



Examining Dissertations: The Case of a University of Technology in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Assessment remains a source of contention within the education community. Inconsistency through contradictory evaluation techniques used by different practitioners makes assessments unreliable. This article reflects on my experience examining research dissertations as a novice academic at a university of technology in South Africa. The main objectives of the current reflective study are to improve my assessment practices by critiquing a dissertation examination tool and to highlight the marking principles to be considered when examining student submissions. I reviewed six dissertations from students busy studying towards their Bachelor of Technology degrees. The reflection was underpinned by Gibb's reflective theory which presents a reflection cycle for the learner who is also the one reflecting. Several themes emerged from my deliberation including the need to enhance the assessment tool, a call for consistency and reliability, and overcoming challenges. From this exercise, the following action plan was developed: continual refinement of assessment tools to develop a rubric; training, development and mentorship for novice assessors; and peer collaboration. By taking these actions, the assessment process for dissertations has the potential to not only benefit the assessors but also the students.

Keywords: Reflection; Novice Examiner; Research Assessment; Dissertation

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an integral part of all teaching and learning activities (Tosuncuoglu, 2018; Petra and Ab Aziz, 2020). It is often used to gauge and confirm student knowledge, provide feedback on learning progress and improve practice among the teachers. Despite its crucial role, the topic of assessment remains a source of contention within the education community. Several scholars have reported how unreliable assessments are due to differing evaluation practices by various practitioners (Brindley, 2001; Kvasova and Kavytska, 2014; Rogaten et al. 2020). To support this notion, Nasab (2015) states that various stakeholders in the education community,

including policymakers, students, parents and administrators, all hold contrasting views on the execution of assessment approaches. This challenge is not unique to basic education, occurring at all levels of learning.

Assessment inconsistencies also exist in higher education and discrepancies have even been noted in the examination of dissertations. A study by Schulze and Lemmer (2019) reported disparities in examiner reports and recommendations. Dissertations are often examined by academics comprising former industry professionals with no previous formal training as educators. Their experience with assessment is often limited to that of having once been students during their own

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academic training. Based on Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive learning, research constitutes the highest order of learning because it is a form of creating (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001; Forehand, 2010). However, the examination of research projects in the form of dissertations becomes the responsibility of academics who often are not trained educators and some have minimal-nil formal dissertation training. This is concerning when considering the nature of research papers that are often framed and guided by the actual research project and not necessarily a standard question-and-answer format which makes examination a complex task.

In light of this, numerous interventions and practices have been suggested to help improve assessment practices among academics. One such method is the reflective technique. According to Feucht, Brownlee and Schraw (2017), reflective practice has been fundamental in the education of teachers and professional development. It has also been highlighted as a useful tool to improve practice in education by enabling the practitioner to learn from their experience (Kolb, 1984; Jasper, 2013). Assessments that lack reflective discussions about the impact they have on decisions that have been made may have questionable validity (Huot and Schendel, 1999). As such, reflecting on assessment also serves to validate practice.

Since appraisal plays an integral role in education, reflecting on assessment practices is imperative to improve the overall evaluation procedures. While the content of dissertations is guided by the unique nature of the research topic itself, they typically consist of standardised components including an introduction, literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, results, discussion and conclusion. These elements can be effectively evaluated using an appropriate assessment tool. In light of this, if reflection is conducted to improve practice, the

examination tool must also be reviewed to improve it for future use. As such, the current article is a reflection on my experience as a novice examiner at a university of technology in South Africa. The main objectives of the current reflective study are to improve my assessment practices by reviewing a dissertation examination tool and highlighting the principles used for marking that are to be considered when examining a dissertation.

BACKGROUND CONTEXT

The current section serves to provide context for the assessment task on which I am reflecting. Dissertations from final-year postgraduate students in a Bachelor of Technology programme were examined. In our department, the Research Methods subject lecturer is responsible for assessing dissertations. However, in this particular instance, the lecturer requested the assistance of other academics in the department. Only those members who held a master's and/or doctoral (PhD) qualification formed part of the assessment team. The number of years of experience in academia was not considered during selection.

