



A Transformative Approach to Admissions Assessment: The South African Case

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RESEARCH



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ABSTRACT

School-leaving and higher education admission assessments in South Africa are typically summative and normative, comparing students for admission into university. However, we argue that these assessments need to be *transformative*, impacting the curriculum and empowering students to explore their own agency. This study is a reflective contribution based on over a decade of development and administration of school-leaving and higher education assessments. It adopts a literacies perspective, distinguishing between the 'autonomous' view of literacy (focused on *competencies*) and the 'ideological model' (viewing literacy as social practices). The ideological model values diverse literacy practices and challenges normative approaches that assume homogeneous student populations and stable disciplines. While normative approaches focus on identifying academic conventions and teaching proficiency within these norms, *transformative* approaches a) situate these conventions within contested knowledge traditions; b) elicit writers' perspectives on these conventions; and c) explore alternative academic meaning-making that considers students' diverse resources. At present, school-leaving and admission assessments rely on candidates' cultural capital and socioeconomic status. As such, these assessments may disadvantage poorer students and perpetuate inequities. To transform higher education, assessments must shift from normative, summative practices to transformative, inclusive, and empowering approaches, integrating feedback that fosters student agency and acknowledges diverse literacies. Such transformative assessments, we conclude, should not merely rank students but provide input for development of curricula and provide for feedback to and from students to understand and improve their learning, thus enabling self-reflection and growth.

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INTRODUCTION

The transition to democracy in South Africa in 1994 marked the beginning of significant changes in the country's higher education system. Central to these changes were three key goals: equity, access, and success in higher education (Maringe and Chiramba, 2022). These goals were aimed at addressing the deep-seated inequalities left by apartheid policies. *Equity* was seen to provide a basis for rectifying the injustices of the past. It involved ensuring that all students, regardless of background, had the opportunity to pursue higher education. Access referred to the inclusion of students from previously marginalized communities. This aspect has seen notable improvements, with substantial increases in enrolment from these communities.

However, *success*—the ability to engage meaningfully with and succeed in the academic context—has lagged behind. While more students from marginalized backgrounds are entering South African higher education, their success rates have not improved comparably. This highlights ongoing challenges within the education system. Analysis by Maringa and Chiramba (2022) underscores this issue, noting the commendable progress in physical access but pointing out the lack of similar strides in student success. Similarly, Leibowitz and Bozalek (2014) and Letseka and Pitsoe (2014) emphasize the dismal performance in ensuring that students not only enter but thrive and succeed in higher education.

School-leaving and higher education admission assessments are often used in a summative or norm-referenced manner. That is, scores on these assessments are used to make comparative decisions about student admission and placement. In South Africa, the school-leaving assessment, or National Senior Certificate, was introduced in 2008 for the cohort entering higher education in 2009. The higher education admission assessments, or National Benchmark Tests, were also first used with the 2009 cohort. This paper reflects on the use of these assessments and argues that assessments should be used in a transformative manner. We argue that admission assessments should inform curriculum transformation and provide students with opportunities to explore their own agency. This is based on the premise that what is important is students' preparedness in terms of the literacies required in higher education. The paper concludes that for assessments to be transformative, they need to inform curriculum development, facilitate student agency and include multiple forms of feedback. Although the paper draws on publicly available data, it is not empirical in nature. Rather, the contribution of the paper is reflective in that it proposes an alternative perspective on assessments that views them as more than merely a tool for student selection and placement.

ASSESSMENT TYPES AND PURPOSES: A PRIMER

Understanding the different purposes to which tests are put lays the groundwork for describing and comparing the purposes of the South African school-leaving tests and higher education admission assessments as well as how well they achieve these purposes. While descriptions of the various purposes may often be seen as binary, in practice, assessments lie on a continuum between these poles.

The first two test types and purposes we discuss are formative and summative assessments (Black and Wiliam, 1998). Formative assessments focus on monitoring students' responses to instruction, as well as their progress. With formative assessment, feedback is immediate for both student and teacher. Formative assessment is interactive or cyclical in nature (Sadler, 1988) and offers significant learning gains, particularly when results are used to inform teaching and learning (Black and Wiliam, 1998). All formative assessment is to a degree diagnostic (Black, 2001: 25). In contrast, the focus of summative assessment is to determine what students have learned at the end of a grade level or unit of instruction. It assists in determining the degree to which learning and instructional aims have been achieved.

