SCIENTIFIC CULTURE
www.sci-cult.com

SCIENTIFIC CULTURE, Vol. 12, No. 1.1, (2026), pp. 1712-1723
Open Access. Online & Print

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.11425225

AN ANALYSIS OF THE TRANSITION FROM MATRIC TO UNIVERSITY ASSESSMENTS IN SOUTH AFRICA: EXPERIENCES OF ODEL STUDENTS

Tandiwe Mdlungu[1], Thabiso Zitha[2]

[1]Lecturer, School of Criminal Justice, University of South Africa, University of South Africa, College of Law, Email: emdlunt@unisa.ac.za, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7751-3873
[2]Lecturer, Private Law, University of South Africa, University of South Africa, College of Law, Email: zithatd@unisa.ac.za, ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-6604-8041

Received: 10/10/2025
Accepted: 10/11/2025

Corresponding Author: Tandiwe Mdlungu1 (emdlunt@unisa.ac.za)

ABSTRACT

The transition from Grade 12 (Matric) to university in South Africa remains one of the most pressing challenges within higher education. While completion of the National Senior Certificate signifies academic achievement, it does not always equip learners with the language proficiency, critical thinking, and independent learning skills required at the tertiary level. Within the context of Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL), these challenges are further compounded by digital inequality, limited access to academic support, and the enduring influence of socio-economic disparities. This study is framed within the larger context of South Africa's educational system, where the effects of apartheid, linguistic realities, and unequal educational outcomes still influence students' capacity to adjust to new university evaluation methods. The aim of this study is to analyse how learners in South Africa experience the transition from Grade 12 (Matric) to university assessments with particular attention to ODeL. This study adopts a qualitative approach with an emphasis on content analysis to examine the transition from Grade 12 (Matric) to university assessments within South Africa's ODeL environment. A literature synthesis covering the period 2020–2025 was undertaken, drawing on peer-reviewed scholarship, government and sector reports (including those of the Department of Higher Education and Training and the Council on Higher Education), and institutional documents from different universities. The data were subjected to thematic analysis, structured by the Low-Bandwidth, Translanguaging, and Authentic Assessment (LB-TAA) framework, to integrate insights across sources. This approach not only enabled the identification of systemic challenges, particularly those linked to language, digital inequity, and assessment design, but also illuminated possible strategies for alignment between school-leaving examinations and the demands of higher education. The study reveals that the majority of students struggle with a clear misalignment between the rote memorization style of Matric examinations and the more independent and analytic tasks expected at university. Many students also face barriers related to language, as assessment practices remain dominated by English, which disadvantages those from multilingual backgrounds. Digital inequalities such as limited access to devices, high data costs, and unstable connectivity further restrict fair participation in ODeL assessments. At the same time, most students report that multilingual and low-bandwidth approaches, such as translanguaging in formative assessments, open-resource tasks, and mobile-first methods using SMS or WhatsApp, make assessment more accessible. The rapid digitisation of assessments

during COVID-19 also placed additional pressure on students, with e-proctoring systems often heightening concerns of exclusion and unfairness. Published research from other Global South contexts shows that when communities are involved in student support and when multilingual approaches are built into assessment, inclusivity and participation improve. Based on these findings, the study recommends that assessment practices in South Africa's ODeL system must be restructured to include stronger alignment between school and university tasks, and the use of multilingual methods suitable for unstable or limited connectivity approaches. Universities are further urged to move away from surveillance-heavy assessment methods towards more inclusive, formative, and context-sensitive strategies that reflect the realities of many South African students.

KEYWORDS: Assessment, Language Inclusivity, ODeL, Inequality, Student Success.

1. INTRODUCTION

The move from secondary to higher education marks an important and often difficult stage in a student's learning journey. In South Africa, this change is especially challenging because there is a clear gap between the way assessments are set at matric level through the National Senior Certificate (NSC) and the types of assessments expected at university, particularly in Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) institutions. Matric examinations are largely based on memorisation, standardised testing, and structured responses. By contrast, university assessments expect students to show higher-level thinking skills, such as critical analysis, independent inquiry, the ability to construct academic arguments, and competence in discipline-specific writing (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

The gap becomes even more pronounced in the ODeL environment. The University of South Africa (UNISA), with an enrolment of more than 370,000 students in 2024, demonstrates both the scale and importance of ODeL in widening access to higher education (UNISA Annual Report, 2024). Yet, the very features that make ODeL attractive, such as its wide reach and flexibility, can also work against students. When learners have limited interaction with lecturers and peers, their sense of academic connection weakens, often leading to reduced participation and what Moore (1993) refers to as "transactional distance." Data from the Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2022) confirms this concern: while first-year dropout rates at traditional contact universities average around 20% to 25%, attrition in ODeL programmes can be as high as 40 to 50 per cent.

