

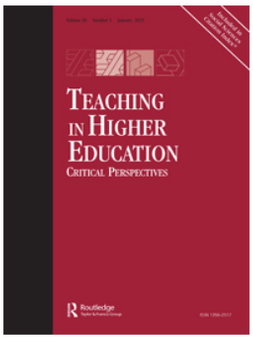
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Exploring the nexus between assessment, quality and social justice: reflections on remote assessment practices

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ABSTRACT

In the shift to Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERT&L) during the Covid-19 pandemic, remote assessment and feedback became a major source of discontent and challenge for students and staff. This paper is a reflection and analysis of assessment practices during ERT&L, and our theorisation of the possibilities for shifts towards sustainable and transformative approaches to assessment in the global south. We argue that the challenges experienced during the pandemic revealed a view of assessment as gatekeeping, and a conception of quality as exceptional. In the context of ERT&L, assessment strategies based on such views may have further marginalised and disadvantaged students faced with technological, economic, and socio-cultural access issues. We highlight that institutional responses and staff concerns regarding standards and the validity and reliability of remote assessments are evident of affirmative rather than transformative approaches to reimagining assessments for social justice.

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Remote assessment; sustainable assessment; social justice; transformation; quality

Introduction

While the development of online materials during the Covid-19 pandemic was challenging for staff and the process of online learning undoubtedly challenging for students, it is the online assessment component of Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERT&L) that proved most unsettling for both staff and students (García-Peñalvo et al. 2021). In this paper, as academics with a scholarly interest in assessment, we problematise the perceived challenges experienced by students and staff during ERT&L. We examine how online assessment strategies that emerged during ERT&L supported or exacerbated existing inequalities and inequities in our global south context, by widening or reducing access to previously disadvantaged and marginalised persons to higher education. We argue that the challenges experienced during ERT&L stemmed from an entrenched view of assessment as a proxy for student competence and the quality of teaching, and the shift to ERT&L proving problematic because it disrupted the foundations of this view and the conceptions of quality upon which the view is premised. We suggest however, that moving forward, these challenges and the lessons learnt may

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be harnessed as an opportunity for shifting towards more equitable, sustainable assessments (Boud 2007) that are also more 'fit for purpose' in a post-Covid-19, twenty-first-century learning environment.

South African higher education context

The South African higher education system is unique in its history, with its roots deeply intertwined with the apartheid regime and its legacy of social and racial injustice. Post the end of apartheid in 1994, there have been noteworthy efforts to address historic injustices in higher education, guided by the national policy directives of the Education White Paper 3: a programme for the transformation of higher education (DoE 1997). One area of significant transformation has been increased enrolment rates for students from historically marginalised communities such as Black Africans. In addition, various academic development and student support initiatives have been implemented. Transformation imperatives have also been addressed more directly by lecturers through pedagogical responsiveness linked to the improvement of the effectiveness of assessment to meet the disciplinary-specific needs, economic needs and address the diverse socio-cultural-historical realities of students (Slonimsky and Shalem 2006). Despite these efforts the effects and impacts of ongoing injustices persist.

Scott, Yeld, and Hendry (2007), point out that it is often Black African students who continue to be most disadvantaged, as seen in poor pass rates and high levels of attrition. This is supported by the Council on Higher Education (CHE 2013), which indicates that lingering inequalities keep such students perpetually disadvantaged by virtue of the injustice of non-participation. There are many reasons for non-participation, including the inability to pay fees, the lack of access to conducive accommodation, students' underpreparedness for university due to poor schooling conditions, technological and connectivity issues, as well as unreliable electricity supply. Such challenges were highlighted in various protests and disruptions in the last decade, the 2015 Fees must fall protests and the recent Covid 19 pandemic being striking examples of these. With respect to the latter, stark in differences were revealed by students' experiences of ERT&L (Czerniewicz et al. 2020), and of assessments in particular. Understanding the nature and purpose of assessment in higher education thus becomes central to our thesis. We argue that the disruption to entrenched views of assessment during ERT&L may have exacerbated the divide between the advantaged and the disadvantaged while presenting opportunities for rethinking assessments for greater equity.