The subject lecturer randomly distributed the dissertations to each of the assessors. A total of six were allocated to each academic along with an assessment tool. This tool outlined the overall marks allocation and the percentage weights for each of the following components of a dissertation: abstract, introduction, methods, results and analysis, discussion and conclusion, and references. However, it did not outline specific criteria about what specific content warranted a good mark over a bad one to ensure objectivity and consistency in the marking process across all examiners.

ASSESSMENT AS MARKING

When considering the critical role of assessments in teaching and learning as a tool

to identify strengths and weaknesses, and to certify student achievements (Boud and Falchikov 2006; Tosuncuoglu, 2018; Pinto et al., 2020), it is important to consider the principles that guide evaluations when marking. Here, I consider the six principles as outlined in the *Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education Enhancing Academic Practice* (Fry et al., 2008) which include consistency, reliability, validity, levelness, transparency and inclusivity. Here, consistency is defined as ensuring marking and grading are done appropriately, reliability means that any two markers will grade a piece of work and assign the same score, while validity means that marking should measure what it is meant to appraise (Fry et al., 2008). Levelness is described as assessing learning outcomes that are appropriate for each level of study, transparency is related to the fairness with which students perceive the assessment system, and inclusivity refers to adjusting assessments to accommodate students with disabilities (Fry et al., 2008). Among the marking and grading principles, reliability, validity and fairness are considered as the most crucial components of high-quality assessment (CSAI, 2018). As such, it is imperative for the research assessment tool to possess these principles to ensure that the way an examination is conducted is of a high quality.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

When considering the marking and grading principles as stated in the previous section, it is crucial for an assessment to possess such characteristics. It is for this reason that this article aims to critique the dissertation assessment tool provided. The following section outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the reflection on my experience as a novice dissertation examiner.

A Blend of Experiential Learning and Reflection

Teachers and academics are required to continually improve their teaching and learning practices to provide up-to-date and high standard teaching and learning for all students. Often, this can only be achieved through experiential learning. Experiential learning is defined as education that occurs in action through experiences (Beaudin and Quick, 1995). For experiential learning to impact one's practice and influence change in future practice, it is often useful to reflect on past experiences. Reflection and reflective practice are linked with learning that occurs through and from experience (Kolb, 1984; Jasper, 2013). Reflection does not only foster learning through experience, but it also enables assessors to identify, improve and develop an action plan to enhance future practice. Reflection is a way to foster personal and professional maturation of independent and qualified professionals (Jasper, 2013).

The current reflection is underpinned by Gibb's Reflective Theory of 1988 (Gibbs, 1988) which comprises a six-stage cycle guiding reflection. It is an expansion of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory in which reflective practice is based on a four-stage cycle consisting of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). In following this pattern, as the learner goes through each stage, they must experience, think, reflect and act on what has been learned (McCarthy, 2010). Similarly, in the six stages of Gibb's Reflective Cycle which includes description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion and an action plan (Gibbs, 1988), the learner experiences, reflects, thinks and acts based on the lesson learned. According to Brookfield (2017), learning from an experience is redundant if there is no reflective exercise - without a reflection the experience would be forgotten.

Integrating the Criterion-Referenced Assessment In the Assessment of a Dissertation

In the context of dissertations, assessment entails evaluating adherence to research standards, research quality and the clarity of the argument in relation to predetermined components of a dissertation. In light of this, criterion-referenced assessment was identified as a suitable approach for the evaluation of dissertations. Criterion-referenced assessment is defined as an approach that evaluates individual performance against a set of pre-determined standards (Glaser, 1963; Pui et al., 2021). This approach offered an objective and structured framework to appraise and assess the quality and alignment of the dissertations which I assessed. Although there was no specific description of what warranted the allocation of a certain mark, the assessment tool presented a structure of the components of a dissertation for evaluation.

