Key Principles for Over-Arching National Assessment Policy: A South African Perspective

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Reference Formats (APA 7th Edition)
Bolton, H., Ntshayintshayi, N., Bolton, S., Hleza, T., Mokwele, T., Eve, C., Lebooa, C., & Mahlangu, Z. (2024). Key Principles for over-arching national assessment policy: A South African perspective. In M. L. Mokhele-Makgalwa, M. A. Mohale & T. L. Madise (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 40th AEAA Annual Conference on Reimagining Educational Assessment in the Age of Multiple Dimensions of Learning in a Global Society* (pp. 170-191). ERRCD Forum. https://doi.org/10.38140/obp2-2024-12

Abstract: The South African system for education, training and development is framed by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), intended to reform pre-democracy unfair practices. The NQF objectives of access, redress, mobility, progression, quality, and transparency are achieved by implementing the NQF policy suite, including policies for qualifications, assessment, and recognising learning. The National Policy for Designing and Implementing Assessment, developed by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA), frames assessment across diverse NQF contexts. This paper seeks to address the questions: (1) *'What does the literature say about the features of good assessment policy?* (2) *'What aspects feature in the assessment policies of high-achieving schooling systems, higher education institutions and vocational bodies internationally?'* and (3) *What lessons can be drawn from the literature and sourced policies.* The paper presents a literature review on sought-after criteria in assessment policy and a qualitative analysis of the overarching national, schooling, higher education, and vocational assessment policies of the 16 countries selected. It draws on the literature and policies to develop recommendations to enhance South African assessment policy. The findings pointed to key aspects for development in South African national assessment policy, particularly in the areas of academic integrity and ethics; plagiarism; online assessment and technology and assessment; greater guidance in enabling and supporting diverse groups; closing the loop between current and future learning or work; and greater clarity in, and accessibility of, guidance for policy implementers. Drawing on these findings could potentially strengthen South African assessment policy in the NQF context.

Keywords: Assessment policy, assessment principles.

1. Introduction

The South African system for education, training, and development is framed by the National Qualifications Framework (NQF), a relational device to integrate and reform pre-democracy unequal and unfair practices. The NQF objectives of access, redress, mobility, progression, quality, and transparency are achieved by implementing the NQF policy suite, comprising policies for qualifications, recognising learning, credit transfer, and assessment, amongst others. The South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) oversees the development and implementation of these policies, providing leadership and guidance for the three Quality Councils – for general and further, higher, and occupational qualifications respectively – in this regard.

The National Policy and Criteria for Designing and Implementing Assessment for NQF Qualifications and Part-Qualifications and Professional Designations (SAQA, 2014) broadly frames assessment across these diverse contexts, serving, on one hand, to align assessment policies in the system with the NQF objectives and values in the South African Constitution, and on the other hand to uplift the different traditions, encouraging good assessment practices. SAQA is in the process of reviewing, updating, and strengthening this overarching national assessment policy.

8.1 Problem statement

The research presented in this paper was designed to inform the South African national assessment policy review.It explored the literature on the qualities delineated for good assessment policy and sought to understand the features of assessment policies in highly ranked schooling systems, associated Vocational Education and Training (VET) entities, and top-rated higher education institutions (HEIs). The intention was to triangulate the assessment principles highlighted in the literature with those identified in the selected policies. It was believed that a comparative analysis might reveal gaps in both the literature and the policies, both of which had the potential to enhance overarching assessment policy in South Africa.

1.2. Research questions

The research presented in this paper sought to address the following questions.

- What does the literature say about the qualities of good assessment policy?
- What aspects are included in the assessment policies of high-achieving schooling systems, higher education institutions and vocational bodies internationally?
- What aspects in the literature and assessment policies studied offer insights to enhance the National Policy for Designing and Implementing Assessment (SAQA, 2014) in South Africa?

The hypothesis informing the research was that while the literature could highlight the principles of good assessment policy, the analysis of existing policies in high-performing systems and institutions might shed further light on what features are elaborated, and how these are combined and delineated.

1.3 Paper overview

The paper presents a literature review of the principles found in good assessment policy. It then outlines an analysis of the features in the assessment policies of selected high-performing systems and entities. A comparative analysis follows, between qualities identified in the literature and features of the selected policies, that points to elements that could contribute to the literature and strengthen overarching assessment policy in South Africa and elsewhere.

2. Principles of Good Assessment Policy Found in the Literature

Principles that shape assessment design and application are known to play a vital role in the success of learning (Islam et al., 2021). The literature review utilised various search techniques for articles that interrogated the notion of *good assessment policy* and *policy for quality assessment*. While

the implementation contexts of assessment policy are diverse (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2013), this variance makes a narrow categorisation of key assessment principles difficult; several aspects are either commonly used or their importance can be inferred from their use. Such aspects highlighted in the literature.

2.1 Validity and reliability

There is extensive literature on the extent to which assessments accurately measure what they intend to assess (validity) and whether these produce consistent results (reliability), including how related challenges can be addressed (Jackson et al., 2023; Rasooli et al., 2019; Roy et al., 2018; Sireci, 2014). There are different views surrounding the validity of assessments that measure higher-order thinking skills and other complex competencies, and there is general agreement that traditional assessments, such as multiple-choice tests, fail to capture these skills effectively (Rintayati et al., 2021).