Theoretical framing

Given our focus on shifts in assessment practices, we have chosen to undergird our reflections and analyses on Luckett and Sutherland's (2000) five dimensions of assessment viz.: 'Why assess? What to assess? How to assess? How to interpret performance? How to respond to students?'. Luckett and Sutherland addressed these dimensions of assessment in relation to two imperatives that dominated at that time, i.e. globalisation and massification of higher education. While these imperatives are undoubtedly still relevant, these dimensions form the cornerstones of all assessment practices and were, therefore, well suited for our interrogation of assessments during ERT&L. In particular, we have

chosen to focus on the dimensions of 'what was assessed' and the 'how' of assessment, to lead us towards a deeper understanding of the 'why' (i.e. purpose of assessment) in relation to quality and social justice.

In this paper, we discuss the complexities and dilemmas that were foregrounded in these dimensions during ERT&L, what these possibly reveal about stakeholder perceptions of the *purpose* of assessment, and issues of *quality* as described by Harvey and Green (1993), viz., quality as exceptional; perfection; fit for purpose; value for money; and transformation of the student. We further highlight the interplay between assessment and quality and the implications thereof for students from economically disadvantaged and marginalised urban and rural communities, drawing on Fraser's social justice framework to examine this interplay. Our argument is that a critical examination of the complexities of assessment through the lenses of quality and social justice will allow for greater awareness of the often-negative consequences of entrenched assessment practices, and a resultant shift in assessment praxis towards greater emphasis on learning and transformation of the student. We begin this deliberation with an account of assessment purpose relative to notions of quality, which we discuss in the next section.

Purposes of assessment in relation to quality

The dominant view of assessment is that it is the task, sets of tasks and activities or processes of confirming the achievement of learning outcomes, or measurement of competency and/or quality (Boud 2007). Luckett and Sutherland (2000) address the purpose of assessment through the 'why assess' dimension of the process of assessment which they classify broadly into formative and summative purposes, for learning and accreditation respectively. Boud and Falchikov (2006) similarly point out that assessments should serve a dual purpose (or double duty), i.e. as a tool to drive lifelong learning as well as for accreditation purposes.

From a quality perspective, as described by Harvey and Green (1993), assessment for accreditation purposes may be linked to quality as *exceptional* or as *perfection*, tying in with institutional prestige, rankings, international gold standards and academic integrity. In contrast, fiscal constraints have increasingly led to greater marketisation and commodification of education, with assessments viewed in terms of throughputs or completion rates of students, because of the link to funding through fees and subsidies. In this light, quality may be viewed in terms of *value for money*. However, quality as value for money may take on a different meaning for students and their funders who may see students as paying customers. Thus, they are justified in demanding that lecturers ensure that they attain the qualification being paid for.

Students, especially those from economically disadvantaged and marginalised communities, may also see assessment as the gateway to achieving a higher education qualification, which, in turn, may be viewed as the key to decent employment (CHE 2013) and increased opportunities for social mobility (NPC 2011). Lecturers are also acutely aware that assessment performance serves as a signal to employers and society of students' competence and level of employability. Quality assurance and accreditation bodies and employers often look at assessment outcomes in relation to graduate attributes and employability skills as an indication of the level of graduate competence and institutional standards. This is line with the national imperative set out in South Africa's National

Development Plan 2030 of 'educating people with high-level skills for the employment needs of the public and private sectors' (NPC 2011, 262). In other words, assessments outcomes (mostly indicated by the grade achieved) is linked to quality as *fit for purpose*, the purpose being potential employability.

According to Brown (2019, 54),

> Fitness for purpose implies a deliberative and measured approach to decision making around assessment design, so that choices of methodologies and approaches, orientation, agency and timing are all made in alignment with the purposes of the task with that particular cohort of students, at that level, in that context, that subject discipline and at that stage in their academic careers.

If the purpose of assessment is broadened to employability using authentic tasks, then the conception of 'fit for purpose' assessment becomes more complex, especially given the rapidly changing world of work (Barnett 2000) characterised uncertainty and unpredictability. This is echoed in studies of employers' perceptions of workplace readiness of graduates. Griesel and Parker (2009), for example, indicate that many employers of graduates in South Africa are disillusioned with graduate abilities, resonating with earlier sentiments of Harvey and Mason (1996) – that employers believe that graduates possess solid theoretical knowledge but this is increasingly less important than other transferable skills such as critical thinking skills, self-regulation, the ability to apply theoretical knowledge in different and multiple contexts, and the ability to work effectively in teams. The debates about preparation of graduates for the world of work and fit for purpose assessment thus, brings into focus the conceptions of sustainable assessments as a key component of transformative learning, and quality as *transformation* of the student.