The COVID-19 pandemic sharply exposed and deepened these problems. The sudden shift to remote teaching and assessment during 2020 and 2021 brought longstanding inequalities in digital access into full view. In 2021, only about 27% of households in South Africa had reliable internet that could support online learning (Statistics South Africa [Stats SA], 2022). For students living in rural villages or townships, connectivity was often unstable, and access to laptops, tablets, or even steady electricity could not be guaranteed. These conditions severely limited their ability to watch lectures, hand in assignments online, or take part in live assessments (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020)

Language adds a further layer of difficulty. Although the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997, as amended in 2018) requires public universities to encourage multilingualism, English continues to dominate as the main language of teaching and assessment (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2020). Many first-year students arrive at university with only a partial command of academic English. This restricts their epistemic access, meaning the ability to fully engage with, understand, and produce knowledge, especially in tasks and examinations where formal academic language is expected (Heugh, 2021).

The combined difficulties of assessment mismatch, limited digital access, language constraints, and the absence of close academic support place many ODeL students at risk of poor performance and possible dropout. These risks are most pronounced for learners from rural, township, and economically disadvantaged communities in South Africa (CHE, 2022). Thus, the aim of this study is to analyse how learners in South Africa experience the transition from Grade 12 (Matric) to university assessments with particular attention to ODeL.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

South Africa's schooling system continues to carry the imprint of apartheid. The Bantu Education Act of 1953 entrenched racial segregation and deliberately channelled fewer resources to Black schools (Christie & Collins, 1982). This left lasting inequalities between schools that had historically served white learners and those that had served Black learners. Differences remain visible in the quality of infrastructure, the availability of learning materials, the training of teachers, and the language of teaching and learning. These gaps are most evident in rural and township schools, where poor resources and reliance on rote learning approaches persist (Spaull, 2013).

In the democratic period, the government attempted to address these inequalities through the South African Schools Act of 1996 and curriculum reforms. The National Curriculum Statement (2002), later revised into the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) in 2012 (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2012), became the main framework. CAPS directs the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, more commonly known as matric, which remain the final step of secondary education and the entry requirement for higher education. Yet many observers argue that the metric system places too much weight on uniform testing and recall of content, leaving learners underprepared for the critical, independent, and research-based tasks expected at the university level (Taylor, 2019).

The Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997) marked a decisive shift in restructuring South African universities, with the intention of advancing

equity, widening access, and driving transformation (CHE, 2016). Within this framework, the growth of ODeL has been most visible at the University of South Africa (UNISA), which enrols more than 370,000 students each year. A large proportion of these students are the first in their families to attend university and come from socio-economically disadvantaged communities (UNISA, 2024).

Despite this expansion, deep-seated structural inequalities remain. Students often arrive with limited preparation from the school system, face barriers related to language, and experience restricted access to reliable digital tools and infrastructure. These constraints continue to undermine performance, with national data indicating dropout rates of between 40 and 50 per cent among first-year students in certain ODeL programmes (CHE, 2022).

It is within this historical and structural setting that the present challenges of assessment transition must be located. The move from rote-driven matric examinations to university tasks that require independent reasoning and higher-order cognitive engagement illustrates the enduring gap between policy aspirations and the lived realities of students.

2.1. The Assessment Transitions in South Africa

The Council on Higher Education (CHE, 2022) observes that the National Senior Certificate (NSC) does not sufficiently prepare learners for the demands of higher education. In universities, especially within ODeL, students are expected to show skills such as critical thinking, the ability to bring ideas together, and academic literacy. These skills are often not developed at the secondary school level (Scott, 2018). Studies at UNISA further show that many students do not fail their early assignments because they lack understanding of the subject matter, but rather because they have weak academic writing skills and are unfamiliar with university assessment practices (Boughey & McKenna, 2021).

The language remains a barrier. Although the Language Policy Framework for Higher Education (DHET, 2020) calls for multilingualism, English continues to dominate as the language of teaching, learning, and assessment (Madiba, 2014). For many first-year students who come from African-language backgrounds, this shift limits their access to knowledge, making academic writing and comprehension more difficult (Heugh, 2021). One approach suggested is translanguaging, which uses more than one language in teaching and assessment. This has been recognised as a way to broaden participation and make assessment fairer (Ngcobo, Ndebele & Bryant, 2021). However, its practical use in universities is still very limited.

The digital divide makes the movement from school to university assessment far more difficult. Statistics South Africa (2022) shows that by 2021, only 27% of households had reliable internet access, with clear gaps between rural and urban areas. The outbreak of COVID-19 brought these differences into sharp relief: although universities shifted quickly to online assessments, many students did not have the necessary devices, stable connectivity, or even electricity to take part (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Within an ODeL environment, this exclusion was particularly harsh, limiting access to fair assessment and worsening first-year dropout rates.

