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Experience of Lecturers Applying Innovative Assessment Strategies for Quality Teaching and Learning in Two Modules, University of the Free State

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Abstract. Innovative assessment in a blended teaching and learning environment is critical to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and helps evaluate students' module outcomes. The study aimed to examine the assessment methods of two different modules in the Faculty of Education of a national university, highlighting lecturers' experiences in their attempt to use innovative assessment strategies for quality teaching and learning. This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with three lecturers and self-reflections of the three principal investigators. We couch the study in Fink's taxonomy as it covers the creation of significant learning experiences, including but not limited to a learning-centered approach and a response to the changes in education. In the two modules, the assessments have been deemed innovative by integrating and using various assessment strategies, assessment tools, and formative and summative assessment activities that form part of broader learning and teaching strategies. The study employed generic data analysis to underscore the significance of innovative assessment strategies. The study exposed the value of institutional support in enhancing quality teaching and learning as envisioned by Vision 130 of the University of the Free State through innovative assessments. Furthermore, innovative approaches that align with the digital-native students result in greater personalized learning. Morally correct thinking and behavior and students working together are essential in achieving student success and bringing about quality in education in the distinctive context of a university in South Africa.

Keywords: blended learning environment; innovative assessment; learning-centered approach; quality teaching and learning; South Africa

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1. Introduction

If there are innovative assessments in a blended teaching and learning environment, they are critical to enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and help evaluate students' module outcomes. These assessments combine contact, distance, and strategies supported by information technology that provide support opportunities to meet the needs of different audiences and contexts (Christensen et al., 2013; Eskici & Cayak, 2023). Implementing blended learning in several institutions and universities came with a need to assess not only what students are taught but also how they are taught (Yangari & Inga, 2021).

Consequently, lecturers in institutions and universities are challenged to develop innovative assessment strategies that support and enhance quality teaching and learning. The strategies implemented must help measure and achieve the goals and purposes the lecturers set and the learning experiences required for their qualifications (CHE, 2022). A pertinent question should be raised about the experiences of lecturers and students regarding innovative assessment strategies utilized in educational institutions.

The emerging literature on innovative assessment strategies mainly focuses on the changes to assessment necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the need to train and prepare teachers to use information and communication technologies (ICT). As the first global health crisis in a digital era (Alkaabi et al., 2023), the COVID-19 pandemic was responded to using the technology, impacting education delivery and experiences of the digital era (Bond, 2021). The impact of technology in all its forms on education cannot be ignored. Timms (2016) highlights the power of the digital age and the ability of technology to permeate heavily into any sector, causing significant changes, with the education sector being the most effected.

The intensive penetration of technology in education highlights the need to prepare and equip lecturers in a technologically advancing world. A sharp focus can be on how students are assessed innovatively. The increased focus on the importance of accountability in any institution and quality teaching and learning compels this study (Jankowski et al., 2023). In our experiences as lecturers, students have different learning styles and respond to each type of assessment differently. Young people seem to embrace technology more readily than most adults do. The use of different assessment types allows for inclusivity and provides opportunities for a broader range of learning styles.

This research resulted from reflections on the innovative assessments used in lectures at the University of the Free State (UFS). The point of departure was the conviction of the value of assessment in any educational institution and the need for innovative assessment strategies focusing on the experiences of lecturers. The literature is clear about the value of assessment in education (Bond, 2021; Jankowski et al., 2023) in evaluating students' performance and the effectiveness of the institutions. Assessment strategies must be considered to improve the quality of teaching and learning. While we acknowledge the literature on the different assessment strategies, there is a need to zoom in on the experiences of

lecturers regarding innovative assessment strategies. According to Fink's taxonomy of significant learning (Fink, 2013), meaningful learning outcomes extend beyond foundational knowledge and include application, integration, human dimension, caring, and learning how to learn. Innovative strategies are important as they can address multiple dimensions of significant learning by fostering deeper engagement encouraging reflective thinking and promoting application of real knowledge from experiences of lecturers who are participating in the modules.

In some instances, teaching and learning take place under challenging circumstances such as large classes and faculties that are under pressure to keep up with technological advancements to keep students engaged in teaching and learning, especially with assessment strategies. The fast-paced technological advancements that have characterized the digital era have caused adverse effects and caused flux in every sector of the economy. The educational sector has been faced with unprecedented awareness, availability, and utilization of technology (Frank et al., 2019).