Given the multiple purposes of assessments and multi-stakeholder expectations of quality, institutional assessment policies are, therefore, often crafted to balance between these tensions. We discuss these tensions, but also suggest that ERT&L might have afforded the opportunity for a significant review and revision of assessment practices. Further, we suggest that emergent challenges and responses could have opened the space to address social justice imperatives more explicitly.

Social justice and assessment

In her conceptualisation of the role of assessment in achieving social justice, McArthur (2016, 968) suggests a view of assessment 'in nurturing the forms of learning that will promote greater social justice within society as a whole'. This view resonates with the conceptualisation of sustainable assessment (Boud 2000), i.e. assessments designed to equip students with the ability to effectively regulate their current and future learning (lifelong) and outcomes. Boud's theorisation of sustainable assessment is expanded into sustainable feedback by authors such as Hounsell (2007) and Carless et al. (2011, 397) who define it as 'dialogic processes and activities which can support and inform the student on the current task, whilst also developing the ability to self-regulate performance on future tasks'.

A central aspect of sustainable assessment and feedback is thus, the development of students' self-regulation capabilities, which encompasses the development of reflexivity

and evaluative judgements through the engagement with authentic and integrative assessment tasks. The assessments, as an integrated part of the learning process, thus becomes transformative and emancipatory. However, it is premised on the role of the student as a full and active participant, requiring a high degree of participatory parity (Fraser 2005, 2007), especially in the move to online assessments during ERT&L. Of interest to us is how the shift to online assessment may have supported or constrained fairer and more equitable assessment processes and outcomes for all students. We argue that assessment strategies driven primarily for (by) certification purposes and underpinned by conceptions of quality as exceptional may heighten social inequities (i.e. fairness and just treatment (Badat and Sayed 2014)), particularly for the most disadvantaged students. This stance is justified in relation to the concept of participatory parity within the economic, cultural and political dimensions of social justice in education (Fraser 2005, 2007).

For our purposes, Fraser's theorisation of the three dimensions of social justice in education provides a useful analytical framework for understanding the issues of social justices that arose in the sphere of assessments during ERT&L. The economic dimension of Fraser's theory may be summarised as that which refers to the distribution of material resources that enable or constrain participation as equals (Fraser 2007). In this respect, the unequal distribution of resources prevents or constrain participation for those who are marginalised or deprived of such resources. In contrast, the cultural dimension is based on the notion of equal respect for all participants and equal opportunities for achieving social esteem. Participatory parity may be prevented in the cultural domain 'through a hierarchical status order in which institutionalized patterns of cultural value depreciate certain attributes associated with people or the activities in which they are engaged' (Bozalek and Boughey 2012, 689). The political dimension, on the other hand, refers to representation and boundary setting, where the rules for participation are based on criteria of social belonging that determine eligibility for participation (Fraser 2007).

Fraser (2007) suggests that the lack of participatory parity with respect to the economic dimension (maldistribution), the cultural dimension (misrecognition), and the political dimension (misrepresentation), can be addressed from either an affirmative or transformative pedagogic approach. Affirmative approaches for redressing social injustice aim to correct inequitable outcomes of social arrangements (e.g. equity of student success or outcome) without disturbing the underlying social structures that generate them (Fraser 2007). This will align to assessment framing that prioritises justice of assessment or procedural notions of fairness, transparency, validity and quality of assessments (McArthur 2016). Transformative approaches, on the other hand, aim to correct unjust outcomes by restructuring the underlying socio-cultural structures which gives rise to the social injustice (Fraser 2007).

Fraser thus, provides a useful framework for distinguishing between different sources and forms of marginalisation and injustice in higher education. However, we acknowledge Fraser's proviso that these dimensions are separated only for the purposes of analysis. In reality, these intertwine in complex and often intangible ways, adding to the difficulty of clearly defining social justice in education. Still, the dimensions provide a useful analytical framework for explaining the structuring and organisation of social interactions in higher education (including teaching, learning, and assessment). This is

particularly relevant in the context of a country like South Africa, where the effects of colonisation and apartheid continue to inflict social injustices on many levels of society, including higher education (Badat and Sayed 2014).

