and learning complicated assessments by disrupting how assessments are done.

As online education is expanding worldwide in all types of higher education institutions, faculties and administrators continue to deal with a variety of issues related to the online education, including both quality of instruction and learning, as well as quality of assessment (Dendir & Maxwell, 2020). Some researchers argue that formative or summative assessments which are used to measure learning in online courses do not truly reflect learning because it is possible that they are achieved by cheating which occurs during these online assessments (Arnold, 2016). The problem of academic dishonesty in online classes in the form of cheating continues to grow (Golden & Kohlbeck, 2020)

The increased level of uncertainty in today's academic landscape has been accompanied by notable advancements in technology, particularly in the realm of online proctored assessments. While these innovations offer practical solutions for remote evaluation, they also spark important ethical debates regarding student privacy and the fairness of such methods. When effectively designed and implemented, assessment serves as a powerful tool to promote meaningful learning, guiding students toward a deeper understanding of subject matter and supporting the achievement of clearly defined learning outcomes. Formative and summative assessments should be thoughtfully designed to serve dual purposes: that is; as tools for evaluating student achievement (assessments of learning) and as mechanisms to enhance the learning process itself (assessments for learning). Effective assessment demands meticulous planning and should transcend the narrow purpose of merely reporting student success or failure. Rather, it should be strategically designed to actively support and enhance the learning process, fostering growth and development in students.

Literature

In The Information Age, Castells announces the coming of the new stage of societal development. He calls it the Information Age / informationalism and believes that it comes after two previous stages – pre-industrialism and industrialism, (Castells 2010, 1996). Informationalism differs from the previous industrial stage essentially as "each mode of development has a structurally determined performance principle around which technological processes are organized, informationalism is oriented towards technological development, that is toward the accumulation of knowledge and towards higher levels of complexity in information processing", Castells (2010). This is also applicable to teaching and learning, with access to information through availability of ICT infrastructure, students and lecturers may work in the comfort of their homes and still be productive. However, Castells believes that focusing on information processing and not on the output, increases the output even more,s/he states that "while higher levels of knowledge may normally result in higher levels of output per unit of input, it is the pursuit of knowledge and information that characterizes the technological production function under informationalism", (Castells, 2010). Therefore, according to Castells, human and social development has a direction, and this direction seems to be towards effectiveness. Roztocki et al., (2019) postulate that, Information, and Communication Technologies (ICT) play a significant role in all aspects of modern society. ICT have changed the way in which we communicate with each other, how we find needed information, how we work, how we interact with government agencies, and how we manage our social lives. During the time of writing this research piece, teaching and learning was offered online due to Covid-19 regulation such as social distancing. Hence class lessons were delivered in different spaces to accommodate the flow of communication using online platform, such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and/or WhatsApp etc. As this study focuses on application of multimodal teaching strategies in higher education institutions, it is essential to apply different modes of teaching, including computer-based instructional technology and to explore how computer technology is used in the university classroom, and how computer-based teaching methods differ from traditional teaching methods in terms of class interaction and in-class learning.

Since computer-based methods give people more time to work wherever they are, even in their comfort zones,the integration of information technology into educational settings has been significantly accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, transforming what had been a gradual shift into an urgent and widespread adoption, that is according to (Bozkurt, & Sharma, 2020). Hence, in a study conducted by the Air Force Academy, (Gist et al. 1988-1989) found that students taught in classrooms equipped with instructor workstations and videodisks had more positive

attitudes about the instructor, the teaching method used in the course, and about how the instruction had affected their own attitudes than compared to students who were taught in a traditional classroom via a lecture method. The outbreak of the covid pandemic taught us that teaching and learning should not be confined to a physical space only, hence the application of multi-media was adopted. (Braun et al., 2020) indicate that, education in the digital age includes but is not restricted to digital education and encompasses the transmission of technical skills.