Assessments can also be described as *of*, *for* and *as* learning (Earl, 2003; Gipps, 1994). Assessment *of* learning involves gathering information at the end of the teaching and learning process in order to rank student achievement against a standard. Assessment of learning is summative and typically entails standardized tests. In assessment of learning, examiners should ensure that assessment provides accurate judgements of students' competence or proficiency, so that the information is used to make defensible and reasonable decisions.

Assessment *for* learning is a process in which students use assessment information to adjust their learning strategies, and in which teachers use the information to adjust their teaching. Such assessments suggest that students learn in individual ways but recognize that there may be predictable pathways that numerous students go through. Assessment data can thus be used to determine what students know, as well as how, when, and whether they use what they know. In this way, teachers can allocate resources and target their instruction.

Assessment *as* learning is the use of ongoing self-assessment on the part of students. Within this approach, students monitor their own learning by reflecting on their own learning and making adjustments so that they achieve greater understanding. Students, as critical and active thinkers, make sense of information, relate it to their own prior knowledge, and use it for new learning. Such metacognitive self-regulation occurs when students monitor what they are learning and use self-generated

feedback to adjust, adapt and even change what they understand. When teachers pivot to assessment as learning, assessment becomes a channel for helping students become critical thinkers that can reflect and critically analyse their own learning.

Assessment can also be described as criterion-referenced, which means that it is 'constructed to provide information about the level of a test-taker's performance in relation to clearly defined domains of content and/or behaviours (e.g. reading, writing, mathematics) that require mastery' (Foxcroft, 2006: 9). Or, they can be described as norm-referenced, where performance of learners in a particular year is normed to a 'norm group'. Norm-referenced tests aim to sort and rank students, usually 'on a curve', and not to see if they meet a criterion or standard (Prince, 2016).

Finally, assessment for social justice seeks to achieve the broader purposes of 'justice of assessment within higher education, and ... nurturing the forms of learning that will promote greater social justice within society as a whole' (McArthur, 2016: 968). Social justice in assessment is necessary as it involves considering if the outcomes of assessment were just: 'assessment for social justice does not disregard the importance of fair procedures, nor the importance of equitable treatment and academic integrity, but it does shift the focus from the procedures to the outcomes of social justice' (McArthur, 2022: 19). Assessment for inclusion should encourage self-motivation, autonomous learning, and importantly, develop collective-minded individuals who are not defined as being in competition with each other (O'Shea and Delahunty, 2022).

CONTEXT: SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL-LEAVING AND HIGHER EDUCATION ADMISSION ASSESSMENTS

There are two assessments of South African school-leavers in South Africa. Firstly, the national school-leaving examinations, the National Senior Certificate (NSC), are compulsory for entry into higher education. The NSC is awarded to school-leavers who have met the requirements set out by the Department of Basic Education. The NSC enables school leavers access to a range of post-school opportunities, depending on their Grade 12 NSC scores. The results of the NSC are norm-referenced and interpretation thereof for the purposes of admission, placement, and particularly curriculum development is often difficult.

A second assessment is the higher education admission assessments, the National Benchmark Tests (NBTs). The NBTs are criterion-referenced and assess students in three domains, or 'literacies': Academic Literacy, Quantitative Literacy and Mathematics. According to Griesel (2006: 4), the objectives of the NBTs include:

- assessing students' entry-level academic literacy, quantitative literacy and mathematical proficiency;
- assessing the relationship between higher education entry-level proficiencies and school-level exit outcomes;
- providing higher education institutions with extra information for the admission and placement of students; and
- informing the curricula of foundation courses and other curriculum changes.

It is thus evident that the conceptualisation, design and implementation of the NBTs aims to provide information to aid in student selection and placement as well as curriculum development. This is important because it is not only school curriculum content that is important for successful performance in higher education. Rather, it is the cognitive abilities and competencies underlying the content of the school curriculum that are important. These are learned in one context, the school context, and need to be transferred to another, the higher education context, as well as within specific disciplinary contexts. The NBTs thus focus on the application of knowledge across these contexts.

The function of the NSC assessments is to certify school leavers' achievement and to identify whether they meet the statutory higher education admissions criteria. The NSC assessments are not completely standardized as they include a continuous assessment (CASS) mark for work done throughout the year which may be different for different NSC candidates. The CASS mark is approximately 25% of the total mark. The examinations are also mainly constructed-response assessments. NSC assessments can be seen to be partly formative as the feedback that students receive on their CASS mark may allow for learning to be encouraged. However, the largest part, 75%, is the final assessment, which makes the NSC largely summative. The NSC is an assessment of learning as it assesses what has been learnt. It is an achievement assessment since it focuses on subject material that has already been taught. The NSC, in terms of higher education admission, is often used in a normative manner, in that students must obtain certain levels of performance in order to gain access to higher education in general, and to particular types of programs, specifically.