METHODOLOGY

I employed the interpretivist paradigm to navigate my role as a novice research assessor. According to Alharahsheh and Pius (2020), this paradigm enables researchers to gain in-depth information through experience and perception of a particular context. I utilised this perspective as a framework to guide the way I engaged with experiences encountered during the assessment of the dissertations. In line with this approach, I firmly assert that multiple realities, rather than a single ontological reality, exist, because each individual possesses a subjective viewpoint of their own personal experience (Pham, 2018). My reflection is based on all six dissertations assessed.

To guide the writing of my reflection, I adopted Gibb’s Reflective Cycle as a framework, adapting it to guide my writing (see Table 1).

Table 1: Gibb’s (1988) Reflective Model Adapted

Stages	Item
1. Description	The dissertation assessment journey
2. Feelings	Emotions and initial reactions
3. Evaluation	Consultation for assessment
4. Analysis	Evaluating dissertation examination and expanding knowledge
5. Conclusion	Key takeaways and lessons learnt
6. Action plan	Enhancing the dissertation assessment practice

The Reflection

The following section comprises my self-reflection exercise based on a personal experience of examining dissertations as a novice academic. It will be presented according to the six stages of Gibb’s Reflective Model as stated in Table 1.

Stage 1

Description: The dissertation assessment journey

As a novice academic, this was the first time I took on the role of assessing research dissertations, marking the beginning of my professional journey in this domain. While I had research experience, it was merely as a research student and not an examiner and so, I did not possess the necessary expertise. I approached this task with great enthusiasm and eagerness to learn, grow and contribute to the assessment process. Overall, assessing dissertations provided a good platform to develop and refine my evaluation practices as

I continue to grow and develop in my academic career.

The assessment tool provided to all the examiners specified the different components of the dissertation and mark allocation (see Table 2).

Table 2: Items in the Assessment Tool Provided

Items to be assessed	
Abstract (background, methods, results and conclusion)	5 marks
Introduction	15 marks
Additional marks for diagrams and tables	5 marks
Methods	10 marks
Results and analysis	30 marks
Discussion and conclusion	25 marks
References	10 marks

The examiners were not provided with additional instructions and guidelines to use in conjunction with the above assessment tool. The evaluation rubric (Table 2) does not provide an outline of what specific content warrants a good mark over a bad one, thus leaving judgement open to interpretation. Based on this, the tool does not ensure objectivity and consistency in the marking process for all examiners.

Although I had no prior experience with examining dissertations, my experience as a research student had taught me that assessment of essays typically involves evaluating the different components to determine quality and consistency. In addition, fulfilling my assessment task was also guided by the criteria for a good dissertation as outlined by various scholars, including Smith et al., (2009); Booth et al., (2013), and Thomas (2022) (see Table 3 for an outline of the guidance applied).

The abstract was judged on clarity and overall presentation of the study, including the conclusions drawn from study findings. The introduction was appraised on whether it provided an overview of the research and its objectives in a clear and concise manner, using literature to justify the research. The methodology was assessed for its appropriateness in relation to the study and the validity and reliability of the methods used. Results and analysis were evaluated on the rigour used in the analysis and interpretation process and if there was a clear link to the aim of the study. Discussion and conclusion were assessed for clarity and the kind of contribution that would be made to literature, even if just a perception of the contribution the findings would make in line with the aim of the study. References were checked for correctness of the format style and completeness both in-text and on the reference list. Mark allocations were based on how well the dissertations fulfilled these criteria.

Table 3: Interpretation of Guidance for the Assessment Criteria for Mark Allocation

Item	My assessment criteria for mark allocation
Abstract	Maximum marks assigned for an accurate description of the overall project including methodology, results and conclusions drawn from the results provided.