Kirtiklis, (2017) like Manuel Castells defines the present social landscape as the Information Age, in which human societies perform their activities in a new technological paradigm argueing that this landscape was brought about by the revolution of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT).

As COVID19 continue to disrupt classes and closure of higher learning institutions are prolonged for an unknown period, academics and parents are expected to continue helping students learn at home. Assessment is an essential element in a higher education e-learning scenario (Bulut, 2019). Furthermore, Bulut (2019) emphasizes that assessment for e-learning requires effort on the part of the educational community to propose methods, strategies, and procedures in order to achieve effective and efficient processes. Nevertheless, coronavirus had a huge impact on the sector, leaving a question mark over how students are assessed both now and, in the future, (Khan, 2021). While Hawkins, (2020) indicates that, one of the largest challenges with online learning is assessment of student learning from a distance. This is a new area for both teachers and students, and assessments will likely have larger measurement error than usual, (Burgess & Sievertsen, 2020). Many countries have cancelled or modified national exams and have defaulted to other means of assessment. In higher education many universities and colleges are replacing traditional exams with online assessment tools. It seems like assessing students' learning from a distance is a serious challenge for some institutions whose students reside in rural areas. According to Baleni, (2015) online and blended learning have become common educational strategies in higher education. Lecturers have to re-theorise certain basic concerns of teaching, learning and assessment in non-traditional environments. These concerns include perceptions such as cogency and trustworthiness of assessment in online environments in relation to serving the intended purposes, as well as understanding how formative assessment operates within online learning environments.

As Vonderwell et al., (2007) point out, assessment (whether formative or summative) in online learning frameworks incorporates diverse features as related to face-to-face environments mostly due to the asynchronous environment of interactivity among the online contributors (the lecturer and students). Guangul et al., (2020) indicate that, higher education institutions have faced different challenges in their teaching-learning activities. The calamity of COVID-19 necessitated the use of technology for assessment. Particularly, conducting assessments remotely during COVID-19 has posed extraordinary challenges for higher education institutions owing to lack of preparation superimposed with the inherent problems of remote assessment. Joshi et al., (2020) state that, assessment is universally recognised as one of the most important and powerful elements of an educational experience, as it provides observable evidence of learning, determines student progress and demonstrates understanding of the curriculum. Furthermore, Pereira et al.,(2017) emphasize that, assessment of student learning in an online setup cannot be simply transferred from a conventional face-to-face classroom but needs rethinking to weigh its benefits and drawbacks as a medium of communication. However, Senel & Senel, (2021) highlight that, most of these institutions were not fully prepared to have all of their courses online. Technical inadequacies, lack of qualified online tools, inexperience of instructors and students in distance education have emerged as major issues that institutions must face.

In a study conducted by Ahmad, (2020) they state that, it is always important to use different assessment approaches and strategies to assess set learning outcome, hence, assessment provides a more authentic, reliable and valid picture of the student's learning. Meanwhile, (Appiah & Van Tonder,(2018) believe that online assessment format has become a viable means of assessing students due to advancements in technology and online learning tools. Sadler, (2016) outlines that, education institution will do away with pen and paper assessment and move to digital testing as an innovative form of assessment. Since assessment methods affect how students learn, Schuwirth & Van Der Vleuten, (2011), suggest that online assessments must be designed to stimulate positive learning behaviours in students. Amer, (2020) points out that, E-exam enables instructors to use multimedia. That makes this type of exam suitable for assessing various skills and capabilities, in fact, Daramola, (2017) agrees by saying, it can also be used for assessing students' skills, such as: the problem-solving skills.