Similar difficulties have been reported across the Global South. In India, the University Grants Commission (UGC, 2020) promoted blended and open-book examinations as a way to ease inequities, yet the Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) still battled with access problems in rural districts. In Nigeria, the National Open University (NOUN) faced power shortages and high data costs that disrupted online assessment processes (Adebisi & Oni, 2021). In Brazil, the pandemic laid bare strong regional differences, as students in the North and North-East were left out of many online examinations (Carvalho & de Souza, 2021). Taken together, these examples show that South Africa's difficulties are not unique. They mirror the broader experience of ODeL systems in the Global South, where deep-rooted inequalities and the realities of linguistic diversity continue to shape and complicate transitions in assessment.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: THE LB-TAA MODEL

This study draws on the Low-Bandwidth, Translanguaging, Authentic Assessment (LB-TAA) framework, which combines ideas from academic literacy research, epistemic access theory, and digital equity studies to interpret the barriers first-year ODeL students face in South Africa. Rather than treating assessment as a simple measure of performance, the framework views it as a critical site where language, technology, and pedagogy intersect to either open or close doors to student success.

The first pillar of LB-TAA is scaffolded academic literacy development. Local studies point to a sharp divide between the rote-learning culture of matric and the critical thinking expected in higher education (Boughey & McKenna, 2021; Scott, 2018). At many universities, students are penalised in their first

assignments not because of weak content knowledge, but because they lack exposure to academic writing conventions (CHE, 2022). In the ODeL context, where face-to-face support is limited, the LB-TAA framework argues for gradual scaffolding through small, formative tasks. For example, SMS-based quizzes or short WhatsApp audio submissions can familiarise students with academic conventions without creating heavy data burdens. This approach mirrors projects trialled at the University of the Western Cape during the pandemic, where lecturers used WhatsApp groups to run low-cost, formative peer discussions that improved essay-writing confidence among first-years.

The second pillar, translanguaging in assessment, is grounded in theories of epistemic justice. Research shows that English-only assessments deepen exclusion, as most South African students' first languages are African languages (Heugh, 2021; Ngcobo, Ndebele & Bryant, 2021). Allowing bilingual or code-meshed responses in formative work draws on students' full linguistic repertoires, while aligning with the DHET Language Policy Framework (2020). At UNISA, for instance, trial use of bilingual glossaries and short reflective pieces in isiZulu and Sesotho has helped students grasp criminology concepts more deeply before attempting English-only assignments.

The third pillar, authentic open-resource assessment, responds to critiques of closed-book examinations and online proctoring. During COVID-19, surveillance-based systems were widely condemned as invasive and inequitable (Archer, 2023). By contrast, assessments such as portfolios, case studies, and community-based projects are more contextually valid and reduce reliance on costly technologies (Carvalho & de Souza, 2021). At Rhodes University, lecturers in Education redesigned their assessments into localised community interviews and reflective journals, which not only reduced data costs but also gave students meaningful, situated learning experiences.

The fourth pillar is low-bandwidth infrastructure integration. South Africa's digital divide remains stark: in 2021, only 27% of households had reliable internet (Stats SA, 2022). Since the majority of students rely on mobile phones (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020), LB-TAA insists that assessment must adapt to this reality. Institutions have experimented with USSD quizzes and zero-rated WhatsApp platforms, enabling rural students to participate without expensive connectivity. For example, in Limpopo, lecturers piloted SMS-based formative questions for agricultural science students, which proved more inclusive than traditional online platforms.

Finally, policy alignment grounds LB-TAA in South Africa's higher education framework. The Higher Education Act (1997) mandates equity of access, while the CHE (2016; 2022) highlights student success as a systemic priority. LB-TAA translates these commitments into practice by combining scaffolding, translanguaging, authenticity, and low-bandwidth delivery.

In this study, LB-TAA serves two roles: analytically, it highlights how gaps in literacy support, language policy, and technology access reproduce exclusion; prescriptively, it provides a structured model for re-designing assessments that are linguistically inclusive, technologically practical, and pedagogically meaningful. Rooted in the South African context, the framework has also shown adaptability in other Global South environments where inequalities in language and technology are equally pronounced.