2.2 Clarity and transparency

Clarity and transparency are essential components of good assessment practice. Clearly defining the desired learning outcomes and assessment criteria, along with contextually appropriate supportive pedagogic practices, enables learners to understand and work towards achieving the assessment goals (Bolton, 2013). Clarity and transparency in assessment refer to the degree to which assessment expectations, criteria, and purpose are clear and accessible to students, ensuring that learners understand what is being evaluated and how they can effectively demonstrate their learning (Roy et al., 2018). Assessment policy must ensure that these aspects are clearly elaborated in context-specific ways that are easy to understand, interpret, and apply, fostering an awareness of the consequences of assessment.

2.3 Alignment with educational goals

The alignment of assessment policies and assessments with broader educational goals is essential to ensure that they are relevant and contribute to desired learning outcomes (Butler et al., 2018; Islam et al., 2021). Gaps between policy and practice can be detrimental to learning, so policy developers need to collaborate with implementers to create effective policies and guidelines (Doucet & Pont, 2021).

2.4 Inclusivity and fairness

Internationally, there are efforts to enhance inclusivity and accommodations in assessment policy to ensure fairness by addressing individuals' special needs, providing equitable opportunities for different cultural, language, and socio-economic groups, as well as for those with varying physical and mental abilities and learning styles. Recent studies have highlighted these efforts across various educational contexts (Tai et al., 2023). Assessment accommodations are implemented globally in higher education systems, for instance, to ensure that students with disabilities can participate fairly (Nieminen & Eaton, 2024; Tai et al., 2023). While discrimination

and bias impact feelings of belonging in a learning environment (Hussain et al., 2019), feelings of trust and inclusion enhance learner achievement levels and narrow the gaps between demographically different learners (Yeager et al., 2014). Although the field of inclusivity and fairness in some contexts is relatively new and growing, with a need for empirical research and theoretical frameworks (Bain, 2023), inclusivity is a well-established national approach in democratic South Africa, which has a diverse population and an entrenched legislative framework to support it (Bolton & Matsau, 2022).

2.5 Flexibility and standardization

The objective nature of standardised processes enables the creation and efficient external adjustment of structured curricula and assessments that guide learning environments (Yang, 2023). However, a concern with standardised systems is their relative inability to evaluate creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, and other higher-order skills, as well as their association with assessment processes that can be stressful for both teachers and learners, all of which potentially affect the validity of such assessments (Yang, 2023). Standardised curricula and assessments may also exclude certain groups in a diverse society.

Policy that allows more flexibility in assessments enables teachers to tailor assessments to the needs of learners and focus on active engagement, which has been shown to enhance the achievement of learning outcomes (Errisuriz et al., 2021; Phothongsunan, 2020; Wu et al., 2021). Similarly, effective pedagogy for groups of learners in diverse socio-economic contexts has been found to include detailed, explicit, and frequent feedback in formative assessments (Bolton, 2013). An approach that combines teacher and school flexibility in designing and implementing assessments within a framework of standardised criteria has been linked to student success (Ministry of Education Ontario [MEO], 2024b).

2.6 Assessing soft skills

The idea of assessing soft skills refers tothe evaluation of non-technical personal attributes such as communication, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptability, leadership, and emotional intelligence, which are important for success in the workplace (Succi & Wieant, 2019). Soft skills are often assessed through interviews, situational judgment tests, and role-playing, where learners are observed regarding their behaviour in simulated work environments, among other methods (Succi & Wieant, 2019). Hard skills are generally understood to be technical and quantifiable (Succi & Wieant, 2019) and can be field-specific or cross-cutting.

A topic of discussion in recent literature is the role of soft skills in employability and their essentiality in today's labour markets (Succi & Wieant, 2019; Yang, 2023). There is general agreement that new technologies are powerful tools in the teaching, learning, and assessment of soft skills (Cimatti, 2016). Čubrić & Čubrić (2016) address a range of ICT tools used in the teaching of such skills, while O'Connor et al. (2016) highlight the role of technology in

integrating the development of soft skills into pedagogical processes. However, the teaching, learning, and assessment of soft skills remain a relatively new area.

2.7 Role of technology in assessment

Technology has been described as a cornerstone in the transformation of assessment methods in education and training (Kusmawan, 2023). The impact of technology on assessment is a complex and evolving topic. Extensive research has been conducted on various aspects of current technologies, such as the benefits and challenges of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its applications in assessment, the adaptability of assessments, and the automation of assessment (Bennett, 2011; Kusmawan, 2023). However, there are cautionary voices warning against an over-reliance on technological tools. Critics argue that excessive dependence on technology can create barriers for students lacking adequate resources, lead to potential technical failures, and diminish the role of human judgement in assessment processes (Sintonen, 2020). The 2020 pandemic highlighted some of the benefits of technological advances in remote learning and assessment (Takar, 2020).

2.8 Contextual relevance

Assessment policies are contextually situated and can refer to country aspirations, education and training system goals, and assessment and learner contexts, as well as regional, continental and global foci, and others. Assessment policy developed in one context – country, socio-economic, cultural, learner capability, technological, teaching advancements, and others – may not be valid when applied in other contexts (OECD, 2013). It is argued that contextual relevance should be a key component of good assessment policy.

2.9 Assessment integrity

Assessment integrity isthe practice of ensuring that assessments are fair, accurate, and trustworthy.It involves designing assessments to prevent cheating and plagiarism while promoting student learning (Holden et al., 2021). In the literature, the topic of integrity frequently arises in discussions about dishonesty in post-secondary education and how assessment design can be structured to enhance academic integrity (Holden et al., 2021). The role of technology in assessment integrity is also an increasingly important topic, particularly in the field of AI (Bin-Nashwan et al., 2023).