Online exams significantly decrease the administrative burden on the school, helping save the time and effort spent on the printing and distribution of exam papers and setting up on examination centres and classrooms, (Haidar & Al-Salman, 2020). The technological affordances of the next-generation can foster the use of innovative assessment strategies that include audio or formative video feedback, online polls, mastery quizzes, and auto-graded tests, (Zabolotniaia et al., 2020). Zabin, (2021) elaborates that, beyond being more secure and cost-effective

than paper tests and exams, digital tests created with the assistance of artificial intelligence can greatly reduce teacher workload when it comes to creating and grading tests. The tools used for online assessments are objective, focusing on mostly written examinations. Due to advancements in technology and online learning tools and systems, an online assessment format has become a viable means of assessing students in such systems, (Appiah & Van Tonder, 2018).

Assessment represents one of the most complex and demanding aspects of transitioning to distance learning, particularly for institutions accustomed to traditional face-to-face oral or written examinations. This challenge arises from redesigning evaluation methods to ensure academic integrity, align with new pedagogical approaches, and accurately measure learning outcomes in a virtual environment. Adapting to these changes often requires significant shifts in technology, instructor training, and student engagement strategies, as the control shift towards the students makes it hardly possible to ensure that students are not cheating, (Munoz & Mackay, 2019). Due to the closure of educational facilities, Ali & Dmour, (2021) outline that assessments will be conducted online. However, the credibility of online assessment is questionable hence, students are not supervised so they are more likely to cheat since they cannot be checked upon. The issue of cheating in online instruction and assessment is central to consider while running the online courses and exams, (Raines et al., 2011; Watson & Sottile, 2010). Also, the fact that it is basically impossible to invigilate student behaviour during online assessments means that students are more than likely to rely on cheating methods as they have no means of being caught by exam invigilators, (Alsadoon, (2017). The process of online assessments makes exam creation more difficult and adds strain to the staff and lecturers, (Ali & Dmour, 2021).

Different studies have identified that, E-assessment in higher education could face some challenges particularly for student who are not familiar with computers or with the online assessment process. Osuji, (2012) outlines that, some teachers are unfamiliar with technology, or most of them use E-assessment for the first time. Therefore, teachers need training, to be confident for/in using E-assessment systems, Jordan & Mitchell, (2009). Day et al., (2021) contends that, one of the biggest challenges was the need to revise assessment strategies that adapted to a socially distanced setting but that still reflected learning objectives. According to Al-Shaikhli & Courtenage (2018), online assessments also allow fraudulent examinations, in which students are capable to cheat. This provides inaccurate results and thus causes unfairness within the grading system. (Guangul et al., 2020) pointed out that, the main challenges identified in remote assessment were academic dishonesty, infrastructure, coverage of learning outcomes, and commitment of students to submit assessments. The other challenge related to COVID-19 is assessing students remotely. In higher institutions, assessment has three major purposes: that is; to support learning, to execute accountability, and to provide certification, progress, and transfer (Archer, 2017; Capsim, 2020).

2. Methodology

The study was guided by the overarching research question: What challenges do higher education institutions in KwaZulu-Natal experience when conducting online assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic? In this paper a sequential qualitative research method was used, and a constructivism paradigm was adopted. According to Ahmad et al., (2019: 2828) "qualitative research is a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting. It focuses on the, "why" rather than the "what" of social phenomena and relies on the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their everyday lives". The focus of a qualitative orientation is to explore the experiences, meanings, beliefs, experiences and perspectives that participants assign to a social phenomenon, (Nieuwenhuis, 2020).

3.1 Research Model/Design

A case study research design was employed, the purpose of the research design is to ensure that evidence solicited from the participants enables the researcher to answer the research questions as truthfully as possible. Research design involves research planning, and it also focuses attention on how data are collected.

3.2 Data Collecting Tools

In the initial phase of this research, primary data was gathered through virtual focus group interviews involving both students and academics. This approach provided diverse perspectives on the topic. In the subsequent phase, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two university officials to gain deeper insights into their experiences and reflections on online assessment practices during the COVID-19 era.