It was necessary to consider critically how the assessment was done, as technological innovations took center stage and changed how teaching and learning occurred (Hundley & Keith, 2023). Several irreversible changes, good practices, and evolutionary strategies have come to the fore and have been adopted in higher education institutions while pivoting towards remote learning, which is accentuated by the digital era. Higher education institutions are now exposed to various innovative assessment strategies.

A focus on assessment trends becomes an essential area of study as the assessment strategies evolve with digital transformation (Jankowski et al., 2023). How students are taught, what they are taught, and why they are taught become vital in imagining how they will be assessed. Banta and Palomba (2015) see assessment as a measure of knowledge and ability; however, other scholars see assessment as going beyond that. Hundley and Keith (2023) extend our understanding of assessment by noting that assessment evaluates the effectiveness of an institution. Thus, assessment provides information that helps improve the effectiveness of instruction, as results from assessments can show aspects that require improvement. If instruction is given innovatively in ways that include technological innovation and blended learning, assessment is expected to be done innovatively and in a blended fashion.

In the digital era, innovative assessment strategies are utilized in the blended learning processes adopted by higher education institutions. Considering innovative assessment, the experiences of lecturers and students applying innovative assessment strategies for quality teaching and learning in two modules at the University of Free State were explored. By exploring these experiences within innovative assessments in the selected modules, the study aimed to underscore the merits, inherent limitations, and paradoxes embedded within the experiences.

2. Significance of the Study

According to the assessment policy of the UFS, assessment is the foundation of quality and excellence in higher education. This highlights the importance of assessment, which is backed by legislation that promotes diversity and flexibility in evaluations. The White Paper for Post-School Education and Training mandates higher education institutions to provide various assessment types and approaches to satisfy the unique demands of the students while remaining flexible and inventive. Innovative assessment is a key component of blended learning, allowing students to choose their learning environment, including time, place, and pace, while also addressing the requirement for inclusiveness and flexibility (Christensen et al., 2013).

According to scholars (Ferri et al., 2020; Herro et al., 2018; Zou et al., 2021), even lecturers and teachers who are familiar with technology may struggle to use formative evaluation in the classroom. Challenges may include a lack of willingness to integrate creative assessment methodologies, as observed in a comparison of innovative assessment in Germany and the USA, as well as inadequate expertise in pedagogic and technological domains (Jaafar et al., 2024; Martin et al., 2020). According to a study conducted in Japan (Lee & Ogawa, 2021), online education and assessment are more difficult to manage than personal teaching. Blended learning necessitates more time and sophisticated lesson design; nevertheless, many advantages include access to resources, flexibility, and high student motivation.

Blended learning requires more time and a complex lesson design, but offers benefits such as access to resources, flexibility, increased student motivation, and support (Keržič et al., 2019). This study aimed to explore experiences of lecturers' innovative assessment strategies in two separate modules, as well as to recommend aspects for development to improve the quality of teaching and learning, thereby contributing to quality education. The contribution was used to improve innovative assessment, shape assessment policies of the UFS, and increase the knowledge foundation on quality teaching and learning.

The assessment landscape of higher education has undergone modifications to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Jankowski et al., 2023). Therefore, the outlines of assessment have been altered to accommodate the different changes and problems that the digital era has brought to higher education. The cynicism of the public about school quality has led to greater emphasis on assessment (Hundley & Keith, 2023). Students' requirements must be addressed in an era marked by the advancement of remote learning, and there are numerous dimensions of creative evaluations to fit the rapid digitization. This study examined lecturers' experiences with novel evaluation methodologies for quality teaching and learning in two modules of the University of the Free State.

3. Research Objectives

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Explore the experiences of lecturers regarding innovative assessments in the selected modules at the UFS.

2. Explore the opportunities and challenges lecturers face when implementing innovative assessments in the selected modules at the UFS; and
3. Identify how research participants promote innovative assessments for quality teaching and learning in the selected modules at the UFS.

4. Critical Research Questions

The following research questions underpinned this study:

1. What are the experiences of lecturers regarding innovative assessments in the selected modules at the UFS?
2. What do lecturers believe are the benefits and challenges of innovative assessments in the selected modules at the UFS?
3. How do research participants promote innovative assessments for quality teaching and learning in the selected modules at the UFS?