3. Method and Sampling

The research was designed to inform the review of overarching national assessment policy. First, principles of good assessment policy were sought in the literature. Secondly, a sample of policies from high-performing countries and entities was selected, covering the national, schooling, VET, and higher education sectors. Principles from the literature, along with additional aspects

identified in any sampled policy, were systematically sought across all policies in the sample. The following studies and rankings were used for the selection.

- Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) (Mullis et al., 2023)
- Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Mullis at al., 2020)
- Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SACMEQ IV) (Awich, 2021)
- Quacquarelli Symonds Universities Rankings 2024 (QS)
- Edurank.org rating system 2024

3.1. Selection of countries for schooling assessment policies

The starting point was to use PIRLS and TIMSS scores above the midpoint in the respective studies to select a single country per area corresponding with the world regions outlined in the United Nations (UN, 1999) M49 Geoscheme. To include a range of African countries, SAQMEQ IV scores for Reading and Mathematics were employed to choose countries across the UN M49 Geoscheme regions. In the case of SACMEQ IV, a mean score was generated for Reading and Mathematics based on the scores of male and female learners per country. From this dataset, a midpoint was established from the average of the scores, and data were selected from above this midpoint.

The countries included in the initial sample were Australia, Botswana, Canada, eSwatini, Ethiopia, Ghana, Ireland, Kenya, Mauritius, Namibia, New Zealand, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United Kingdom (England), the United States of America (USA), and Zimbabwe – a total of 18 countries, with 72 policies expected for analysis.

3.2 Selection of post-school assessment policies

Higher education institutions (HEIs) were then selected for the chosen countries using two systems. The first, QS, ranks the top 1500 universities globally based on numerous factors, including academic and employer-related reputation, student numbers, citations per faculty, international faculty and students, research networks, employment outcomes, and sustainability.

This system did not adequately cover the desired geographic spread of regions for the sample. Therefore, to expand regional reach, an additional rating system, Edurank.org, was used to identify high-ranking HEIs in the selected countries. Edurank.org ranks HEIs based solely on academic publications and citations. National, vocational, and occupational training assessment policies were sourced from the high-achieving countries that had already been selected.

3.3 Final sample

Sourcing policies required an understanding of the country systems and entity responsibilities regarding assessment, with some countries charging prohibitive fees for this information.

Additionally, policies were not always available on websites, leading to a general lack of accessibility to vocational and occupational assessment policies.

The structuring of assessment policy varied widely across countries and institutions. In some instances, there were combined policies for the schooling and vocational sectors, the national and schooling sectors, or the national and vocational sectors, and sometimes multiple policies per sector. The reach of these policies could be national, provincial, or institutional. The assessment policies could be standalone or combined with those for national qualifications frameworks, or VET/HEI policies for quality assurance or student guidance. The latter included, or were separate from, policies on plagiarism and the use of technology in teaching, learning, and assessment. Where there were multiple complementary policies within a sector per country, the policies were analysed as a policy set.

The final sample used for analysis was a subset of the intended sample, based on the selection criteria described and the availability of documents. For each country in the sample, at least one assessment policy was sought for each of the national, schooling, VET, and HE sectors. Of over 100 policies sourced, 75 were included in the sample and analysed. These documents, notwithstanding their diversity, contained areas of elaboration potentially useful for countries seeking to update and strengthen their national educational assessment policies.

Table 1 shows the 16 countries comprising the final sample.

Table 1: *Assessment policies sourced for analysis by country and sector*

Country (Coded)	Types of assessment policies sourced			
	National assessment policy	**Schooling assessment policy**	**Trade/ Occupational/ Vocational assessment policy**	**HEI assessment policy**
0001	O1, O2, O3	S1	V1, V2	H1, H2
0002	O1	S1	V1	H1
0003		S1	V1	H1
0004	O1	S1 (Also V1)	V1 (Also S1)	H1, H2
0005	O1	S1		H1
0006	O1 (Also V1)	S1, S2, S3	V1 (Also O1)	H1, H2
0007	O1	S1	V1, V2	H1
0008	O1, O2, O3	S1, S2	V1	H1
0009	O1	S1	V1	H1
0010	O1 (Also S1, V1)	S1 (Also O1, V1)	V1 (Also O1, S1)	H1, H2
0011	O1	S1	V1	H1
0012	O1	S1	V1	H1, H2

0013	O1	S1, S2	V1, V2	H1, H2
0014		S1, S2	V1	H1
0015		S1, S2, S3		H1, H2
0016	O1	S1		H1

Legend:

- **Green** = Policies sourced; **Yellow** = Policies not found
- O=Overarching, S=Schooling, V=Trade/ Occupational/ Vocational, H=Higher Education
- 1, 2, 3 refer to the number of policies of the specific type sourced

Table 1 shows the 16 countries in the final sample, in code form, and the policy types sourced and analysed. Documents were found in some instances (highlighted in green) and not in others (highlighted in yellow). Where a single document applies to more than one sector, it is indicated in all the sectors that apply.