The purpose of the NBTs, in contrast, is to identify the extent to which school leavers aiming to study at higher education institutions meet the core literacies (academic literacy, quantitative literacy and mathematics) that will be expected of them. This *should* allow higher education institutions to identify how best to respond to the learning needs of students they admit. The NBTs are criterion-referenced assessments that use multiple choice questions and are written under standardized conditions. The NBTs are assessments *for* learning, also called 'formative assessments', as they assess the

preparedness of students entering higher education. They provide information about student readiness. They assess aptitude since they do not focus on specific course material that has been taught previously (except for the mathematics test that assumes the school mathematics curriculum). In this paper, we argue that the NBTs *can* position themselves within a ‘transformative stance’. However, the extent to which this is the case depends on the ways in which NBT results are used by institutions and students alike. [Table 1](#) summarises the comparison between the NSC and the NBTs.

ACADEMIC LITERACIES AS A THEORETICAL FRAMING

It is often argued that South African schooling does not prepare higher education students adequately and that there are inequalities in the experiences and conditions of those who enter universities. Scott, Yeld and Hendry (2007: 42) point out that ‘the educational factor to which poor performance is perhaps most commonly ascribed across the higher education sector is student under-preparedness’. This ‘underpreparedness’ arises not only from poorly or inadequately taught school subjects, but also from inadequacies in the area of academic literacies. McKenna (2009: 8) puts this as follows: ‘the real key to whether a student will pass or fail relates to the literacy practices she brings with her to the University from her school and home environments, and the extent to which these have commonalities with the literacy practices of her chosen discipline’.

While there is a common-sense understanding of ‘literacy’ as referring only to reading and writing, this — the autonomous view ([Street, 1995b](#)) — is often fraught with conservative views about ‘literacy’ levels of scholars and schools. In contrast, the New Literacy Studies (NLS) ([Barton, 1994](#); [Baynham, 1995](#); [Gee, 1996](#); [Heath, 1983](#); [Street, 1995a](#); [Street, 1995b](#)) attempt to give a social practice account of literacy. The NLS problematize what qualifies as literacy and asks whose *literacies* are dominant and whose are marginalised. This accounts for use of the pluralised form of ‘literacies’. The term also draws our attention to the different types of literacy practices which students must master; these include critical literacies, feedback literacies, and broader information literacies.

In the NLS, ‘academic literacies’ refers to any form of social practice that requires a set of conventions or codes to communicate meaning ([Heath, 1983](#); [Barton, 1994](#); [Baynham, 1995](#); [Street, 1984](#); [1995a](#); [1995b](#); [Gee, 1996](#)). In this sense, to be ‘literate’ does not simply mean to have acquired the skills to encode and decode signs but to have mastered a set of social practices. These social practices will necessarily be plural. The social practices view of literacies also emphasizes their use in context rather than as decontextualized. Barton and Hamilton (2000: 9) argue that ‘in literacy events people use written language in an integrated way as part of a range of semiotic systems; these semiotic systems include mathematical systems, musical notation, maps and other non-text based images’.

Emerging from NLS, academic literacies research has developed as an important ‘field of enquiry with a

	NATIONAL SENIOR CERTIFICATE (NSC) ASSESSMENTS	NATIONAL BENCHMARK TESTS (NBTs) ASSESSMENTS
Purpose of assessment	To certify NSC candidates’ achievement levels and to identify whether they meet the statutory higher education admissions criteria. To identify the extent to which school-leavers meet the curriculum statement expectations, as expressed in the Subject Assessment Guidelines.	To identify the extent to which students aiming to enter higher education meet the core academic literacy, quantitative literacy and mathematics competencies required by school-leavers on entry to higher education study. To identify how best higher education institutions could meet the teaching and learning needs of admitted students.
Assessment type	Mainly constructed response; partly standardized; largely summative; norm-referenced; assessment of learning; achievement assessment	Only select response (MCQ); standardized; criterion-referenced; assessment <i>for</i> and <i>as</i> learning; aptitude assessment
Rating or proficiency levels employed and how these are determined	Norm-referenced. Rating codes of 1–7 determined through dividing performance into 0–29% for band 1, 30–39%, 40–49%, ... 70–79% for bands 2 to 6 and 80–100% for band 7	Criterion-referenced. Proficiency levels of ‘Proficient’, ‘Intermediate’ and ‘Basic’ determined through modified Angoff standard setting method and the ‘Intermediate’ proficiency level split into ‘Upper’ and ‘Lower’ using the midpoint between the Basic/Intermediate score and the Intermediate/Proficient score.
How assessment scores are determined and comparability from one assessment instance to the next	In-class continuous assessment scores are combined with examination scores to arrive at the final assessment score and these are fitted to a five-year norm curve.	Assessments have common items embedded into them. Responses to items on the assessments are used to determine raw scores and the common items are used to link and equate assessments.