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Introduction	Assessed according to how well the subject of interest was presented. Discussion of pertinent topics within the subject using literature to support. Check that aims, objectives and research questions make scientific sense. If there is clear research of the problem and the importance of study.
Methods	Demonstration of good control and understanding in organising and applying relevant research methods.
Results and analysis	Assessed for logical coherence between the objectives and research findings, as well as clear structuring and understanding of text. Assessed the quality and style of tables, graphical representation and illustrations to present research findings. Assessed whether analysis of data is sufficient to make research findings and draw scientifically sound conclusions.
Discussion and conclusion	Must be a logical discussion of research findings with supporting evidence from literature. Assessing if conclusions and recommendations are logical and valid.
References	The entire dissertation was assessed for correctness of referencing (in-text citations). Quality check of bibliography.

Stage 2

Feelings: Emotions and Initial Reactions

Initially, the thought of examining dissertations for the first time brought excitement that beckoned the promise of growth in academia. The opportunity filled me with a sense of adventure that sparked my intellectual curiosity. However, a tide of apprehension, fear and doubt also lay beneath the surface because I was about to delve into the unfamiliar terrain of dissertation assessment. I realised the immense responsibility that accompanied this huge task and questioned my preparedness and whether my judgements would be valid. Would I be able to identify the research intricacies of each dissertation and examine them appropriately? Would I be able to provide feedback that is constructive and fair? My lack of confidence, due to my limited experience, caused me to doubt my

competence in being able to provide suitable guidance.

Despite all the feelings of doubt and fear, I recognised that I needed to face and overcome these complex emotions to be able to experience personal and professional growth as proposed by Serrat and Serrat (2017). Therefore, I determined to use the opportunity as a valuable learning experience. With this change of mindset, I treated each dissertation that I assessed as an opportunity to learn and refine my critical thinking skills. I also used it to deepen my comprehension of the research process and assessment thereof.

My resolve to learn from this experience became a catalyst for change as I noted the ambiguity of the assessment tool. I also became aware of the need for consistency, objectivity and alignment to established standards for assessing

dissertations and so recognised the need for the assessment tool to be modified accordingly. I analysed the strengths and weaknesses of the tool in relation to established standards and incorporated missing criteria which enhanced its clarity. The changes made resulted in a more standardised device that enabled consistent and objective evaluation of all student submissions.

It is worth noting that to ensure the assessment of every dissertation by all assessors was appropriate and fair, all essays were submitted to an external moderator. The moderator did not provide any negative feedback which means the assessment was appropriately completed by everyone involved.

Stage 3

Consultation for Assessment

As a specialist virology medical technologist working as an academic, I was initially reluctant to examine dissertations with research topics that were outside the scope of my specialisation. Some of the areas discussed were in disciplines such as haematology and clinical chemistry which I had last been exposed to as an undergraduate student. Therefore, my knowledge in these disciplines had naturally faded over time and I felt uncertain of my ability to examine them. At that point, I recognised I needed assistance with understanding the actual topics before delving in to examine. Although I was not an expert, I was determined to be fair and objective in my assessment.

Understanding the topics prior to assessing was paramount, so I resorted to dialogue-based consultation and sought the assistance of two of my colleagues who had expert experience in haematology and clinical chemistry. The dialogues were mainly telephonic (three) with one in-person discussions. They mainly focused on understanding aspects about the research

topics I was uncertain about. These aspects included the type of data that should be analysed in line with the topics, as well as the type of results to look for. In addition to consulting my colleagues, I sought to supplement my knowledge by searching on the internet. I looked for reputable sources, including journal articles with information about the topics in the unfamiliar disciplines. Consulting my colleagues and using internet sources not only broadened my understanding but also assured me that my assessment would be robust and well-informed.

It is worth mentioning that dialogue-based communication presented a challenge with the amount of time spent on telephone calls and in-person discussions with colleagues. This not only disrupted my flow of work but also impacted the time it took me to finish marking. However, in hindsight I realise that the time spent was highly valuable as it enabled me to gain knowledge and grow in those areas. Additionally, the time spent facilitated the development of a good working relationship.