3.4 Analysis

A thematic analysis (Naeem et al., 2023) was conducted to explore the background and contextual information included in the sampled policies, the principles of good assessment policy identified through the literature survey, and additional areas within the policies that could potentially enhance South African and other assessment policies. The three aspects not elaborated on in the literature, but found in several policies within the sample, were, firstly, currency, or the extent to which the policy reflects current expectations, standards, and good practice. Secondly, multi-faceted assessments, which refer to the use of multiple forms of assessment to increase the effectiveness and fairness of the evaluation process. Thirdly, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), which encompasses processes through which prior knowledge and skills—whether formal, non-formal, or informal—are made visible, mediated, and assessed for the purposes of alternative access and admission to studies, recognition and certification, or further learning and development (SAQA, 2019).

The analysis thus identified the following in all the sampled policies:

A. Validity
B. Reliability
C. Clarity
D. Transparency
E. Alignment with Educational Goals
F. Inclusivity and Fairness
G. Flexibility
H. Standardization
I. Assessing Soft Skills
J. Role of Technology in Assessment
K. Contextual Relevance
L. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)
M. Integrity (Responsibility/Accountability/Plagiarism)

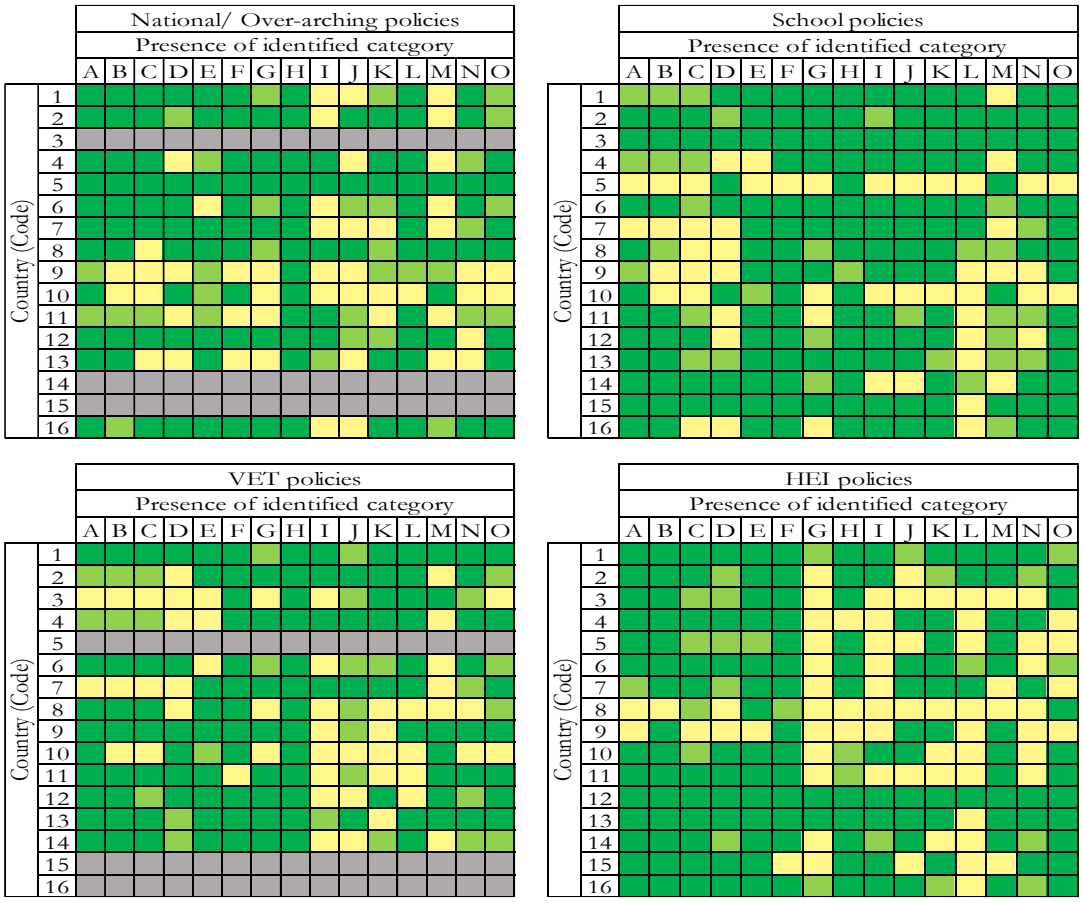
N. Currency
O. Multifaceted assessment

The presence of these aspects was noted as being *explicit* when referred to by name, and *implicit* when interpretation could *infer* the quality. Aspects thought to be too context-specific and *not* analysed were policy purposes and objectives, implementation procedures, and implementation roles and responsibilities. Information from the analysis was captured using an Excel spreadsheet and compared with that in existing national South African assessment policy (SAQA, 2014) towards its potential enhancement.

4. Results

Table 2 shows the presence in the analysed policies, of features associated in the literature with good assessment policy, and additional features identified across the sourced policies. Countries are assigned numbers for anonymity.

Table 2: *Analysis of sourced national, schooling, HEI and VET policies*



Legend: (See list of assessment features in Section 3.4)

- **Dark green** = Explicit
- **Light green** = Implicit

- **Yellow** = Feature not found
- **Grey** = Policy not found

Table 2 shows that the principles and features identified in the literature review and policies were well represented in the sourced policies of the selected countries. In the sample overall, across all sectors, 530 of 870 (61%) of the references to the features were found to be explicit; 119 (14%) were categorised as implicit, and 221 (25%) were deemed not present. However, differences in how the information was elaborated appeared to be important for the revision of South African national policy and assessment policies elsewhere.

In the four sectors investigated, the most common principles were found to be as follows, with numbers and percentages for the sub-sample provided in brackets.