3.4 Research Procedures

Before the study was carried out, the interview schedule was developed based on the research questions.The interview questions were distributed in advance to allow student participants adequate time for reflection, enabling

them to provide more thoughtful and informed responses. Additionally, early access to the questions helped them familiarize themselves with any unfamiliar terminology, ensuring more meaningful engagement during the interview, which was conducted on the virtual platform, Microsoft Teams. Data were generated using a virtual focus group discussion. According to Dilshad and Latif (2013:192), a focus group interview "provides a rich and detailed set of data about perceptions, thoughts, feelings and impressions of people in their own words".

3.5 Sampling or Study Group

All participants were from one participating university which is in the rural areas and were selected for this study because they were easily accessible and readily available to participate. The selected participants held rich information and had experienced online learning for the first time. This included twelve first year students of different programs from the selected institution as well as six academics. Students showed a very high interest and presented their views, comments, and suggestions concerning online assessment. Likewise, the researcher was interested and eager to find out about challenges and experiences of students and academics' perception in this regard. With this research piece, the challenges posed by lack of ICT infrastructure to monitor online assessment was identified and this makes results obtained by students questionable and brings doubt on its credibility.

3.6 Data Analysis

The study was mainly qualitative in nature, and the researcher analysed data using thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is commonly used in qualitative research and is suitable for novice researchers. One important advantage is that it can be used with any theory the researcher chooses. The researcher systematically organized the collected data by categorizing it under distinct headings. Through iterative analysis, recurring patterns and connections within the data were identified. This process facilitated the development of overarching themes and more specific sub-themes, providing a structured framework for interpreting and understanding the findings.

3.7 Presentation of Findings

3.7.1 Online Assessment

According to Joshi et al., (2020) online assessment is relatively new, regular capacity development programs should be conducted by administrators to keep all stakeholders updated with all technological mechanisms of assessment delivery. Assessment plays a significant role in making students' learning more visible. It offers clear evidence of their progress, understanding, and skill development, enabling academics to evaluate how effective their teaching methods are. By using different approaches, such as formative and summative assessments, as well as peer to peer and self-assessments, academics can better understand individual learning needs, pinpoint areas for growth, and celebrate successes. Moreover, assessments encourage students to reflect on their learning journey, promoting self-awareness and deeper engagement in the learning process.

Students need to be assessed to check whether they are retaining skills for what they have learned. Hawkins, (2020) outlines one of the largest challenges with online learning which is assessment of student learning from a distance. However, the credibility of online assessment is questionable hence, students are not supervised so they are more likely to cheat since they cannot be checked upon. Okada et al., (2019) support the idea that, internet usage is considered a catalyst for e-assessment cheating.

> *Ziningi:…..seeing something for the first time in the exam was frustrating and that is when I decided to cheat. (FGI).*
> *Sihle: ……cheating was caused by poor teaching and learning because some questions appear on exam paper for topic you have never learnt or been taught so that lead to student to copy from books, notes and from slides……(FGI)...*
> *Penuel………. From the first script of the first assignment you read, by the time you …you finish the 10th one, you would have known who copied from whom (FGI)..*
> *Mzilankatha: Mmmmmhhh..there is high possibility of copying because they(students) were unsupervised(SSI)*
> *Nolwazy: ……. even without turn-it-in just by looking into the assignment you can tell that, this is copy and paste. ……There's plagiarism. Could tell I've marked this work before. Same everything even the way the sentence is starting. (FGI).*

Seemingly, students did cheat during exams because of several reasons. One of the reasons was that of curriculum coverage, it seems like lecturers did not cover the syllabus this gap in syllabus coverage has significant implications for institutional responsibilities beyond issues of student academic integrity. Institutions are entrusted with

ensuring the quality and consistency of education, and the failure to deliver a complete curriculum raises concerns about academic standards, student preparedness, and long-term credibility. It affects accreditation compliance, graduate employability, and the equitable treatment of students across cohorts. Moreover, institutions have to provide adequate academic support, remedial opportunities, and transparent communication to mitigate learning losses and uphold their educational mandate during crises. Addressing these gaps requires systemic interventions rather than solely placing responsibility on students. Some topics were seen on the exam question paper for the first time. Therefore, the students' perspectives were that they were not taught enough; hence, since students were not supervised, they decided to cheat. However, on one hand, academics claimed that the curriculum was covered.