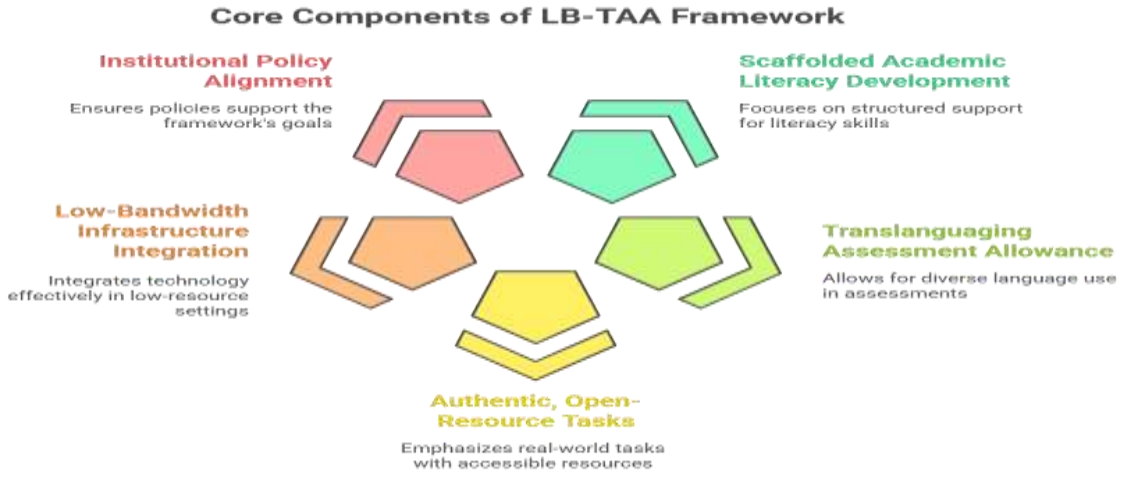

Figure 1: Core Components of the LB-TAA Framework.

4. METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative desktop research design. This approach is well-suited to examining complex questions of education in different settings. Desktop research refers to the careful review and synthesis of existing knowledge, such as academic writings, government policies and institutional reports, in order to build a deeper understanding of a social or educational issue (Maree, 2020).

In this case, the focus is on how South African students move from matric assessment practices in high school to the new expectations of first-year university assessments. The study places emphasis on challenges in ODeL. The design is interpretive in nature because the concern is not with prediction and measurement but with meaning, context and student experiences. Unlike positivist studies, which seek to generalise findings, interpretive research allows for reflection and an understanding of how factors such as language, technology and educational systems interact to shape learning (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The use of an interpretive design makes it possible to combine different forms of evidence, including legislative texts, institutional statistics and published research, to form an analysis that reflects South African realities and connects with global debates about assessment transitions.

4.1. Data Collection

For the purpose of secondary data collection, the study utilised three main types of material.

- ✓ **Peer-reviewed literature:** This included journal articles and books sourced from databases such as Sabinet, Scopus, Web of Science and ERIC. These studies dealt with transitions from secondary to higher education, fairness in assessment and the impact of digital learning inequalities. Publications between 2010 and 2024 were prioritised, with particular attention given to the period during and after COVID-19 when online education became a central concern.
- ✓ **Policy and legislative frameworks:** These covered documents such as the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), the Language Policy Framework for Higher Education Institutions (2020) and the Higher Education Act (No. 101 of 1997). These texts provide insight into how assessment practices are structured within South Africa's education system and how language and access are positioned in policy.
- ✓ **Institutional and sectoral reports:** Reports from the Council on Higher Education (CHE), including VitalStats and Essential Tertiary Education Statistics, were used together with institutional documents such as the UNISA Annual Report (2024). These provide evidence on student performance, attrition and the ways in which universities respond to challenges linked to assessment.

4.2. Data Analysis

In this study, data were analysed using thematic analysis, which allows for the systematic identification, organisation, and interpretation of recurrent patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three overarching themes were used to guide the analysis:

- Language and epistemic access, focusing on how linguistic diversity and English dominance shape students' ability to engage in assessments.
- Digital inequalities in ODeL, particularly the impact of bandwidth, device access, and online proctoring on assessment participation and equity.

Themes were first coded deductively based on the LB-TAA theoretical framework (scaffolding, translanguaging, authenticity, low-bandwidth access, and policy alignment) and then inductively refined to capture emergent insights from the data.

4.3. Trustworthiness

The study ensured credibility by drawing on different types of evidence, including academic writings, government policies and institutional reports. This use of multiple sources allowed for cross-checking and provided a balanced account of the topic under study. Moreover, transferability was strengthened by setting the South African findings alongside experiences reported in other Global South contexts. This comparison made it possible to see how issues of assessment transition in South Africa connect with, and differ from, those in countries with similar educational and social challenges. Dependability was achieved through a clear and detailed description of how sources were identified, selected and analysed. This level of transparency makes it possible for others to follow the same process and judge the soundness of the findings. Lastly, confirmability was supported by consistently grounding interpretations in published literature and established policy documents. This helped to reduce the risk of personal bias and ensured that the conclusions drawn were linked to recognised knowledge in the field (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how South African learners experience the shift from Grade 12 (Matric) to university assessments. Particular attention was given to the ways in which language proficiency shapes this transition and to the additional demands posed by the ODeL environment. Below, the findings of the study are presented and organised into key themes

5.1. Theme 1: Language Barriers and Assessment Transition

A key barrier to assessment success is language. The South African Constitution guarantees the recognition of all official languages, yet English continues to dominate in higher education assessment (Dladla, 2015). The use of English as the only language of evaluation marginalises students who think and reason best in African languages such as isiZulu, Sesotho, or isiXhosa.