- National
  - Standardization (13 explicit, 100% of sub-sample)
  - Validity (11 explicit, 2 implicit, 100%)
  - RPL (11 explicit, 1 implicit, 92%)
  - Reliability (9 explicit, 2 implicit, 85%)
  - Alignment with educational goals (8 explicit, 4 implicit, 92%)
  - Multifaceted assessment (7 explicit, 4 implicit, 85%)
- Schooling
  - Standardization (15 explicit, 1 implicit, 100% of sub-sample)
  - Inclusivity and fairness (15 explicit, 94%)
  - Multifaceted assessment (14 explicit, 88%)
  - Alignment with educational goals (13 explicit, 1 implicit, 88%)
  - Contextual relevance (13 explicit, 1 implicit, 88%)
  - Validity (11 explicit, 3 implicit, 88%)
- VET
  - Standardization (13 explicit, 100% of sub-sample)
  - Inclusivity and fairness (12 explicit, 92%)
  - Validity (9 explicit, 2 implicit, 85%)
  - Relevance and/or currency (7 explicit, 4 implicit, 85%)
  - Multifaceted assessment (7 explicit, 4 implicit, 85%)
- HEI
  - Inclusivity and fairness (15 explicit, 94% of sub-sample)
  - Reliability (14 explicit, 1 implicit, 94%)
  - Clarity (14 explicit, 1 implicit, 94%)
  - Alignment with educational goals (11 explicit, 4 implicit, 94%)
  - Validity (13 explicit, 1 implicit, 88%)
  - Transparency (9 explicit, 5 implicit, 88%)

5. Discussion of Findings

Overall, the policy analysis (Table 2) showed that the fifteen key assessment aspects were present in the documents of highly ranked systems and institutions, but unevenly so. Of the fifteen

principles identified, six were found in over 70%-80% of the assessment policies sourced, namely validity, reliability, alignment with educational goals, inclusivity and fairness, and using multifaceted assessments – with validity and standardisation being present in over 80% of policies across all four sectors. Features found less often overall were assessing soft skills, using technology in assessments, and RPL, amongst others.

Patterns varied across the four sectors – national, schooling, higher education, and VET. In the HEI policies, almost all documents elaborated on validity, reliability, clarity, transparency, alignment with educational goals, inclusivity, fairness, and standardisation, and over 70% detailed contextual relevance, transferability, academic integrity, and the use of multifaceted assessments. The focus on clarity and transparency was more frequent in this sector than in the others. Just under two-thirds explained the use of technology in assessment, and around half had requirements for currency and the assessment of soft skills. Internationally, notably, only a quarter of the policies touched on the flexibility of assessments or RPL, while in South Africa this is a major focus (Bolton & Matsau, 2022; Bolton, Blom & Matsau, 2020).

In contrast, while over 80% of the assessment policies at national level elaborated on validity, reliability, alignment with educational goals, standardisation, and multifaceted assessments, and over 70% on contextual relevance, transferability, inclusivity, and fairness – over 80% also elaborated on the need for flexibility in assessment and RPL, showing that these are national imperatives. Less frequently, in around two-thirds of the national policies, detail was found on clarity, transparency, and currency; around half of the national policies required the assessment of soft skills and detailed the use of technology in assessment, and 40% addressed integrity in assessment.

The schooling sector policies showed clear parallels with the national policies, with the latter more frequently referring to clarity and transparency. Over 70% of the schooling policies addressed the assessment of soft skills and the use of technology in assessment – in this regard, it seems that the schooling sector is ahead of the other sectors. Academic integrity was covered as such in around two-thirds of policies sourced, and RPL in around 40% – the low percentage of the latter being a challenge when basic education policies provide for adult learners.

Over 80% of the VET assessment policies elaborated on validity, inclusivity and fairness, currency, and multifaceted assessments – with VET being the only sector in which currency was emphasised in most (85%) of the documents sourced. Similarly, over 70% detailed requirements for clarity, flexibility, and using technology in assessment. Two-thirds of the VET policies addressed RPL, a higher proportion than that in the schooling and HEI documents. While only two-thirds of VET policies explicitly detailed the need for transparency and contextual relevance, the policies themselves were found generally to be transparent and clear, and developed for specific contexts. Some 38% referred to the assessment of soft skills.

Content in the assessment policies differed in the extent to which it was explicitly expressed or implied, but where content was present, it was explicit in over 60% of instances.

The features in the sourced policies broadly matched those identified in the literature, but in varied frequencies and combinations, and extent of elaboration. The study thus focused on how the features were elaborated in the policies sourced. The dimensions of six of the fifteen principles identified in the literature are sketched for their usefulness for the South African assessment policy review, namely, those relating to policy context; inclusivity and fairness; online assessment and using technology in assessment; academic integrity, ethics and plagiarism; closing the loop; and clarity, transparency, and guidance.

5.1. Policy context

Most of the policies analysed framed assessment within country, legislative, institutional, or curriculum contexts, or combinations of these aspects. This framing was elaborated to differing extents, although all served to align the assessment policy with its implementation context(s). Ghana's National Pre-Tertiary Education and Curriculum Framework (Republic of Ghana Ministry of Education, 2018) provides a useful example of policy embedded in *country, regional, continental, and global aspirations, as well as the legislative context*, where the contexts are nested and linked explicitly to curriculum and assessment.