3.7.2 Challenges related to Online Assessment Monitoring Systems

Major challenges of online assessments are totally dependent on technology. they can involve high costs for assessment system software licences, servers, large number of computers, well-trained support staff and large spaces. It is becoming increasingly realised that there is a need to develop a system/ tool to assist monitoring of both formative and summative online assessment. It appears there were no guidelines in place designed for online tests and exams. Leshchinskaya & Piani, (2020) state that, the unprecedented change brought by the COVID-19 pandemic to higher education has brought complex implications pertaining to students' evaluation instructions, perhaps for online assessment to be reliable, it is necessary to design proper guidelines.

> **Nana:** *When it comes to monitoring; to monitor plagiarize or copy when they are writing assessments online, I have failed dismally. Because we sometimes gave them quiz. And it used to frustrate me to see a student getting between 90- 100%.(FGI)..*
>
> **Thabo:** *………. the universities did not have a program or a system in place to monitor cheating- it was more like an open book test throughout and students had knowledge of websites where they could use to paraphrasing their copied work(FG)..*
>
> **Sphindile….** *that's why students decided to coy or plagiarise…… no invigilator and no one was watching…… (FGI)..*
>
> **Zolile:** *during exams we used to screenshot and share answers also, refer to notes from the slides and, textbooks (FGI)..*
>
> **Mzilankatha:** *there is a high possibility that the marks students obtained did not deserve them because we did not have monitoring tools or strategy, they were writing exams*
>
> *Remember that eerr ….er..when a person is writing a formal paper every time there must be eeerr ..an invigilator. (SSI)*
>
> **Mawethu…...** *I also experienced the same challenges, especially with summative assessments; students were cheating even if you shuffle the answers…. they were always ahead of us even to maneuver the system ..... but with formative assessments I did not really have any challenges because I put the document into turn-it-in…...it helped me a lot minimise plagiarism. (FGI)..*
>
> **Trump:** *………. on assessments, some of us were using multiple choice questions and quizzes. We we found that most lecturers had difficulties in... in ...in selecting what these students should see. So you'd find that a lecturer would just set a quiz and allow the learners to see the answers immediately when they finished the quiz. (FGI)..*
>
> **Mihla:** *Another thing that makes us copy was that in most cases classes used to be cancelled due to poor connectivity…. student did not learn and understand the module, that is why they decided to help themselves by copying for them to pass that module (FGI)..*
>
> **Tukzin:…...** *level of copying was very high….(FGI)..*
>
> **Ms Vilakazi:** *..it compromised the integrity of our assessments, because students were unsupervised when they were giving us answers some they were bringing our slides as they are.*
>
> *…. so we really need to find some measures where we can be able to supervise or to see our students while they are writing online (SSI)*

Based on the responses from participants, it was evident that the online assessment failed to meet the expected standards of quality. Tomlinson & Moon, (2013) indicate specific concerns which included technical issues that disrupted the assessment process, poorly structured or ambiguous questions that did not accurately measure the intended competencies, and a lack of personalized or constructive feedback. Additionally, participants highlighted that the online format lacked interactive elements and engagement, which negatively impacted on their overall experience and confidence in the assessment's validity, it has transpired that institutions did not have a system or program in place to monitor online or distance assessment of either tests or examinations. *Zolile* confirmed that students wrote exams without being invigilated. Hence, they engaged in cheating by utilizing online resources such as Google to copy and paste answers, consulting with others, and referencing personal class notes or course materials. This raises questions on credibility issues as well as the quality of results obtained by students during

the covid-19 pandemic or lockdown. In the case of formative assessment, it shows that the rate of plagiarism was high. However, even if the document was put into turn-it-in lecturers could not pick that up because students knew a computer program that assisted them with paraphrasing, this is what participant "Thabo" alluded to.