5. Clarification of Key Concepts Used in the Study

5.1 Innovative assessment

In a world increasingly shaped by technological transformation, innovation permeates every aspect of our existence and reshapes the assessment landscape. Innovation is introducing new things, ideas, strategies, or things that have been discovered (Frank et al., 2019). Assessment is viewed as a process of estimating the nature or value of something and, therefore, is multifaceted, involving processes and procedures for collecting and recording information (William, 2022). Put together, innovative assessment can be defined as the introduction of new strategies for collecting information to measure teaching and learning.

McDowell and Sambell (1999) hint at dissatisfaction with traditional assessment methods in higher education. They reported on the increase in the diversity of methods of assessment, which gave rise to alternative or innovative assessment. Innovative assessment strategies use technological resources to improve the quality and adequacy of the teaching and learning process (Frank et al., 2019; Yangari & Inga, 2021). According to Carless and Zhou (2016), innovative assessment is moving away from *assessment of learning* to *assessment for learning*.

Consequently, innovative assessments juxtapose formative, summative, and self-assessment to enhance quality teaching and learning (El-Maaddawy, 2017). The literature reviewed concurred with Solomon's innovative assessments as he indicated that he gave students assessments where complete projects directly linked with real world linking it with Fink (2013) supporting application, integration and human dimension. He also mentions using multimedia such as video group presentations, which are lined to promote learning how to learn, as Fink said.

5.2 Quality teaching and learning

A rise in the call for accountability in educational institutions demonstrates a clear indication of what the public expect from learning institutions. The public wants quality teaching and learning. What is quality teaching and learning in higher education institutions? Quality teaching is concerned with factors that directly impact the student's achievement and well-being (Lovat & Clement, 2008). This

entails the application of appropriate strategies, including assessments, as part of the pedagogy to get the best out of students. This is beyond transferring information to students for regurgitation, to consciously create a conducive environment for total learning capacity among students. Hollins (2011) notes that identifying and developing suitable assessment strategies is essential for quality teaching. Besides, quality teaching considers psychosocial elements, dimensions of cooperation, and team spirit (Papanthymou & Darra, 2023). Therefore, quality teaching emphasizes the power of a teacher to make a difference in students' learning. In the next paragraph we briefly explain quality learning.

Quality learning is engaging for lecturers and students, providing influential and formative feedback to students (Biggs et al., 2022). For the lecturer, the goals of the lesson plans are met, feedback is given to students, and teaching takes place. For the students, assessment becomes an integral part of quality learning as it measures learning and should mirror the curriculum, so that it can be evaluated to see if students have learnt what they were supposed to learn (Biggs et al., 2022). Teixeira-Dias et al. (2005) define quality learning as the development of students' abilities in a way that stimulates them to enquire more, analyze, and be creative, resulting in independent judgement and self-awareness. The abilities include intellectual and imaginative powers, problem solving, and communication skills.

5.3 UFS Vision 130

The UFS looks forward to continuous transformation in a way that remains relevant to the dynamic and ever-changing international higher education sphere. As part of its Vision 130, the University of Free State aims to be ranked among the top five universities in South Africa and among the top 600 globally (University of the Free State, Vision 130, 2022). This can be achieved by quality teaching and learning with the three main tenets, namely academic excellence, quality, and impact; maximum societal impact with sustainable relationships; and a diverse, inclusive, and equitable university. Innovation, impact and accountability are some of the key issues on which the university will focus in terms of the 2034 goals.

These key issues must be portrayed clearly in all areas of the university, including assessments, which are an important part of teaching and learning. When quality teaching and quality learning occur, this study considers it as quality teaching and learning. To this study, the term *quality teaching and learning* is used to denote the simultaneous occurrence of quality teaching and learning processes. Considering the discussion above, quality teaching and learning implies that the lecturer influences change in the students, whose actions and interactions change through their full engagement.

6. Theoretical Framework

Fink's (2013) taxonomy, the theoretical framework underpinning this article, is applicable since it includes producing major learning experiences, such as a learning-centered approach and a response to educational changes (Barnes & Caprino, 2016). Contemporary theory in Fink's (2013) taxonomy of significant learning indicates that learning is most effective when it integrates foundational

knowledge, application, integration, human dimension, caring and learning how to learn. It further indicates design assessments that go beyond memorization such as reflective portfolios, community-built projects, and simulation that test real-world projects. The assessments in the two modules were regarded as innovative because they integrated and used various assessment methodologies, tools, and assessment activities (formative and summative) that were part of larger learning and teaching strategies. Fink's (2013) taxonomy of significant learning attempts to generate meaningful learning experiences in higher education (Branzetti et al., 2019).