The example of a University of Technology illustrates this point. The shift from a dual-medium policy (English and Afrikaans) to English-only instruction excluded students from Sesotho-speaking backgrounds who struggled to interpret assessment guidelines and present their ideas in academic essay form (Ngidi & Mncwango, 2022). The challenges they experienced were not due to lack of intelligence but due to what Heugh (2021) calls epistemic exclusion, where students' knowledge is silenced by the language of assessment.

The experiences of rural universities further show the tension between language and learning. The University of Fort Hare provides a clear example, where students' ability to read and engage with assessment tasks is often hindered when their preferred language is ignored (O'Shea, 2025). The result is that many students perform poorly, not because of limited ability but because their linguistic strengths are overlooked.

The LB-TAA framework highlights translanguaging as a practical response. Translanguaging allows students to draw on more than one language in order to think, plan, and express ideas. Others have applied this approach by permitting students to outline arguments in their home language before refining them into English for submission. The approach strengthens critical reasoning while respecting linguistic identity. The framework also supports the Department of Higher Education and Training's Language Policy (2020), which calls for African languages to be integrated into higher education practice (Rakgogo, 2024).

5.2. Theme 2: Digital Inequalities in Odel

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the seriousness of digital inequality in South Africa. The expansion of online proctoring, electronic submissions, and digital exams was meant to modernise assessment, but it left many students behind. A large number of rural students, for example, in Mkatazo Village in the Eastern Cape, could not participate because of poor infrastructure, high data costs, and limited digital skills (Mwansa, 2025).

The South African media repeatedly reminds us that the digital divide is a persistent problem. The reality is that not all students have equal access to devices, reliable connectivity, or sufficient data to take part in online learning and assessment (Mandela University, 2024). The problem is not unique to South Africa. Pan-African evidence shows that only about 37% of Africans were connected to the internet in 2023, with South Africa showing the same pattern. The majority of students depend on mobile data rather than broadband, but the costs remain prohibitive and the networks are unstable (Munyati, 2025).

The LB-TAA framework responds to this challenge by calling for low-bandwidth assessment methods. The use of USSD, SMS, and WhatsApp has been applied successfully by several South African universities. Others allowed students to submit multiple-choice responses via SMS or scan and send written assignments through WhatsApp during the pandemic. The use of these alternative platforms ensured that students in rural or low-income settings could still participate in assessment despite digital barriers.

5.3. Theme 3: Psychosocial Challenges of Transition

The emotional and social dimensions of learning shape how students experience the transition into ODeL assessment. Many first-year South African students describe feelings of isolation that are worsened by limited contact with peers and lecturers (CHE, 2022). This is especially visible in rural and township areas, where learners who came from structured, teacher-led matric classrooms must suddenly adapt to independent and self-directed forms of learning.

The daily pressures of living under precarious conditions add to this burden. Students often share crowded living spaces, lack quiet study environments, and face persistent financial strain. These circumstances reduce their readiness for assessments and deepen stress levels (Maringe & Ojo, 2021). Reports in the South African press documented several student suicides during the

COVID-19 period, with commentators linking these tragedies to the stress of online examinations and the fear of being excluded due to technical failures (Daily Maverick, 2021). Such events reveal the hidden costs of assessment systems that place heavy pressure on vulnerable students without sufficient psychosocial support.

The LB-TAA framework responds by embedding scaffolded formative assessments that can be delivered through low-bandwidth tools. These small, continuous tasks provide feedback while reducing the anxiety tied to high-stakes examinations. The gradual build-up of confidence allows students to adjust more smoothly to the academic culture of ODeL. For South Africa's first-year students, especially those from rural and disadvantaged backgrounds, such an approach is not only desirable but essential for academic survival.

Example of theory in practice: In Brazil, rural learners benefited when universities piloted locally adapted assessment methods that emphasised authentic and low-pressure tasks. This practical example shows how LB-TAA can be applied in South Africa, where rural and township students face similar psychosocial barriers.

5.4. Theme 4: International Lessons from Developing-Country Odel Practice

The experience of ODeL systems in the Global South provides valuable guidance for South Africa's reform efforts. The University Grants Commission in India approved blended and open-source forms of assessment during the pandemic as a way to reduce deep inequalities in student access (UGC, 2020). Nigerian universities, despite facing severe infrastructure shortages, established community-based study centres. These centres served as local hubs that supported assessments and brought academic services closer to students, helping to overcome problems of isolation and poor connectivity (Adebisi & Oni, 2021). The Brazilian case shows how rural learners were hit hardest by online examinations during COVID-19. This unequal burden led to renewed calls for assessments that are authentic, context-sensitive, and more responsive to learners' realities (Carvalho & de Souza, 2021).