Table 1 Comparison of the NSC and NBTs Assessments (extracted and adapted from [Prince, 2016: 28](#)).

specific epistemological and ideological stance towards the study of academic communication' (Lillis and Scott, 2007: 5). They locate the emergence of academic literacies research within a particular historical moment in higher education and describe its ideological stance as 'explicitly transformative rather than normative' (Lillis and Scott, 2007: 12). Academic literacies research shifts the emphasis from *texts* towards *academic practices*. This is important as the notion of 'academic literacies' as a socially situated practice 'offers a powerful way of conceptualising the link between the activities of reading and writing and the social structures in which they are embedded and which they help to shape' (Barton and Hamilton, 1998: 6). Academic literacies research is, therefore, a 'critical approach to the researching and teaching of writing and literacy and to the role and potential of these activities for individual meaning making and academic knowledge construction in higher education' (Lillis et al., 2015: 4). It draws attention to the importance of adopting socially situated accounts of text production, in this case, assessment.

More recently, researchers have applied a social practice approach to mathematics and numeracy, arguing that mathematical and statistical practices are similarly socially situated practices crucial to knowledge production in higher education (Kelly et al., 2007; Prince and Archer, 2006; Prince and Archer, 2008; Prince and Simpson, 2016; Street, 2005; Street & Baker, 2006). Quantitative literacy and mathematics practices are part of a broader view of academic literacy practices. Moschkovich (2015) uses the phrase 'academic literacy in mathematics' to shift the focus from language as words to a broader view of literacy as participation in practices and discourses. It reflects a sense of mathematical discourse as 'the complex interaction of three semiotic systems—natural language, mathematics symbol systems, and visual displays' (O'Halloran, 1999). Prince and Archer (2008) propose the term 'academic numeracy practices' to highlight both the connection to the disciplines of statistics and mathematics as well as language.

'Practice' offers a way of thinking about what individuals as socially situated actors do in a generalized context but also in the context of a specific situation. The term 'practice' is defined as 'habitualised ways, tied to particular times and places, in which people apply resources (material or symbolic) to act together in the world' (Chouliarakis and Fairclough, 1999: 21). This notion has been applied to both numeracy and mathematics by theorists such as Street (2000; 2005) and Baynham and Baker (2002). For Baynham and Baker, mathematics and numeracy practices are 'more than the behaviours that occur when people 'do' mathematics/numeracy, [and] more than the events in which numerical activity is involved' (Baynham and Baker, 2002: 6). This view of academic numeracy practices enables 'the discourses,

the values and beliefs and the social relations that surround numeracy events as well as the contexts in which they are sited to be explored' (Baynham and Baker, 2002: 6).

Critical theorists such as Boughey (2009: 4) stress that the idea of 'underpreparedness' often implies 'deficiency' on the part of students rather than recognizing that universities themselves are also often underprepared to meet the needs of the students they admit. Higher education teaching, learning, curricula and assessment need to take into account the capacities of students and address what Scott, Yeld and Hendry have called the 'articulation gap' (2007: 42) between the level of students' academic, quantitative and mathematics literacies, and the demands of curricula. To design more responsive curricula, universities need more information about the capacities of their students. One of the goals of transformative admissions assessment, we argue, should be to provide this kind of diagnostic information.

ADMISSIONS ASSESSMENT AS TRANSFORMATIVE

Boud and Falchikov (2007) highlight the entrenched nature of assessment practices in higher education, emphasizing their strong orientation towards certification. This paradigm, focused on performativity, ties closely to the perceived quality of qualifications. The rigidity of the assessment system is deeply rooted in the personal epistemologies of both lecturers and students, reflecting a significant emphasis on future job and higher education prospects.

This quote from Boud and Falchikov illustrates the high stakes involved in assessment:

Assessment affects people's lives. The future directions and careers of students depend on it. There are risks involved in changing assessment without considering the consequences. This has meant that there has been very slow movement in the development of new assessment ideas and changes in practice (Boud and Falchikov, 2007: 3).