This taxonomy consists of six interwoven domains, including (a) *learning how to learn*, in which lecturers engage in continuous professional development, reflecting on their experiences, experimenting with new methods, and adapting their assessment strategies to improve teaching and learning; (b) *foundational knowledge*, in which instructors gain a deeper grasp of novel assessment methodologies, and their experiences reflect how they develop expertise in assessment design and implementation; (c) *application*, in which lecturers implement these creative ideas in real classroom environments, refining assessment methodologies, responding to student demands, and problem-solving issues that arise in practical application; (d) *integration*, where the lecturers connect new assessment methodologies to course material, learning outcomes, and student involvement across the two modules and also use feedback from students and colleagues to improve their practices; (e) the *human dimension*, where lecturers' experiences influence their personal growth as educators and their connections with students.

Innovative assessments frequently promote cooperation, student-centered learning, and deeper involvement; (f) and *caring*, which implies implementing creative assessments that can influence lecturers' attitudes and values regarding teaching, fairness of assessment, and achievement of students (Fink, 2013). Their enthusiasm for effective learning may grow as they see the results of their strategies (Branzetti et al., 2019). Each domain represents a distinct perspective on the learning process, and when applied together to curriculum design, considerable learning occurs.

7. Research Design and Methodology:

This section includes the rationale for the chosen research approach, methods of data collection, and techniques of analysis.

7.1 Research Paradigm

According to Lincoln et al. (2011), research philosophies or paradigms are belief systems or worldviews that guide the researcher to choose the methods to apply in the study and to understand the ontology (nature of reality) and the epistemology (the nature of knowledge) of the study fundamentally. Four research paradigms that can be considered are the positivism/post-positivism, interpretivism/social constructivism, emancipatory/critical, and pragmatism/post-modernism paradigms (Creswell, 2021).

This study was embedded within the interpretivism paradigm because it sought to understand the subjective world of human experience; in this study, lecturers' experience, by retaining the integrity of the phenomenon (innovative assessment) (Cohen et al., 2017). The researchers sought to understand participants' conceptualizations, practices and experiences regarding innovative assessment for quality teaching and learning. This was enhanced by how interpretivism avoids a rigid structural framework, as does positivism, but instead adopts a more personal and flexible research structure (Carson et al., 2001), which captures meanings in human interaction. Interpretivism also makes sense of what is perceived to be reality (Carson et al., 2001).

7.2 Qualitative Research Approach

The researchers have chosen to use qualitative research methodology, a research approach that is defined as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at using statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (Hoepfl, 1997: 7), as well as a research method "designed to help researchers understand people and what they say and do" (Myers, 2019: 5). In studying the research problem, a qualitative approach was used to generate data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and the places under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

The approach allowed the researchers to observe the setting to be studied. Qualitative research methods can establish an understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which the lecturers and students live, as behavior is explained best in context (Myers, 2019). Assessment was a complex phenomenon to study, and a qualitative research approach enabled a nuanced understanding of the trends and experiences regarding innovative assessment strategies through the participants' responses (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

7.3 Research Design

According to Creswell and Poth (2016) and Myers (2019), a research design entails deciding upon all the philosophical assumptions, research methods, data-collection techniques, and the qualitative data analysis approach. The researchers maintained an interpretive philosophical perspective in this study, with the case study as the research design methodology, and semi-structured interviews and document analysis as methods of data gathering.

In this case study, the researchers endeavored to develop an in-depth, detailed, and intensive understanding of lecturers' experiences with innovative assessments by collecting data on a single case (Creswell, 2021). The case was based on the two selected modules the lecturers are co-teaching. This type of case study was meant to explore and critique the lecturers' experiences in applying innovative assessments for quality teaching and learning, in which the intervention being explored has no clear, single set of outcomes.

7.4 Research Population/Sampling

Purposive sampling was used for this study. Creswell and Poth (2016) advise that nonprobability purposive sampling techniques are suitable for qualitative research where the researcher selects specific individuals or cases. The six lecturers from the University of Free State were selected purposively as part of the

team that taught the two selected modules. The lecturers had thorough knowledge of the innovative assessments used in the selected modules and could share their experiences. Students were not included as part of the population because the focus of the study was on the experiences of the lecturers. However, the perspectives of students as interpreted by the lecturers, who are reflective by the nature of their role, were included and analyzed.