The *country aspiration* of quality education for all is laid out, including curriculum and assessment goals, intended learning experiences, and the resources needed. The curriculum, assessment, and approach are intended to be catalysts for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO], 2017) and for broadly educated citizens for whom schooling is the foundation for lifelong learning and work. These goals are, in turn, aligned with the *African Union Agenda 2063* (African Union Commission, 2015) of quality education, inclusive socio-economic development, entrepreneurship, scientific literacy, industrial transformation, and responsible citizenship – rooted in Pan-Africanism and the African Renaissance.

These country and African contexts are positioned within the *global context* (Republic of Ghana, 2018), where learners need to be fluent in key global as well as local languages and possess global competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity and innovation, communication and collaboration, local cultural identity and global citizenship, as well as leadership qualities, digital literacy, awareness of climate change, and skills for a green economy, among others. The *teaching and learning context* is, in turn, linked to the country, continental, and global contexts, with the requirement that teachers have deep subject and pedagogical knowledge and undergo regular continuing professional development (CPD). *Implementation factors* such as quality leadership and management, quality assurance, and monitoring and evaluation frame all aspects, and the *legislative context* mirrors the other contexts described.

5.2. Diverse learner groups and inclusivity

Equity and inclusivity are central concerns in post-democratic South Africa and elsewhere, as evidenced by the frequency of these items in the sourced policies. Useful elaborations, while not necessarily directly transportable across contexts, illustrate principles that could be adapted.

Australia's Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2021) policy, Clause 2.2[1], for example, requires the institutional policies of HEIs to accommodate student diversity, especially under-represented and disadvantaged groups, and "create equivalent opportunities for academic success regardless of students' backgrounds." Specified (named) groups receive targeted attention and are tracked and monitored towards enhancing admission policies, as well as teaching, learning, and support for these groups.

Similarly, in Australia, the Queensland Department of Education (QDE, 2023, p. 14) Curriculum, Assessment, and Reporting Framework promotes a whole-school approach to teaching, learning, and assessment where teachers "differentiate to ensure every student is engaged, challenged, and supported and develops the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to realise their potential" and "provide learning opportunities and tailored supports that recognise/respond to individual learning needs." The QDE established and maintains an Assessment and Moderation Hub with resources for all teachers. Schools analyse assessment and reporting data to identify diverse learner groups and address the student needs through "increasingly personalised differentiation" and "tailored support" for curriculum access or an "individual curriculum plan" (ICP) or "highly individualised curriculum plan" (HICP) (QDE, 2023, pp. 16-17). The policy lists groups who may require additional support – including learners who are deaf, hard of hearing, or who have deaf parents; learners with home languages other than English; learners whose families are immigrants from countries where English is not a main language; learners with refugee backgrounds; learners who are "international students" or "children of international students"; and learners returning from living in countries where English is not a main language, amongst others (QDE, 2023, p. 19). This clarity provides guidance for inclusive practices.

In the Botswana Examinations Council's (BEC, 2018) *Issues and Options Paper*, similarly, the principles of inclusivity, fairness and flexibility, including adjusting assessment practices to support the achievement of learning outcomes, are elaborated. While the later National Policy on Assessment for General Education and TVET summarises these aspects, the details in the Paper comprise a rich source of information for policy writers and implementers. For example, disabilities can be physical, intellectual, psychological, sensory, neurological, learning-related, disfigurement-related, and disease-related (BEC, 2018, p. 20). The definition of *disadvantage* includes learners whose families or socio-economic circumstances hinder their ability to learn and can relate to gender, ethnicity, socio-economic status, AIDS/HIV status, poverty, lack of adequate family support, or discrimination. The resulting "reasonable adjustments" need to

uphold the needs of individual learners, the integrity of learning outcomes and standards, and equity, fairness, and consistency, and can include adjusted assessment procedures, methods, venues, adaptive technologies, scheduling, and others to create accommodating timeframes, types of assessments, and equipment (BEC, 2018, pp. 20-21). General Education and Training Providers need to develop a Reasonable Adjustment Policy (RAP) and share it with learners and their families, train staff to implement it, and prevent related victimisation (BEC, 2018, p. 21).

In a fourth example, Canada's Ministry of Education Ontario (MEO, 2024c) publishes detailed information on Indigenous education and supporting First Nation Schools. The Ministry seeks to enhance access, close the achievement gap between Indigenous students and all students, and build awareness of Indigenous histories, cultures, languages, and perspectives. Support is provided through School Boards and other mechanisms such as formal agreements with traditional councils. School Boards develop and report on the related policies, and every Board must have a full-time position dedicated to supporting Indigenous education, as formally guided by an Indigenous Education Council (IEC). Boards are encouraged to have Indigenous Graduation Coaches to support students in their studies and transitioning into further learning and work (MEO, 2024c). The Ministry funds initiatives towards the success of specified Indigenous groups, including programmes on Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing, Indigenous cultures, and Indigenous languages (MEO, 2024c). The website (MEO, 2024c) provides the necessary information and links.

While many assessment policies sourced had accommodations for learners with special needs, the Ministry of Ontario's *Growing Success: Assessment, Evaluation, and Reporting in Ontario Schools, P-12* (MEO, 2024b, pp. 69-79) was unusually comprehensive and clear. In this document, the early identification of special needs is imperative so that Individual Education Plans (IEPs) can be developed. An IEP can include *accommodations only*, individualised assessment strategies (e.g. extended assessment times, large text size, oral testing, assistive devices, alternative methods and settings), or *modified learning expectations* together with such accommodations, where course outcomes are not compromised, or an *alternative curriculum programme*. The starting point for an IEP is an individual's learning strengths and needs, investigated via a variety of assessment methods. The policy provides detailed resources for each type of IEP, and its implementation and monitoring.