In the next section we reflect on assessment practices adopted during ERT&L, in relation to the key traits of sustainable assessment and assessment for social justice. Our reflections are based on data obtained from a cross-faculty workshop on assessment during ERT&L as part of a wider project on assessment practices across the institution during ERT&L (University of the Witwatersrand ethics clearance number H21/07/27). Workshop participants were encouraged to reflect on pass rates in their courses, the assessment practices they had adopted as a result of the pivot to online assessment, and their experiences of assessment during ERT&L. These reflections (conducted in groups) were collated and analysed through an open coding process, resulting in the identification of key trends and emergent themes. This process was followed by a further categorisation of the data into two broad themes, viz., (1) assessment practices underpinned by an affirmative response to social justice (and conception of quality as exceptional); and (2) assessment practices and processes which have the potential to engage students in assessment as part of a transformative response.

Assessment practices underpinned by affirmative approach to social justice

Luckett and Shay (2020) describe Fraser's notion of the affirmative approach as accepting of the underlying boundaries and criteria that demarcate the 'who' of any social justice intervention. They point out that it 'may execute redistributive and recognition work but leaves intact the underlying structures that set up the inequalities in the first place, for example, strategies to "bridge the gap" for the "have-nots" to help them catch up with the "haves"' (Luckett and Shay 2020, 55). Relating this to the context of ERT&L, social justice concerns emanating from economic and social disparities quickly became evident as universities in South Africa and throughout the world quickly pivoted from face-to-face teaching and assessment to almost exclusive online engagement.

Ideally, lecturers should have transformed assessments for ERT&L based on the principles of good assessment and feedback (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Gibbs and Simpson 2004) that underpin what and how to assess. According to JISC (2010, 14), these principles, can 'ensure that the educational purposes of assessment and feedback are clear and that they are grounded in what is known about good practice … and … also make it possible to identify where the application of technology may add educational value'. However, the move to online assessment, even under the best of circumstances, often happens in a reactive mode, against the background of caution that the use of technology often replicates existing assessment practices, with sometimes unintended and potentially negative consequences for students. This was shown to be true in many instances, with the responses by individual lecturers to the transition to online assessment demonstrating, at least initially, a strong desire to maintain the *status quo* with respect to the forms and types of assessments that were administered online during ERT&L. This is supported by Mottiar et al. (2022), who demonstrated in their 'Typology of academic assessment responses' (TARC) that ERT&L responses could be classified as 'adaptive responder', 'reactor', or 'opportunistic innovator'. Mottiar et al. (2022, 12) describe reactors as lecturers who 'simply moved assessments online', adaptors as

those who 'modified assessment slightly for the online environment' and 'opportunistic innovators' as those who used the opportunity of the pandemic to implement ideas that they had already been considering pre-ERT&L.

In our context, 'adaptive' lecturers (Mottiar et al. 2022) gave considerable thought to addressing issues of plagiarism, cheating. Al-Maqbali and Hussain (2022) reported similar findings, driven by the imperative of accountability, with the form and content of assessment significantly influenced to limit such activities. For example, the design of quizzes to prevent academic dishonesty/collaborations brought to the fore the issue of distrust and policing linked to the need to maintain institutional standards. Heightened anxiety and circumstances inconducive for learning may also have led to some students to engage in less honest academic practices (i.e. cheating and plagiarism) that were reported anecdotally and more formally. These practices included allegations of cyber cheating and students' collaborations via social media applications such as WhatsApp, where screenshots were supposedly shared while assessments were being conducted. While such behaviour may have spanned across the board, it can be argued that the more sophisticated options for cheating (called 'contract cheating', involving signing up to online tutor sites and paying for answers to assessment questions) were the purview of those with the socio-economic affordances to do so.

Another strategy by 'reactor' and 'adaptive responders' included LMS assessment systems set up to prohibit backtracking (lock questions after they are answered), limiting the availability period for assessment, randomising questions, anonymous marking, and extensive use of Turnitin or proctoring software. Shay (2008a) provides an account on how adoption of anonymous marking can bring to the fore tensions between equity and excellence that can be contradictory to the notion of using assessment as learning through student-lecturer conversations. These approaches may also be regarded as affirmative responses, aimed at reproducing face-to-face/traditional assessment conditions. However, the potential for inflicting anxiety and stress and the negative impact the implemented LMS settings could have had on student participation appeared to have been ignored.