7.5 Data-collection Techniques

According to Cohen et al. (2017), in general, interviews are research methods that enable participants and the interviewer to gain insight into how people interpret certain situations from their point of view. Semi-structured interviews and self-reflections were used as suitable data-collection techniques for the case study research method followed in this study (Myers, 2019). Semi-structured interviews with three selected lecturers were conducted in the selected modules to obtain in-depth information on the experiences of lecturers in innovative assessment strategies in the two different modules and suggest areas for improvement to enhance the quality of teaching and learning. The three researchers of this study submitted reflections on their experiences with innovative assessments in the chosen modules.

Therefore, using semi-structured interviews through interaction with participants assisted in collecting detailed information and understanding the lecturers' experiences with innovative assessments in the two selected modules. Semi-structured interviews gave detailed accounts of the participants' beliefs or perceptions about the particular topic and were suitable for researching the topic that could be complex, personal, or controversial (Creswell, 2021). The issue of innovative assessment strategies in higher education could be controversial due to the demand for accountability and the complexities surrounding designing assessments.

Creswell (2021) highlights the advantages of interviews, including how participants can provide historical information and how the researcher controls the line of questioning. Some disadvantages of interviews are that people are rarely equally articulate or perceptive and that indirect information is filtered through the interviewee's views. Before the actual study was conducted, the researchers piloted the study to ensure the adequacy and efficiency of the data-collection tools. The pilot study involved testing the instruments with two lecturers in the selected modules, and the responses were analyzed to ascertain the validity of the tools.

After piloting the study, the researchers were confident that their data-collection instrument was efficient and adequate. To pilot the study, one of the researchers requested a lecturer who was teaching the undergraduate module at another university, to test the instrument. Polit and Beck (2008) posit that a pilot study is conducted to prevent the occurrence of a fatal flaw in a study that is costly in time, and in this study, we prevented that fatal flaw by testing the instrument. Simkus (2023) states that a pilot study enables researchers to develop consistent practices and familiarize themselves with the procedures in the protocol.

The use of reflections to collect data from participants – three of the lecturers – allowed the researchers to obtain rich, subjective insights, perceptions and processes in teaching and learning. Written narratives were obtained from the lecturers, which critically engaged with their experiences, thoughts, and practices (Moon, 2006). A guideline and checklist were provided to the three lecturers who had to write the reflections. The guideline and checklist included the names of the selected modules, the inclusion and exclusion criteria and minimum length of the reflection.

In this way, deep insights were obtained into the lecturers' experiences and processes when using innovative assessments in the selected module at the University of the Free State. These multiple sources of data and the involvement of more than one researcher aided in data triangulation due to the different methods used. The importance of seeking approval for using reflection underscores ethical considerations in research (Creswell, 2021). Semi-structured interviews and reflections of lecturers provided meticulous interpretation of findings.

7.6 Data Analysis

Creswell (2021) states that data analysis involves preparing the data for analysis, conducting different analyses, moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and interpreting the larger meaning of the data. As this study used the qualitative approach, it considered rich descriptions of how lecturers and students experienced innovative assessment strategies in the selected modules. For this reason, an inductive approach was used to analyze the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and reflections. According to Creswell (2021), the inductive approach involves the bottom-up approach to data analysis. The researchers worked back and forth between the data and themes that emerged and, on the data, collected until we had a comprehensive set of themes. Our analysis was inductive because the theoretical framework informed our codes.

In this study generic steps of data analysis were used to analyze data gathered from the semi-structured interviews and lecturers' reflections effectively (Creswell, 2021) The steps involved organizing and preparing the data for analysis, reading through all the data, and beginning detailed analysis using a coding process to generate a description of the setting that the data from semi-structured interviews and reflections were revealing. Themes were then categorized for analysis, advancing how the description and themes were represented in the qualitative narrative, and the data were interpreted to indicate lessons learnt.

The themes were: exposure to innovative teaching and learning strategies; institutional support to assist lecturers; and learning-centered assessment approaches. The issues of trustworthiness were dealt with when the data were analyzed, and the researchers consulted the participants to clarify some aspects and further elaborations on the issues.