The notion of "credit recovery" was found in Ontario's *Growing Success* policy (MEO, 2024b, pp. 83-89), designed to keep secondary school students who have failed summative assessments in the system. It is implemented with strict quality control measures to maintain its credibility. Credits may be recovered from the daily teaching, learning, and assessments of a qualified teacher, and there are no limits to the amounts of credits recovered. It is based on an inclusive school culture and considers multiple factors that may have hindered learning achievements, and not assessment grades alone. It is regulated by teachers, the School Credit Recovery Team, the

principal, and the School Board. Emphasis is placed on the school *providing opportunities for students to demonstrate* how course outcomes have been met.

5.3. Online assessment and using technology in assessment

Most of the sourced policies, especially those pre-dating the 2020 COVID pandemic, did not elaborate on online assessment and the use of technology in assessment. However, useful examples were found.

The website of the Ministry of Education in Ontario (MEO, 2024a) contains links to valuable resources for online teaching, learning, and assessment, where items can be sourced by user type (teachers, families, carers), by school grade and school subject. The resources are designed to support student learning at home, with or without parental-type support, and are state-branded or sanctioned and freely available. The policy *Growing Success* (MEO, 2024a) provides for e-learning to supplement classroom learning. School Boards deliver provincially developed e-learning credit courses; Boards and teachers utilise the Ontario Educational Resource Bank (OERB). These online resources include roles and responsibilities, e-learning contacts and help desks, and information on the hardware, software, and technologies needed for e-learning.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) Ministry of Education's National Qualification Centre (UAE-MOE, 2023) TVET Assessment Guidelines detail, amongst others, useful descriptions of diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, and a range of example tools for each. The policy notes that online learning environments increase access to learning and assessment and states that good practices are still evolving. It cautions that some content areas are more suitable for online assessments than others and requires that Assessment and Training Providers (ATPs) obtain the prior approval of the relevant assessment body before utilising online tools, for which the structures, resources, and expertise must meet the standards specified.

The policy refers to international guidelines for online assessment in VET that are to be monitored and reviewed by assessors and internal and external quality assurers (UAE-MOE, 2023). One set of standards (UAE-MOE, 2023, pp. 9-10) relates to the integrity of the assessment processes, where ATPs must use secure online proctoring systems with "technology-enabled monitoring software" that confirms learner identity and supervises online assessments from start to finish. The proctoring systems should have a range of features to detect and prevent cheating, including multi-factor identification such as facial detection, continual facial recognition, "keystroke dynamics for continuous authentication" during online assessments, and systems that "allow for manual surveillance" (UAE-MOE, 2023, p. 9). Candidates should be interviewed prior to online assessments to determine their levels of knowledge and skills and provide an idea of expected performance levels.

Another set of standards (UAE-MOE, 2023) relates to fairness in online assessment processes, specifying that ATPs should use standardised assessment models and methods in the delivery

of online assessments that are aligned with the programme learning outcomes. Learners must be given a manual and clear guidelines on online assessment processes, methods and tools – including opportunities to do mock online assessments before the formal tests and examinations, to familiarise themselves with the software and test the computer hardware and internet connections. These practice sessions help to reduce anxiety around the online environments.

A third set of standards (UAE-MOE, 2023) relates to quality assurance and contingency plans and accommodates online assessment environment failures. ATPs should have back-up assessment plans, including plans for learners without the necessary equipment (e.g., webcam and microphone) or inconsistent internet access, and for partial or full system failures. Assessors and internal quality assurers (IQAs) must record all evidence of online assessments and store it securely for external quality assurance. Examples given of online assessments include case studies, multiple-choice questions, portfolios of work, presentations, simulations, video evidence, virtual labs, quizzes, and reflective texts.

5.4. Academic integrity, ethics, plagiarism

The use of technology in assessment increases the need to monitor the integrity of assessments. In the sourced higher education policies, there were many explicit references to academic integrity, embedded in policies for curriculum, assessment, or quality assurance, or in standalone documents – the latter were not sought systematically but were included when part of, or readily available with, other assessment policies.

The University of Ghana's (UOG, 2016) Plagiarism Policy provides a useful example of a comprehensive, detailed, clearly structured, systematic and easy-to-read standalone policy in this regard. Section 1 covers its fourfold purpose of supporting the HEI's mission to be relevant in national and global developments, clarifying what plagiarism comprises and ways of preventing plagiarism. Sections 2 and 3 further expand on types of plagiarism, including self-plagiarism or re-using one's own work without citing original sources; plagiarism of ideas, methods, results, and words; and intentional and unintentional plagiarism – the latter often being perpetrated by second-language students. Plagiarism is described as academic fraud or theft, punishable, depending on the severity of the case, by public apology, withdrawing material, losing a position, and/or prosecution, and retrospective punishment may apply. The remaining nine sections of the policy detail the evaluation and reporting of plagiarism; student, staff and institutional responsibilities regarding plagiarism; and plagiarism in different types of assessments, with sanctions.