The utilisation of the LMS assessment tools such as automated multiple-choice questions, tests and quizzes by reactive and opportunist lecturers brought about their own challenges and affordances on what to assess and how to respond to the outcomes of these assessments. Providing multiple small continuous assessments may have been intended to promote participation but may inadvertently have resulted in some students (especially those experiencing connectivity issues and limited data) feeling overwhelmed and over-assessed, similarly noted by Montenegro-Rueda et al. (2021). The consequence thereof was students being strategic in their approaches to completing these tasks, with observations reported of students choosing to complete assessments perceived to be of higher stakes while ignoring others. We argue that by adopting such approaches, student behaviour may have revealed the injustice of such assessment structures, as students were effectively limited in their participation.

The adoption of multiple small assessments with opportunities for feedback was, however, a clear shift from having a single end of topic test, or end-of-semester high stakes assessments which dominated prior to ERT&L, aligned to the certification purpose of assessment and quality as exceptional. However, we observed that feedback from automated assessments was generally in the form of marks indicating the extent

of acquisition or mastery of content knowledge. Taking Biggs' (2012, 50) warning that 'quantifying performances gives little indication of the *quality* of the performance', we can argue that this was yet another example of an affirmative response, with the pre-existing certification purpose of assessment still prioritised.

In instances where the small continuous assessments were purposefully designed to maximise student engagement with the learning, the tasks could possibly 'capture sufficient study time and effort' (Gibbs and Simpson 2004, 12). Using multiple, low stakes assessments with feedback thus, offered a transformative response opportunity, with the possibility of incrementally students' motivation and confidence, and the provision of small, connected tasks enabling students to monitor their learning progress through the feedback provided. It is interesting to note however, that some lecturers used quizzes/tests for 'policing' students, highlighting the issue of distrust in assessment described by Carless (2009).

The issues of trust and maintaining the integrity of assessments also surfaced when lecturers had to find alternative approaches to sit-down invigilated assessments due to lockdown restrictions. These dilemmas presented an opportunity for staff to interrogate university policy on student assessment and to critically engage with the concept and purpose of 'examinations'. The discussions and tensions around examinations highlighted the ongoing power struggles that exist between those who are assessing and those being assessed, a well-established characteristic of the 'assessment of learning' culture being unequal power relations (Knight 2002, 279). This highlights an element of social injustice in both the cultural and political dimensions and is yet another instance of an affirmative response by lecturers.

Nevertheless, informal discussions revealed acknowledgement by many lecturers of the need to design pedagogical sound assessment and their struggles of shifting away from traditional assessment practices focusing on recall and regurgitation of information in time-constrained settings (e.g. time-limited, unseen tests and/or examinations). The major concerns amongst staff centred around impacts on the quality of assessment which, in some cases, also provided the impetus for postponing high stakes end-of-semester assessments. The ongoing need to attain fairness, credibility and integrity of assessments thus, seemed to be the key driver in the assessment decisions taken, again indicating an affirmative response to social injustices, or addressing the justness of assessments.

The concerns about impacts on quality were exacerbated by perceptions that objective testing methods (viz., tests and quizzes) available on the LMS are limited to the assessment of lower order cognitive skills, compounded by the lack of time needed to design multiple choice and short answer questions in ways that could assess higher order cognitive skills. Such concerns about the compromised quality of online assessments again highlighted the underpinning beliefs about the gatekeeping purpose of assessment for certification purposes and conceptions of quality as exceptional, rather than fit for purpose or transformational.

Of significance, however, is that the circumstances pushed lecturers to pause and consider the various challenges that students might face in terms of access and participation, leading to a level of empathy not often seen in academia. This was true at the institutional level as well, with unprecedented attempts to ensure equal opportunity for participation in online learning activities and assessment. For example, universities went to great

lengths to provide both devices and data for students who did not have these affordances. The offer of catch up bootcamps was another example of the attempts of institutions to accommodate students who were experiencing challenges keeping up. In this respect, universities adopted an affirmative response to the social injustices within the economic dimension, in their attempt to address the resources challenges while continuing with the academic year. However, the move to provide data and devices did not necessarily consider other significant constraints to students' equal participation in assessments, while the bootcamps might have further disadvantaged participating students by expecting them to catch up on large sections of work and the assessments thereof, in a week or two.