8. Results

Teaching and learning environments are often confronted with challenges, especially in the South African context, where large classes in the context of this study are a reality. For this reason, academics must find creative ways of engaging in teaching and learning. These circumstances necessitate innovative teaching and learning approaches, particularly in providing students with inventive assessment strategies. The six lecturers (three co-researchers used their reflections to generate data, and the remaining three participating lecturers) generated data through semi-structured interviews and shared their experiences with innovative assessment practices. The co-researchers and lecturers were a mixture of inexperienced and more experienced academics, working in one university but teaching on the three different campuses of the university. To ensure anonymity, the identity of the participants was kept confidential by using pseudonyms.

8.1 Exposure to innovative teaching and learning strategies

For innovative teaching and learning, and assessment to realize, lecturers, as is the case with students, have to become familiar with these new kinds of teaching and learning approaches. The following participant reflected as follows regarding innovative assessment strategies:

“Well, it was a completely new experience as it was my first time lecturing full-time at a university. I had to learn most of the things on the go, but I did not feel overwhelmed as my colleagues were assisting and were also learning together with me on some of these innovative technological advancements.” (Lecturer 1, reflection).

The following participant noted how he perceived innovative assessment as follows:

“My challenge was how to make students innovative. Because my understanding is innovative assessment is about allowing students to be creative, to come up with ideas.” (Lecturer 6, interview).

A participant reflected as follows on the use of digital tools:

“I use numerous instruments as my innovative strategies such as Blackboard discussion, Slido, Pinopto and group video presentations. I mostly use Slido because I found it engaging and quicker to get responses from students within a short space of time, especially considering that our classes are big.” (Lecturer 5, reflection).

Another participant indicated how she approached her classes at the beginning of the module:

“Besides digital innovative methods, I also find that starting my lesson, especially the first [of the module], with narrating my own academic story, students seem to learn more from respect and how we engage in discussions in class. I realized that storytelling is one of the innovative

methods to engage students and in this way make a remarkable impression on students.” (Lecturer 2, reflection).

Innovative teaching and learning strategies become an enabling factor to align the university’s context of larger classes in the Faculty of Education and also keep up with technological advancements in the global development. One of the lecturers mentioned that he did not find it hard to engage in innovative assessment practices because he was learning collaboratively with his colleagues. This lecturer found that exposure to mentoring assisted him in adapting more easily to innovative technological advances in higher education.

Another lecturer was challenged with the fact of engaging his students with assessments that are inventive to instigate meaningful learning experiences. Moreover, lecturers opt to expose students to digital learning experiences to connect with students by thoughtfully integrating digital tools to create a dynamic and connected learning environment. Each lecturer approached the situation uniquely by connecting with co-lecturers and students with ease, perceiving it as a challenge, or choosing to start initial contact with students on a more personal level (as the last-mentioned lecturer did).

8.2 Institutional support to assist lecturers

The lecturers realized that creative ways had to be found to relate to students. For this reason, lecturers began to engage in programs through blended and online learning and assessment to offer students various delivery modes to accommodate their academic needs. The ability of the researchers to apply a suitable diversity of technologies and design in teaching and learning to achieve greater personalized learning is progressing well. These strategies are adopted to enhance students’ learning and offer quality education.

The following participant shared his innovative assessment strategies as follows:

“I think attending the sessions from CTL [Centre for Teaching and Learning] was one of the best things I have ever done for myself; without those sessions and coming back and practicing what I learned, it helped to develop me in terms of innovative methods I used in my classes.” (Lecturer 5, reflection).

Adding on the previous lecturer’s strategy, the following participant remarked:

“I think I cannot only attribute the use of innovative methods to myself, but also to the assistance we always get from institutional workshops (CTL), especially if you do not store the information but use it. For example, Slido and Blackboard discussion board, I would not be far if I had used them immediately after the workshop” (Lecturer 2, reflection).

As the lecturers reflected on their innovative strategies, it became clear that the institutional support from the Centre for Teaching and Learning became essential to cultivate the necessary skills for innovative assessment strategies. To be

trained in a digitalized teaching and learning environment is vital for engagement with students.

8.3 Learning-Centered Assessment Approaches

Learning-centered assessment approaches are part of learning-centered pedagogical approaches. Learning-centered practices commit to the promotion of learning experiences, academic support strategies, and various forms of assistance that universities offer to respond to the needs, aspirations and social backgrounds of their diverse student community (Towards UFS Vision 130).

One of the participants noted the following regarding the challenges she experienced in her module:

“We are very intentional about using online platforms. In assessment, like I said, in the module we are so intentional about going online because of the number of the class. So, one of the strategies that we use is to allow them to write online and to also work in groups. They are also allowed to do group assessments, so they learn from one another. In this way, students are engaged in their academic work, encouraging lecturers to expose students with different forms of assessment.” (Lecturer 4, reflection).