3.7.3 Inequality Exposed by Online Assessment

According to Maphalala et al. (2021), the digital divide continues to exclude many students and was regarded as one of the challenges South African universities had to grapple with as universities migrated to online platforms at the start of the COVID-19 crisis. During the COVID-19 crisis, long-standing disparities in education became more evident, highlighting significant inequalities in resources and access to infrastructure between historically black universities and predominantly white institutions across the country. '' *Zolile: I have noticed the gap amongst universities, during lockdown some universities continued with teaching and learning while others were still trying to adjust to online operations. Especially in our university we waited for too long to get our devices. (FGI)''*. With reference to Romera (2021), s/he indicates that, some of these universities are still lagging behind because most of the enrolled students come from disadvantaged schools where the students were not exposed to technology. Among the many inequalities exposed by COVID-19, the digital divide is not only one of the starkest, but also among the most surprising. Even in developed countries, internet access is still a challenge, (Beaunoyer et al., 2020).

Nana: some of the university here in South Africa, were doing much better than us during the time of COVID in terms of technology, if you consider that the students at Wits were given data, with our students it never happened. And our students found it difficult even to get that data. So, it shows over to something went wrong somewhere somehow and then coming back to the institution itself, if you go to our lecture halls. We've got interactive whiteboards that are not compatible to the system and therefore many of them are not working. ..... FGI

Thabo: Yes, there is gap between historically black universities compared to former predominantly white ... ...if one can look at quality or brand name of laptops supplied is totally different. Students from those institutions receive quiet expensive laptop compared to what we received (FGI).

Penuel: …. it is no longer about our university or historically disadvantaged university…….. It is about the Minister of higher education not prioritizing those historically disadvantaged university before COVID came in(FGI).

Mzilankatha: the coming in of COVID-19 prove that there is a gap, with so called predominantly white institutions this kind of platform (online) was long introduced to them (SSI)

Inequality remains a deeply entrenched issue that permeates every aspect of society, including the education sector. Its impact is far-reaching, influencing access to quality resources, infrastructure, and opportunities, and perpetuating systemic barriers that hinder equitable progress for all. It transpired that COVID-19 pandemic exposed it. Respondents, particularly students, revealed that their friends/siblings from other universities showed them devices of high quality compared to what they had been provided with. Additionally, when the COVID-19 pandemic struck, many universities swiftly adapted and continued with their academic programs by leveraging remote learning tools and digital platforms. In contrast, the institution under study faced significant delays in resuming its operations. This was primarily due to the challenges it encountered in adjusting to the abrupt shift in circumstances, including inadequate preparedness for online learning, limited technological infrastructure, and the need to train faculty and staff to navigate new teaching modalities. These factors collectively contributed to a slower transition, highlighting the importance of institutional readiness and flexibility in managing unforeseen disruptions.

4 Results and Discussion

Administering assessments via online tools has presented considerable difficulties for both academics and students. For academics, the transition required mastering unfamiliar digital platforms, redesigning assessments to suit the online format, and ensuring the integrity of evaluations in a virtual environment. Students, on the other hand, faced difficulties such as unreliable internet connectivity, limited access to appropriate devices, and the added stress of adapting to new testing methods, often without adequate guidance or support. These challenges have brought to light the multifaceted nature of conducting online assessments, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive systems, adequate training, and equitable access to technology. Addressing these issues is crucial to ensuring that evaluations are both fair and effective, leaving no student at a disadvantage due to the systemic barriers or resource disparities. The findings from focus group discussions revealed that students were being honest with their responses. Findings revealed that some students raised the concern with regard to the problem of writing exams

without being supervised, for some they regarded it as open book tests, and most students claimed that they obtained distinctions knowing very well they did not deserve it.