The South African ODeL sector faces similar barriers of digital exclusion, language marginalisation, and transactional distance. These are not unique challenges. The lessons from India, Nigeria, and Brazil demonstrate that practical solutions exist and can be applied in South Africa. Such solutions include multilingual assessment policies, the use of low-technology platforms such as SMS and the development of support structures that are located within communities. The Low-Bandwidth Transformative Assessment Approach (LB-TAA) brings these insights together in a theoretical model that positions assessment as a bridge to first-year success rather than a barrier.

Example of theory in practice: Nigerian study centres illustrate how LB-TAA principles can be realised in practice. By placing learning and assessment support within communities, the centres reduced the effects of weak internet connections and provided safe spaces for interaction. This mirrors South Africa's need for localised hubs in rural and township areas, where connectivity and student isolation remain pressing concerns

5.5. Theme 5: Policy And Practice Misalignment in Assessment

The South African higher education system has adopted progressive policy frameworks such as the Department of Higher Education and Training's Language Policy Framework (2020) and the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013). These frameworks promote multilingualism and equity in assessment. The reality on the ground, however, shows a clear gap between what policies propose and how universities implement them. A number of institutions continue to rely on English-only examinations, particularly high-stakes assessments, despite policies that encourage inclusive and multilingual approaches (Madiba, 2014; Rakgogo, 2024).

The shift to online proctoring during the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted this misalignment even further. The regulatory pressure to safeguard academic integrity through surveillance-based systems came at a cost. Many students in rural and township areas, who could not access stable or affordable internet, were placed at a disadvantage compared to their urban and better-resourced peers (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). The effort to uphold standards ended up reproducing inequality in assessment outcomes.

The South African experience reflects a wider pattern in the Global South. In Nigeria, for example, policy documents call for the establishment of community-based learning centres to bring higher education closer to disadvantaged students. In practice, limited funding has restricted the reach and effectiveness of these centres (Adebisi & Oni, 2021). In India, the University Grants Commission (UGC) issued guidelines encouraging blended learning. Yet the absence of large-scale investment in digital infrastructure made it difficult to ensure fairness and

equal access for all students (UGC, 2020).

An example of how others have tried to close this gap is seen in Tanzania, where the Open University of Tanzania piloted the use of mobile-based assessment tools. These were designed to reach students in rural regions who could not always attend centres physically (Lwoga, 2019). While not perfect, the approach demonstrated how technology could be adapted to serve policy goals of inclusion and equity. Similarly, in South Africa, some universities experimented with WhatsApp-based formative assessments during lockdown, which helped students with limited data to remain engaged (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Mlitwa & Nonyane, 2021).

The lesson for South Africa is that progressive policy is not enough if institutional practices and resource allocation do not support the lived realities of students. The alignment of policy and practice requires not only institutional will but also targeted investment and sensitivity to the inequalities that shape access to education.

6. CONCLUSION

The transition from matric to university assessment remains one of the most serious challenges in South Africa's higher education system, especially within Open Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) institutions. The National Senior Certificate largely encourages memorisation and standardised testing, while universities expect independent reasoning, academic literacy, and self-directed engagement. The result is a clear misalignment. This is made worse by South Africa's wider structural inequalities, such as the exclusion of many students through language, limited digital access, and the psychosocial pressures that come with poverty and family responsibilities. Students from rural villages and township schools often face the hardest struggles. They must attempt assessments in a language that is not always their own, using unreliable digital infrastructure, and at the same time carry the weight of financial and emotional stress.

The global picture shows that these challenges are not unique to South Africa. The experience of countries such as Nigeria, India, and Brazil demonstrates similar problems of digital inequality, weak links between policy and practice, and student alienation. Yet, these contexts also provide lessons. India's use of multilingual learning platforms has enabled students to access content in local languages, while Nigeria's community-based learning centres have reduced the burden of poor internet access by creating local hubs of support. These examples show that developing countries can find practical responses that balance resource constraints with inclusive practice.

The Low-Bandwidth, Translanguaging, Authentic Assessment (LB-TAA) framework provides a direct response to the South African context. The framework combines scaffolded literacy support, space for translanguaging, authentic tasks linked to problem-solving in real contexts, and infrastructure that can operate on low bandwidth. It also stresses the importance of aligning practice with education policy. Through this model, assessment is reframed as a means of empowerment rather than exclusion. The framework is particularly important for South African ODeL institutions such as UNISA, which serve the largest proportion of first-generation and disadvantaged students.

The significance of this study is that it recognises assessment reform as both an academic need and a matter of social justice. South Africa's White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (2013) call for an inclusive and equitable higher education system that transforms society. If that vision is to be realised, then first-year assessment must be redesigned to bridge the gap between matric and university. By doing so, South Africa can not only respond to its own historical inequalities but also provide a model of inclusive ODeL assessment that may guide other countries in the Global South

7. RECOMMENDATIONS

The objective of this paper has been to determine how learners in South Africa experience the transition from Grade 12 (Matric) to university assessments, with particular attention to ODeL institutions. The following recommendations are the recommendations of the study

- ***Alignment Between School and University Assessments***

The alignment of assessment practices between schools and universities remains essential. The majority of first-year students continue to struggle with tasks that demand more than memorisation. A stronger partnership between the Department of Basic Education and universities would allow school-level assessments to gradually introduce problem-solving, independent analysis, and critical thinking. For example, in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, some schools working with Rhodes University piloted inquiry-based science tasks that prepared learners better for university laboratory assessments.