Being able to consult my colleagues helped me to identify the value of collaboration and sharing knowledge. It highlighted the fact that expert knowledge is often distributed through various colleagues and seeking their assistance can often enhance one's own understanding. Consulting experts demonstrates the need to be adaptable and open to learning. The ever-changing landscape of academia often requires academics to be flexible and diverse, even to the point of working on research topics outside of their scope, within reason. Being able to search the internet for additional sources emphasised the need for continuous learning which is of paramount importance to professional growth in academia. Additionally, this experience demonstrated the significance of always

seeking fairness in evaluation, even if it means seeking guidance from others.

Stage 4

Analysis: Evaluating the Dissertation Examination and Expanding Knowledge

In the previous sections, I detailed the experiences and challenges I encountered while assessing research dissertations for the first time. In this analysis stage, I will discuss the implications and insights garnered during this time.

Initially, I noted that the assessment tool provided to all examiners was vague and ambiguous which left it open to interpretation. As depicted in Table 1, the assessment tool outlined the sections or components of a dissertation but did not detail specific criteria needed to assess key features in a thesis. The ambiguity of the evaluations of student submissions has been highlighted by previous studies that reported on the vagueness of research examination (Bourke et al, 2001; Golding et al. 2014). As such, it left the standardisation of assessment across all assessors questionable and potentially impacting the fairness and consistency of the overall evaluation process. To address the issue of standardisation, fairness and validity, I adapted the assessment tool which was provided. This was done by introducing additional criteria for appraising the different components of the dissertation including abstract, introduction, methodology, results and analysis, discussion, conclusion and references. The main aim of introducing additional criteria was to try and address the issue of ambiguity which was previously outlined.

I opted to develop additional criteria to assess each component of the dissertation as outlined in Table 3. I did this to create a more criterion-based reference approach to assessment which is essential to ensure validity and consistency while aligning with established marking principles for reliability,

validity and fairness (CSAI, 2018). The improved tool aligns with educational principles in that it provides clear and transparent criteria for assessing different components of a dissertation. Furthermore, emphasis on improving assessment criteria ensured alignment with characteristics of a thesis as outlined by Haagsman et al. (2021) which includes processing relevant information from literature sources and being able to critically evaluate literature relevant to the research topic.

It is important to note that I experienced a variety of emotions during the assessment process, namely fear and doubt, particularly when assessing dissertations on topics outside of my area of specialisation. These feelings were compounded by my lack of experience which left me feeling ill-equipped to fulfil the task set before me. The fear was a natural response to the challenge. According to Fry et al., (2008: 145) “being inexperienced in marking can feel threatening to a new lecturer.” Therefore, it was not abnormal that I felt the way I did. However, I recognised that I needed assistance and so I consulted colleagues and the internet to gain a better understanding of the actual research topics and the type of research data to expect in the dissertations outside of my specialisation. These actions aligned with the beliefs of McAllister et al. (2020) and Lerang et al. (2021) in which peer interaction is essential for successful student learning. DeBoer (1994) highlights building trust, communicating effectively with others and problem-solving with peers as key elements of collaboration among co-workers. As such, consulting my colleagues did not only help me acquire knowledge but also fostered a more collaborative working environment.

Stage 5

Conclusion: Key Takeaways and Lessons Learnt

This reflective journey has taught me the importance of having a structured assessment tool to ensure fairness, objectivity and consistency in assessing dissertations. The improvements made to the initial assessment tool which included adding clear and specific criteria, have the potential to bring positive change to the process of assessment. The criterion-referenced evaluation approach that was applied highlights the significance of aligning tools for assessment with the principles of education that emphasise that the assessment process should be fair and transparent. As such, improvements made to the assessment tool promote transparency in the appraisal process itself. Additionally, it also guides the quality of students' dissertations.