Another example of an overlooked challenge for students was internet connectivity, which was a persistent setback for some students enrolled for science and related fields. For instance, the assessment of discipline-specific skills through the adoption of simulations, interactive virtual labs, and the use of online data sets due to the inaccessibility of laboratory or field station facilities, proved problematic for students with poor internet connectivity. Such assessments require stable internet access which, when examined through a social justice lens, has the potential to amplify inequities. For such students, their major concern was the potential inability to complete assessment tasks, and the fear of failure was subsequently heightened for this group, because of the implications for employment opportunities. Students appeared more willing to share their challenges with their lecturers, allowing lecturers to become more aware of the social justice imperatives. This led to attempts by lecturers to explore assessments that were more aligned to the principles of sustainable assessments. The pandemic and ERT&L thus provided the opportunity to deeply interrogate the assumptions and beliefs underpinning pre-ERT&L assessment culture, and to shift towards more innovative and transformative responses.

Assessment practices with transformative approach possibilities

Luckett and Shay (2020, 52) describe Fraser's conception of the transformative approach as one characterised by 'the dismantling the power relations, social hierarchies and cultural hegemonies that currently underpin the canons, the assumed norms and values of inherited curricula and setting up processes to reimagine more inclusive ways of participating in curriculum and pedagogic practices'. Viewed through the lens of the transformative approach, socially just assessment reform would go beyond temporary provision of digital devices and data as a way of addressing economic injustices. Additionally, in terms of the cultural and political dimensions, transformative approaches would go beyond obsessions with fairness and academic standards and would address how students' perceived attributes and strengths are valued in how, when and what they are assessed on, and how students are represented in key assessment decisions. In this way, assessment reforms based on transformative approaches to social justice could allow for redefining the 'power relations and social hierarchies' between the assessor and the assessed. As discussed, next, some of the assessment strategies that emerged or were debated as options during ERT&L gave us a glimpse of hope for such a reality.

As the pandemic progressed and academics were forced to find alternative approaches to sit-down invigilated assessments (Dison and Padayachee 2022), and transformative responses which purposefully recognise students' role in assessment, became more

apparent. While some staff lamented the negative impact on quality, most expressed the need to design assessment tasks that could allow students to showcase their learning using multiple assessment opportunities, formats and choices. Such considerations also allowed some 'opportunistic innovators' to rethink assessments beyond recall or 'Googleable' answers because of the concerns of students' dishonesty, fear of collusion amongst students, plagiarism, and contract cheating. For students, on the other hand, such flexibility provided new opportunities to draw on their different abilities and circumstances to illustrate their learning and competence.

We also observed increasing interest from lecturers into ways of involving students more integrally in the crafting of assessments. Bloxham and Boyd (2007) describe such approaches as opportunities for student partnership. Examples included co-creation of assessment criteria and rubrics, or involvement of students in peer and self-assessment, which could have afforded students greater epistemological access (Morrow 2009) through more direct, active participation (in co-creating or refining rubrics, for instance), as well as greater opportunities for reflection. This contrasts with the use of assessment rubrics and criteria for the purposes of reliability, and for exercising control and power over students, as cautioned by Shay (2008b), as well as McArthur (2016) who warns of how criteria and rubrics may be enforce conformity rather than facilitating access to powerful knowledge (Young and Muller 2013). This is significant in the context of South Africa, where the effects of colonisation and apartheid still manifest as barriers to epistemological access and student success. The adoption and promotion of assessment strategies and methods that foreground students' voices and participation are, therefore, important for transformative purposes.

The use of online group/peer assessments is another strategy that offered greater participatory parity, by virtue of shifting students into the role of peer teachers and moving the locus of control from the lecturer to the students (Harland and Wald 2021). It also presents greater opportunities for students to shift from peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991) to more integral participation in the assessment and learning process, boosting students' confidence as their voices (and values) become heard and acknowledged. Despite the potential affordances, preoccupations with issues of fairness, validity and reliability by staff (also highlighted by Al-Maqbali and Hussain 2022) could have reduced the transformative potential of such participatory practices. Furthermore, in the context of ERT&L, full participation in group assessments may have been constrained for students struggling with connectivity and device issues in rural and remote areas. The economic injustice arising from constraints with connectivity would have resulted in cultural injustice for some students by limiting their ability to participate in online group activities. The design of group assessment tasks also requires careful consideration of students' diverse social, cultural and economic contexts, which can potentially reinforce inequities by marginalising students who may lack the material means or cultural capital to contribute fully.