- ***Language Inclusivity in Assessment***

The use of English as the only language of assessment disadvantages most students, especially those from rural and township schools. The adoption of multilingual assessment strategies, such as translanguaging in formative activities, bilingual exam papers, and oral assessments in African languages, can improve access. For instance, the University of KwaZulu-Natal has implemented bilingual examinations in isiZulu and English in selected disciplines, which improved student confidence and performance.

- ***Affordable And Accessible Digital Assessment Models***

The expansion of affordable and accessible digital assessment models is urgent. The majority of ODeL students cannot afford laptops or reliable internet. A mobile-first approach, using platforms such as USSD, SMS, and WhatsApp, provides practical alternatives. Partnerships with service providers to reduce the cost of educational data have already been tested by UNISA, where zero-rating of online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic allowed more students to take part in assessments.

- ***Alternative Assessment Methods***

The reliance on high-stakes examinations continues to disadvantage students, particularly those with limited access to resources. The development of portfolio-based assessments, open-resource tasks, and continuous formative work offers a fairer model. For example, the University of Cape Town expanded the use of portfolio assessments in the humanities Faculty, allowing students from disadvantaged contexts to demonstrate cumulative knowledge rather than relying on a single examination event.

- ***Community-Based Support Structures***

The establishment of community learning hubs and student support centres is critical. Research from countries such as Kenya and India shows that such localised structures improve student retention and participation. In South Africa, community correctional centres and local libraries have served as informal hubs for students without home-based digital resources. A more structured approach, supported by universities, could transform access in rural provinces.

- ***Ethical Use of Digital Surveillance Tools***

The use of digital surveillance and e-proctoring systems raises ethical and fairness concerns. Students in shared households or areas with unstable connectivity are at a distinct disadvantage. Universities should adopt integrity practices that promote fairness without worsening exclusion. In South Africa, the Council on Higher Education has cautioned institutions to balance academic integrity with the principles of social justice when introducing such technologies.

- ***Post-COVID Sustainable Digitisation***

The rapid digitisation during COVID-19 should not be abandoned but rather consolidated in a way that is sustainable and inclusive. Universities should avoid reverting entirely to paper-based examinations or maintaining exclusionary online models. A blended approach, combining digital platforms with flexible offline alternatives, is better suited to the South African context. For example, during the pandemic, the University of the Western Cape developed offline downloadable assessment packs for students with poor connectivity, demonstrating how blended solutions can address inequality.

8. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

While this study employs a qualitative desktop approach, utilizing secondary literature, policy reports, and institutional documents, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. The absence of primary empirical data, such as student interviews, focus groups, or case studies, means that the findings rely on existing interpretations rather than lived experiences. This limits the originality of the empirical contribution. Future research should therefore validate and extend these insights through primary data collection, for example, by conducting in-depth interviews with students navigating the transition from Matric to ODeL, or case studies within universities to capture institutional perspectives. Such empirical work would enrich the evidence base, provide direct voices of students, and strengthen the applicability of the Low-Bandwidth, Translanguaging, and Authentic Assessment (LB-TAA) framework in practice.

Availability of Data and Materials: The study is a narrative review and does not involve the collection or analysis of original data from participants. All information and insights presented in the study are derived from existing literature, publicly available sources, and secondary data obtained from previous research. As such, no new datasets were generated or analysed during the study.

Competing Interests: We, as the authors of the article, declared that we have no competing financial or personal

interests that could have influenced the work reported. The review article was conducted independently, with no external influences, funding, or affiliations that could have impacted the findings or interpretations presented.

Funding: The authors declare that no funding was received for the preparation or publication of the manuscript. The work was conducted independently and does not involve any financial support from external organisations or sponsors.

Author's contributions: The authors have made substantial contributions to the conception, study, and writing of the review article. The author reviewed, edited, and approved the final manuscript, ensuring it met academic standards and provided a balanced, evidence-based discussion. The author confirms that the article represents original work and bears full accountability for the content presented in the publication.

AI-Assisted Language Review: The document has undergone language editing and grammar refinement using AI-based tools. The assistance provided was limited to checking sentence structure, grammar, and clarity to enhance the overall readability of the content. No changes were made to the originality, interpretation, or academic integrity of the work.