Revisiting the assessment tool also enabled alignment with educational and learning objectives for dissertations. The components and criteria contained in it directly related to the outcomes required in the dissertation process, thus reinforcing the principle about assessments being able to measure what students are required to learn. Additionally, evaluation criteria particularly related to the methodology, results and analysis, place an emphasis on developing good research skills as an assessor. This not only enhances the student's experience but also contributes towards advancing academic and research excellence for all involved. The principles of consistency and reliability have been continually emphasised throughout the reflection. This was done so that all students would receive fair treatment and assessment.

In addition to reflecting on the assessment, I also highlighted the challenges which I faced during the dissertation assessment process. This included fear, doubt and the need to examine topics that were beyond my expertise. However, I came to understand that such emotions, and any such experience, can be easily mitigated by harnessing those feelings accordingly to

make a positive impact. This means incorporating self-directed learning and consultation or collaboration to the overall assessment process where necessary.

Stage 6

Action Plan: Enhancing Dissertation Assessment Practices

Based on the insights gained from my reflection on the experience as a novice research dissertation examiner, it is important to outline a clear plan for future assessment to improve the quality and fairness of the process. The action plan below aims to address the challenges which were identified during reflection in order to improve future dissertation assessment practice. In light of the assessment tool, there is a clear need to further refine this apparatus to ensure that it clearly outlines the key components and specific criteria for evaluating those components. It may be necessary to develop an assessment rubric that is more transparent in that it includes a clear description of criteria and strategies for scoring the criteria at different levels. This would enable alignment with Popham (1997), Ragupathi and Lee (2020) that a rubric should outline criteria to be evaluated, provide a description of those criteria and a strategy for scoring.

Once a rubric is developed, it would be imperative to ensure that everyone has the same understanding of how it should be used. Therefore, developing training sessions for assessors and provide them with clear steps on how to assess dissertations will be necessary. The training sessions could also focus on evaluating the effectiveness of the tool and best practices to ensure continual improvement. Calibration sessions where all trainees collectively evaluate sample dissertations and compare their findings to ensure consistency in the assessment practice are also valuable. Ongoing collaboration and knowledge-sharing among peer assessors may be useful to share best procedures and

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provide expert support where required to improve assessment practices. This can be done through scheduling regular meetings related to this task. Additionally, establishing mentorship programmes for established assessors to share expert knowledge and guidance for novice assessors could be key to alleviate initial feelings of doubt and apprehension.

Over and above mentorship programmes, improving assessment practices may benefit from conducting research on the impact of using the suggested improvements. This would positively improve understanding about dissertation examination across a broader academic audience. Research findings could also be shared at conferences and through publications to gain a higher knowledge of processes and methods.

CONCLUSION

In this research paper I embarked on a journey to reflect on my experience as a novice assessor of dissertations and critically examine an existing assessment tool. I aimed to highlight important insights to enhance the quality of the assessment process. My reflective exercise led me to a few conclusions and an action plan with the potential to transform dissertation appraisal for the broader academic community. The beginning of my journey was filled with fear and doubt, emotions common for novice assessors. However, I determined to make

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this a valuable learning experience and a tool to improve dissertation review methods. Where I felt ill-equipped, I sought the assistance of my colleagues and reputable online sources to enhance my understanding to be able to make well-informed decisions in my assessments. This helped to strengthen connections with my colleagues.

At the centre of my reflection was the realisation that the assessment tool provided, required improvement to ensure consistency and fairness. I proceeded to refine the tool by adding clear and specific criteria for assessing dissertations and this aligned with the educational principles of fairness and clarity. The action plan outlined in this paper includes continual refining of the assessment tool, conducting training, standardising procedures, offering student orientation and creating a landscape for collaboration. By taking this action, the assessment process for dissertations has the potential to not only benefit the assessors, but the student too.

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