One of the significant issues pertaining to online assessment is that it facilitates cheating. As mentioned by participants during data presentation, the main challenge identified was that students were cheating/copying when writing either formative or summative assessments. Interestingly, a total of eight respondents agreed that students had either engaged in cheating or were involved in other forms of academic malpractices. This suggests a notable level of awareness or suspicion regarding unethical behaviour among students, which may reflect broader concerns about academic integrity in the educational environment. Also, even academics to some degree, pick that when marking the scripts but there is nothing they could do since students were at home on their own. Nevertheless, as for the reasons mentioned by the participants in their responses such as one below: "there was high possibility of cheating because they(students) were unsupervised".

In support of these observations, students also identified several factors that contributed to cheating and copying during assessments. Among the key reasons highlighted were the lack of proper supervision in online environments, the ease of accessing external resources during tests, and the pressure to perform well in unfamiliar and often stressful conditions. Additionally, some students cited inadequate preparation due to the abrupt transition to remote learning, insufficient clarity in assessment instructions, and the temptation posed by collaborative online platforms. These insights reveal the multifaceted challenges of maintaining academic integrity in virtual assessments and underscore the need for more robust strategies to address these issues. Respondents indicated that copying was caused by poor teaching and learning because some questions appeared on exam paper for topics they had never learnt or been taught. Furthermore, (Sabrina et al., 2022) indicate that this should also be undertaken into issues of monitoring of online assessment to minimise or get rid of academic misconduct.

Findings also reveal that as students cannot be physically monitored in online mode, they can easily engage in academic misconduct without being detected by the academic staff. When online assessments are conducted, the use of technology-based proctored tests and exams becomes a necessary measure to uphold academic integrity. While such tools play a critical role in deterring dishonest practices and maintaining the credibility of assessment outcomes, it is equally important to acknowledge the concerns raised by students—particularly regarding privacy, data security, and the potential for undue stress. Institutions must therefore strive to implement proctoring solutions in a way that is transparent, minimally invasive, and respectful of student rights, while still achieving the essential goal of ensuring fair and reliable evaluation standards in a remote learning environment. Teclehaimanot *et al*., (2018), identifies several legal requirements for conducting online exams. One of the most important requirements is student identification and authentication while taking online exams. There are software tools available to detect plagiarism. Such tools can be integrated into online exams and tests to help detect plagiarism to some extent by analysing submitted content for similarities with existing sources, including academic databases, websites, and previously submitted work. Tools like plagiarism detection software employ advanced algorithms to identify copied material and generate detailed reports, which can assist educators in maintaining academic integrity. However, while these tools are effective in identifying text-based plagiarism, they may have limitations in detecting more sophisticated forms of academic dishonesty, such as paraphrasing or unauthorized collaboration. To enhance their effectiveness, these tools should be used in conjunction with other strategies, such as setting unique and application-based questions, implementing strict exam protocols, and fostering a culture of academic honesty among students.

5 Conclusion

It seemed that students were hit hardest by online assessments, with many struggling to adjust to the new format. The shift from traditional in-person exams to digital ones brought its own set of challenges—technical glitches, less interaction with teachers, and concerns about the fairness and accuracy of the evaluations. All of this only added to the stress and anxiety students were already dealing with, making it clear that better strategies are needed to support them in today's digital learning environment. Some students experienced a very challenging moment writing exams without having enough data, writing under such panicked situation had affected their performance. In this regard, all stakeholders including the universities, government, and the private sector must work together to ensure the provision of effective networking resources suggested by both students and academics. It is increasingly clear that further research is essential to address the various challenges associated with monitoring online assessments. With the ongoing transition of education to digital platforms, there is an increasing demand for comprehensive research to identify effective strategies for maintaining academic integrity, strengthening security protocols, and assessing the fairness and accessibility of online assessment systems. Such research is essential for improving existing practices and ensuring that online assessments are conducted reliably and equitably.

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