Other assessment methods with transformative potential that were adopted more strongly by 'opportunistic innovators' included take home (open book) assessments, self-reflective questions requiring students to explain or justify their answers, learning journals, portfolios. When applied effectively, such assessments may develop greater reflexivity, evaluative competence, and metacognition, while allowing for a greater degree of student autonomy. Such assessments may also be designed to be more

authentic and integrative, providing opportunities for students to become more aware of the applications of disciplinary knowledge in real world contexts (Villarroel et al. 2020), thereby enabling a shift from the view of assessment *of* learning and quality as exceptional, to assessment *for* learning and quality as both fit for purpose and transformational.

Changes in feedback practices also offered hints of shifts towards transformative approaches that could address the cultural and political dimensions of social injustice, e.g. individualised/personalised and dialogic forms of feedback (Carless et al. 2011), enhanced by LMS-based options of providing audio and video feedback to which students could respond. These feedback features had the potential to bring students more directly into the assessment and feedback 'conversation', thus allowing students' voices to be valued and recognised, and dismantling the traditional feedback hierarchy and cultural hegemonies (Luckett and Shay 2020). While such individualised feedback may not always be possible in large classes in excess of 300 students, collaborative assessments and peer feedback involving the use of LMS Chats and Forum tools offered potential solutions to mitigate against the challenges of massification, through dialogic feedback between lecturers and/or tutors and groups of students, and among students themselves. There are many benefits to such feedback interactions, such as enhanced capacity for self-reflection, self-management and improved evaluative skills (Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick 2006; Nicol 2010), especially if the assessment criteria are transparent and were co-created.

In summary, the transformative approaches described above were suggestive of the possibility of 'opportunistic innovators' shifting to 'committed innovators', based on the TARC model by Mottiar et al. (2022). It is also worth noting that even though such practices were more prevalent in the humanities, both prior to and during ERT&L, it was evident that these were also initiated in Engineering and Sciences during Covid 19, where the disciplinary content and class sizes permitted.

Implications

The digital divide foregrounded during ERT&L, as well as the impact of stark differences in material circumstances amongst students (especially during the period of lockdown), highlighted numerous instances of social injustices that were suddenly exaggerated during this time. However, ERT&L also provided an unforeseen opportunity to reveal the complex interplay between assessment purpose, conceptions of quality, and the impacts of these on achieving social justice in higher education. By lifting the veil on certain entrenched assessment practices that have arguably limited genuine and full participation in learning for students from economically disadvantaged and marginalised communities, lecturers became more aware of the material realities of students and the numerous actual and potential challenges to full participation in assessments. As highlighted by Czerniewicz et al. (2020, 949), 'in a certain sense, the pandemic, and the pivoting to online made visible, the invisible', leading many lecturers to explore assessment options that addressed those challenges.

Having shifted out of ERT&L towards blended learning, will the inequality and inequities revealed during Covid-19 precipitate a longer-term shift in assessment praxis? There is a moral and ethical imperative to reimagine how assessment practices that are still

driven by a myriad of socio-cultural and historic contexts, continue to perpetuate social injustices in higher education, particularly in the global south. However, what became clear during ERT&L in our context was challenges such as massification and other structural constraints, as well as academics' general lack of knowledge of effective assessment and feedback principles (as outlined in the institutional assessment policy). Instead, the procedural aspects of the policy such as moderation and weighting of marks seemed to be more common knowledge. Elements of the assessment policy and procedures related to the promotion of social justice did not to filter down to shift mindsets at the individual, course and departmental levels. This suggests the need for higher education institutions like ours to not only re-think the implementation strategies of policies with perhaps greater attention to awareness and on-boarding. In additional, there is a need for national consideration of the various tensions and constraints within the higher education landscape that effectively restrict the adoption of more transformative approaches.

Our analysis and reflections provided in this paper also demonstrated academics' struggles with the tensions inherent in assessment purposes, practices and conceptions of quality. The dominance of quality as exceptional and the high value placed on certification and metrics indicates that while ERT&L provided opportunity for critical engagement around assessment, we still risk shifting back to practices that are less cognizant of social justice imperatives.

Conclusion

This paper highlights the limitations and potential injustices that may arise when one purpose of assessment, and a singular view of quality, is privileged. We have also demonstrated the need for pragmatism when considering possibilities for transformative assessments in challenging and constrained socioeconomic contexts. However, we suggest that the outcome of quality higher education that is transformational, fit for purpose and exceptional for *all* students, may still be achieved when assessment strategies are designed for multiple end goals underpinned by social justice imperatives. We must, therefore, continue to challenge myopic views of assessment and quality, through courageous conversations around social justice, to ensure that the unexpected gains of ERT&L endure in the longer term.

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