5.5. Closing the loop

An aspect not encountered in the assessment literature and not covered explicitly as such in the South African assessment policy is *closing the loop*, involving establishing, monitoring, and

improving systems to support students transitioning into employment. The University of Sharjah's College of Communication (n.d., p. 32) *Assessment: Strategy, Policy and* Processes_ includes guidance towards students "galvanising learning from four-year programmes" into a set of knowledge, self-awareness, and operational competences that support their transition into workplaces and entrepreneurship. Assessment is designed to support these processes and includes graduate exhibitions for employers, workplace learning, freelancing and entrepreneurship projects, and others that encourage innovation.

At the University, closing the loop includes using assessment to inform managers and faculty leadership around where curricula and focal knowledge, skills, and competencies need updating to enhance student transitioning. To enable this process, course leaders produce annual reports taking account of student surveys, Chair Report findings (based on departmental surveys of syllabi, delivery, student employability, and student satisfaction), and Advisory Board advice that is framed by inputs from external stakeholders such as industry professionals, NGO incubators, government, and faculty from related disciplines in other HEIs (University of Sharjah, n.d.).

A more frequently found understanding of *closing the loop* in the sourced policies was the idea of using formative assessments to enhance learning currently underway and using summative assessment results to improve curricula for future student cohorts.

5.6. Clarity, transparency, guidance

The policy descriptions provided illustrate clarity of intent and resulting transparency and guidance for implementers. For schooling, Canada's *Growing Success* (MEO, 2024b), which elaborates assessment principles, types, contexts, standards, examples, and resources for every type of stakeholder, was a particularly useful example. Learners are required to *apply* knowledge and skills, and communicate and innovate, and are graded below, approaching, at, or above the provincial standard. This grading and movement from *norm-referenced* to *criterion-referenced* assessments can enhance learning achievements (Orekhova et al., 2021). Emphasising assessment *for learning* rather than *of learning* guides learners to desired achievement levels (Bin Mubayrik, 2020). The policy includes ensuring the safety of learning and assessment environments (MEO, 2024b).

In a second example, in the VET context, the Australian Skills Quality Authority (ASQA, 2015) publishes explicit learning and assessment standards for Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) that are implemented in four of Australia's six states. One standard details, for instance, *how* RTO training and assessment strategies and practices must be "responsive to industry and learner needs, and the requirements of VET accredited courses" (ASQA, 2015, p. 14). The contexts and requirements to meet the standards are provided, including the only options permitted for VET trainers' and assessors' qualifications and types and years of experience in relation to competences specified. RTOs must implement systematic alignment to VET system requirements, where what is validated, by whom, and how it is documented and acted upon, are

recorded – at least once every five years, for at least 50% of learning offerings. Validation must be undertaken by staff with the relevant current vocational competences, according to lists of qualifications and experience.

The University College Dublin (UCD, 2021) *Assessment Code of Practice* provides a third example of clear, detailed, explicit, and supportive content. The purposes and outcomes of, and the expectations for, assessment; key terms; relevant academic regulations; and assessments under extenuating circumstances and for students with disabilities are laid out. A pre-assessment section details good practices regarding designing assessments, assessment strategies, the approval processes and timelines needed, and *communicating* assessment arrangements, requirements, and expectations to students. The main section of the policy explains how different types of assessment should be conducted, and a post-assessment section covers feedback, processing of results, appeals, and archiving assessment records, amongst others.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

The study sought to identify, in the literature, the qualities of good assessment policy. A systematic analysis followed to ascertain the presence of these features in 75 assessment policies selected from high-achieving schooling systems and associated national, HEI, and VET entities internationally. Where an additional aspect was identified in one of the policies, it was factored into the analysis for all 75 policies.

The analysis showed that the fifteen key features were present in the 75 policies analysed, although not uniformly so in every instance. Distinct patterns were found within sectors; for example, system flexibility and RPL occurred more frequently in the national overarching and VET assessment policies, while academic integrity and plagiarism featured more frequently in the schooling and HEI policies. Assessing soft skills and using technology in assessment were notably absent in around half of the policies but present in 70% of the schooling policies. The VET policies addressed the aspect of currency more frequently than those in the other sectors. An additional aspect not expressed as such in the literature but noted explicitly in several policies was that of closing the loop – feeding assessment results back into enhancing learning or supporting transition into the workplace. The hypothesis regarding identifying good assessment principles for policy through a literature survey and enhancing the findings through policy analysis was supported.

The study had two main limitations. Firstly, it was difficult to source the assessment policies, necessitating prior understanding of the country systems of which they were part. VET assessment policies were especially hard to locate. The different ways in which the policies themselves were structured created an additional layer of complexity, as not all countries had the types of policies sought. A second limitation comprised the lack of space to analyse the *voicing* in the policies: some were more authoritarian, using legal language, while others used a narrative,

guiding, and encouraging style. Understanding the impact of these styles would require additional research.

A key finding of the research was *how* the principles of policy context; inclusivity; online assessment and using technology in assessment; academic integrity; closing the loop; and providing clarity, transparency, and guidance for policy users were elaborated. The research offers insights towards the revision of South Africa's National Policy for Designing and Implementing Assessment (SAQA, 2014) and other policies seeking to enable good practice across all sectors – for general and further, higher, and vocational and occupational education and training. It is recommended that these insights be factored into the relevant policy development and form the basis of further related research.

7. Declarations

Funding: This research did not receive any external funding. The conference costs were covered by the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA).

Acknowledgements: Deep gratitude to Mr Vonani Mabunda of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) for providing tools and expertise in support of identifying and sourcing national, higher education, schooling, and VET policies across countries, which increased the sample of policies found.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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