REFERENCES

Adebisi, T.A. & Oni, C.S. (2021). Online learning and assessment in Nigerian universities during COVID-19: Challenges and prospects. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education*, 18(1), 45–59. https://doi.org/10.1186/s41239-021-00288-6

Archer, E. (2023). Technology-driven proctoring: Validity, social justice and ethics in South African higher education. *Perspectives in Education*, 41(1), 84–100. https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v41.i1.6

Boughey, C. & McKenna, S. (2021). *Understanding higher education: Alternative perspectives*. Stellenbosch: African Sun Media.

Braun, V. & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Carvalho, A. & de Souza, L. (2021). Digital inequalities and the assessment gap in Brazilian higher education during COVID-19. *Journal of Latin American Education Policy*, 5(2), 112–129.

Christie, P. & Collins, C. (1982). Bantu education: Apartheid ideology or labour reproduction? *Comparative Education*, 18(1), 59–75.

Council on Higher Education (CHE). (2016). *A review of higher education in South Africa: Twenty years of democracy*. Pretoria: CHE.

Council on Higher Education (CHE). (2022). *Essential Tertiary Education Statistics (ETES) Report*. Pretoria: CHE.

Council on Higher Education (CHE). (2022). *VitalStats: Public Higher Education 2020*. Pretoria: CHE.

Creswell, J.W. & Poth, C.N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Czerniewicz, L., Agherdien, N., Badenhorst, J., Belluigi, D., Chambers, T., Chili, M. & Wissing, G. (2020). A wake-up call: Equity, inequality and Covid-19 emergency remote teaching and learning. *Postdigital Science and Education*, 2, 946–967.

Daily Maverick. (2021, June 3). Student mental health in crisis. Available at: https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-06-03-student-mental-health-in-crisis/ [Accessed 9 September 2025].

Department of Basic Education (DBE). (2012). *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)*. Pretoria: DBE.

Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). (2020). *Language Policy Framework for South African Public Higher Education Institutions*. Pretoria: DHET.

Dladla, C. (2015). *Assessing the intersectionality of language anxiety and academic performance in South Africa*. [Report].

Heugh, K. (2021). Language and epistemic access: Reframing multilingualism in higher education in South Africa. *Multilingual Margins*, 8(1), 1–20.

Lincoln, Y.S. & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

Lwoga, E.T. (2019). Making learning and assessment mobile: The Open University of Tanzania experience. *International Journal of Education and Development using Information and Communication Technology*, 15(2),

154–168.
Madiba, M. (2014). Promoting multilingualism in South African universities: Case studies of language policy and practice. *Alternation*, 21(1), 10–37.
Maree, K. (ed.). (2020). *First steps in research* (3rd ed.). Pretoria: Van Schaik.
Maringe, F. & Ojo, E. (2021). The psychosocial impact of COVID-19 on South African higher education students. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 43(6), 589–604. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2021.1950976
Mhlanga, D. & Moloi, T. (2020). COVID-19 and the digital transformation of education: What are we learning on 4IR in South Africa? *Education Sciences*, 10(7), 180. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10070180
Mlitwa, N. & Nonyane, J. (2021). WhatsApp as a low-bandwidth assessment tool during Covid-19: Lessons from South African universities. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 35(6), 220–236.
Moore, M.G. (1993). Theory of transactional distance. In Keegan, D. (ed.) *Theoretical principles of distance education*. London: Routledge, pp. 22–38.
Munyati, C. (2025, May 5). Accelerating digital inclusion in Africa. *Brookings*.
Mwansa, G. (2025). Exploring the nature and consequences of digital exclusion in rural South Africa. [Journal Article].
Ngcobo, S., Ndebele, H. & Bryant, K. (2021). Translanguaging: A tool to decolonise students' experiences of learning to write for academic purposes in South Africa. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 55(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v55i1.4
Ngidi, S.A. & Mncwango, E.M. (2022). University students' perspectives on an English-only language policy. In *Proceedings of the South African Transdisciplinary Education Conference*, pp. 1–12.
O'Shea, C. (2025). Fitting in, figuring it out: Attitudes to English at a South African rural university. *Journal for Language Teaching*, 59(1), 45–60.
Rakgogo, T.J. (2024). *A linguistic evaluation of the South African higher education language–in-education policy*. [ERIC Document].
Scott, I. (2018). Designing the South African higher education system for student success. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa*, 6(1), 1–17. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v6i1.3060
Spaull, N. (2013). *South Africa's education crisis: The quality of education in South Africa 1994–2011*. Johannesburg: Centre for Development & Enterprise.
Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). (2022). *General Household Survey 2021*. Pretoria: Stats SA.
Taylor, N. (2019). Inequalities in education in South Africa: From apartheid to the present. *Educational Review*, 71(1), 36–52. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2019.1522042
University Grants Commission (UGC). (2020). *Guidelines on examinations and academic calendar in view of the COVID-19 pandemic*. New Delhi: UGC.
University of South Africa (UNISA). (2024). *Annual Report 2023/2024*. Pretoria: UNISA.