In addition, Lecturer 4 claims the following with group assessments as a form of innovative assessment strategies:

“For example, we give our students group assessments and one of the advantages of this assessment is for them to collaborate and to work together. It is for them to communicate, because being in class is not possible for lecturer to [reach each and every one]. Engage each and every student in big class is not possible, but when they are in a small group students are able to interact with each other. They are able to strategise. So, one of the changes I've noticed that it brings them together. It inculcates the habit of, of working together, yeah and working together is bringing them together and sharing their diverse opinions.” (Lecturer 4, reflection).

Collaborative ways of conducting innovative assessments are pivotal in the university set-up where large classes are a reality for many. Students learn to work in small and bigger groups, learning that it is acceptable that others do not have the same viewpoints as you have. On the other hand, students learn essential skills and attitudes when working with others, which in fact prepare them for the workplace.

Another participant commented:

“We are very intentional about using online platforms. In assessment, like I said, in the module we are so intentional about going online because of the number of the class. So, one of the strategies that we use is to allow them to write online and to also work in groups. They are also allowed to

do group assessments, so they learn from one another. In this way, students are engaged in their academic work, encouraging lecturers to expose students with different forms of assessment.” (Lecturer 1, reflection)

One of the co-researchers (Lecturer 3) reflected as follows regarding the creation and use of a video presentation as an assessment strategy:

“Using creative ways to mediate knowledge and skills we use different delivering modes to accommodate academic needs. For example, creating a video project in the form of a group assessment involves particularly planning, scripting, and presentation together, helping students to improve their communication and counter storytelling abilities. In this way students are fostering skills to voice their positionality in a very distinctive context in which they are learning.” (Lecturer 3, reflection)

Technology is used in assessment via implementing video-based assignments, online tests, optical readers, PowerPoint presentations with multimedia, and collaborative tools like Panopto and Blackboard tools. This involves linking assessments to learning outcomes, considering feasibility, accessibility, group dynamics, submission logistics, and time management. Future studies need to consider students’ feedback and adaptation to fully appreciate the creativity and relevance of these assessments. In fact, the offered innovative assessment strategies are in alignment with the digital-native generation.

One of the lecturer participants touched on an important issue. The issue of the ethical use of technology, especially in formal assessment, is surfacing:

“If we are using assessments, in fact, if we are using technology in order to teach the students, we must most probably be in a position to use technology in assessing. There is a need for us to then lead as lecturers the responsible and ethical use of technology and we can apply it in assessments.” (Lecturer 1, reflection).

Learning-centered assessment approaches are flexible learning experiences that actively involve students in accumulating knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Adapting to students’ mode of learning affords them the opportunity to achieve academic success. Lectures must have continuous opportunity to engage in the support of the CTL to be able to support students from diverse social backgrounds. The more academics expose students to various forms of learning-centered practices, the more opportunities students will have to develop graduate attributes (Fink, 2013) to function as ethical human beings in the larger society.

9. Discussion of findings

Theme 1 – Exposure to innovative teaching and learning strategies

Large classes are a reality in the Faculty of Education. Lecturers must find approaches to creative ways of teaching and learning, especially in developing assessment strategies that meet the needs of the students (Christensen et al., 2013). In this context, where large classes are reality, lecturers in these programs use

online discussions by means of Blackboard (learning management system), engaging students through using prompts to initiate discussions, and online tools such as Slido and Pinopto in classes to stimulate class discussions, and online tests. These tests are used to accommodate the large number of students in classes and highlight the adoption of technology in education delivery (Bond, 2021). Optical readers are used in examinations to offer multiple-choice questions so that marking is done more time efficiently.

Innovative assessments instigate more engagement with students and integrate modern technological advancements. Alternative assessments cater to different student preferences, reducing stress and making learning more interactive (Timms, 2016). This agrees with the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training, which encourages the provision of different types of assessments. Students appreciated the creativity and relevance of these assessments, feeling aligned with their digital-native generation. There was also evidence for scalability and future use where innovative assessments are applicable in other modules as well, offering time-saving benefits and aligning with global educational trends (Hundley & Keith, 2023).

Technology was used in assessment by implementing video-based assignments, online tests, optical readers, PowerPoint presentations with multimedia, and collaborative tools like Panopto and Blackboard. This involved linking assessments to learning outcomes, considering feasibility, accessibility, group dynamics, submission logistics, and time management. With regard to student feedback and adaptation, students appreciated the creativity and relevance of these assessments, believing they aligned with their digital-native generation.

The students are passionate about innovative assessment. It seems to them that the teacher has come, should we say, up or down to their level. The lecturer has come up or down to their level where the Gen Zs are, where we have more understanding and appeal to their generation, which is more technologically inclined (Frank et al., 2019). Thus, refining and adapting to some of these strategies is key to the task of a lecturer; lecturers need to connect to the type of students they have.

Theme 2 – Institutional support to assist lecturers

Institutional workshops support the idea of developing teaching and learning to aid academics in their task to develop students to foster their academic capabilities. Since the 1980s, when academic development centers were established at various universities to support students who were lacking readiness for university studies specifically, scholars have often criticized academic development at universities. Contrarily, Fataar (2019) opines that scholarly work of academic development centers over 20 years in South Africa adds to the growing body of international scholarship of teaching and learning.

Amidst these debates, lecturers at the University of the Free State are appreciative of how the Centre of Teaching and Learning assists in introducing and training them to use various ways to engage in informal and formal assessment strategies. Using innovative assessment tools helps them to increase students' engagement

and is in line with the UFS Vision 130. Most of our assignments had gone through rigorous checking and moderation within the faculty, with minor refinements that were applied to the assessment strategies that we had in place. Of course, there were challenges, like students not having the necessary gadgets or access to the network or not being able to understand completely what they were intended to do, as these innovative strategies would have been a new thing to some of them. So, the idea was to be able to initiate a good plan where the assignment is explained clearly to the students so that they may be able to do the assessments.

Theme 3 - Learning-Centered Assessment Approaches

With regard to the learning-centered approach, dimensions in Fink's theory of human dimensions and caring are relevant (Fink, 2013). Fairness and fostering a critical consciousness in acting in the best interest of the learner in a way that responds to the changes in education are important (Barnes & Caprino, 2016). The group video presentation is offered to involve students in groups so that each student can have the opportunity to contribute to the group work, because this is not possible in large classes.

While working in groups, students learn how to learn, access creative ideas of lecturers and students that are applied, assessments can be integrated, and lecturers can also assess their personal growth (Fink, 2013). The same as with students, lecturers work as a group, and the innovative assessments also inculcate the habit of working together, sharing ideas, and experiences, which are sometimes very different from working independently.

The video group assessment aids students to do their planning, scripting, and presentation together, improving their communication skills, storytelling and counter storytelling abilities in a very distinctive context where they are receiving their studies. The human dimension of personal growth is emphasized here, and lecturers can assess their personal growth while still promoting cooperation, learning-centered learning and deeper involvement. Education should strive to promote a spirit of dialogue that teaches students to accept the differences of others. Lectures must consider ethics in developing assessment tools.

Developing new tests annually, providing randomized questions and creating relevant questions are some of the lecturers' responses to create ethically sound assessment practices. On the other hand, students must act ethically when writing online tests, not over-rely on other students to complete group work, and not make excuses for not being able to write an online test within a specific period. Morally correct thinking and behavior and working together are essential in achieving student success and bringing about quality in education.

10. Conclusion

This study on the experiences of lecturers regarding innovative assessment has shown that there are advantages to innovative assessments for lecturers and students. The lecturers in the two selected modules at the UFS expressed their experiences that included exposure to innovative teaching and learning strategies, including innovative assessments, the existence of institutional support, and the

learning-centered approach that characterized the innovative assessments. Furthermore, the data revealed how working together as lecturers to prepare and administer assignments created an atmosphere of collaboration. Despite the different levels of experience in their lecturing posts, lecturers unanimously agreed on the creativity and relevance that innovative assessments gave to the teaching and learning process. Besides, the innovative assessments were scalable, time saving, and aligned to global trends.

In the light of the experience shared by the lecturers in this study, the current study recommends that the University of Free State take the lecturers' views seriously. There is a need to encourage innovative assessment to enhance quality and collaborative teaching and learning, especially in large classes. Students are receptive to these innovative assessment strategies and thrive in doing digitally driven assessments. Future research can be extended to analyze the experiences of students with regard to innovative assessment and how these can advance lecturers' assessment practices. An analysis of the policy of the university regarding assessments is also needed to provide more support to academic staff to align better to the distinctive South African university context.

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