This suggests that the potential risks associated with altering assessment methods contributes to the slow pace of change. Heavy reliance on traditional assessment practices, driven by concerns over their impact on students' futures, has made innovation in assessment a cautious and gradual process. Nonetheless, it is necessary to explore more integrated and varied assessment approaches that combine both summative and formative elements, providing a more comprehensive evaluation of student learning and supporting ongoing educational development.

A key approach to developing criticality and the capacity for self-regulation is dialogic feedback (Winstone and Carless, 2019). However, giving students meaningful feedback on their learning is an area that has presented multiple challenges in both school leaving and higher education admission assessment. To enhance student success through formative feedback, it is essential to establish supportive structures for all participants involved in the feedback process (Winstone and Boud, 2019). Effective formative feedback can significantly benefit student learning even when associated with low-stakes rewards. Engaging students in cognitive, socio-affective, and structural feedback dialogue allows them to become active participants in a reciprocal process. This approach shifts away from traditional, teacher-dominated communication and encourages students to actively solicit and engage with feedback. As Winstone and Carless (2019) state, such interactions enable students to take a more active role in their learning process, ‘moving away from teacher-dominated forms of communication and enabling students to solicit and engage in feedback interactions’ (Winstone and Carless, 2019: 97).

Lillis et al. (2015) argues that ‘at the heart of an Academic Literacies approach is [the] concern with “transformation” and the “transformative”’. Drawing on Lillis and Scott (2007), Lillis et al. (2015) further argues that a normative approach to Academic Literacies rests on the educational myths that Kress (2007) describes: the homogeneity of the student population, the stability of disciplines, and the unidirectionality of the teacher-student relation. Consonant with these myths there is an interest to ‘identify and induct’: the emphasis is on identifying academic conventions with a view to exploring how students might be taught to become proficient or ‘expert’. On the other hand, a transformative approach involves an interest in such questions but is in addition concerned with: a) locating such conventions in relation to specific and contested traditions of knowledge making; b) eliciting the perspectives of writers (whether students or professionals) on the ways in which such conventions impinge on their meaning making; c) exploring alternative ways of meaning making in academia, by considering the resources that students bring to the academy as legitimate tools for meaning making.

We argue that admissions assessments of academic literacies can also encourage a transformative stance. We make the point, as does Lillis et al. (2015) albeit in relation to academic literacies, that a normative stance in admissions assessment is the default position in much practice in academia and it is a necessary stance in order to enable successful participation in academic institutions as currently configured. However, there is a considerable amount of additional work to be done—thinking, research, engagement and reflection—regarding admissions assessment practices.

Lillis et al. (2015) argues that we need to attend to the workings of academic literacy practices, more widely, rather than focus our attention solely on students who may appear marginalized from the dominant practices and cultures of the academy. She warns that if we concentrate our attention on the latter this will mask the implications of academic literacies research and practice for laying bare the ways in which textual practices become instantiated through institutional processes and procedures. In order to counter deficit stances in relation to students, we need to interrogate practice at both an institutional and sectoral level. To this end, we argue that admissions assessments used within a transformative stance would facilitate the revision of curricula and encourage student agency. While ranking applicants on the basis of merit for selection into higher education is important, there are at least four equally important aspects to consider when making selection decisions. The first of these, especially in the South African context, is equity. The second is appropriate placement of students. A third is that institutions and curriculum structures themselves need to be appropriate for the students they serve. Finally, students need to be retained and be enabled to complete their studies successfully.

Without transformative use of admissions assessment, universities are unlikely to address the current retention patterns. Transformative admissions assessment employs institution-wide strategies, systematically transforming teaching and learning at all levels (institution, program, and course). Unlike standardized measures, which decontextualize learning and assume score comparability across contexts, transformative admissions assessment recognizes that each context requires its own definition of successful learning performance.

Central to transformative admissions assessment are the stakeholders—both faculty and students—who actively engage in the assessment process. Standardized measures, which typically exclude direct involvement of those who teach and learn, fail to be transformative. This approach goes beyond student-centered learning, which focuses on the needs of students, and standards-based assessment, which aims for institutional proficiency. Transformative assessment involves all stakeholders in a collaborative process that shapes performance outcomes and drives holistic change across the institution.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE ADMISSIONS ASSESSMENT

We identify three principles for incorporating admissions assessment as transformative in the higher education context. These principles emerge from our reflections on researching and administering these assessments.

The three principles are that: a) curricula should be continually re-designed in order to better respond to the diagnostic information provided by assessments, b) within curricula, students should be encouraged to engage in reflection on their own learning, thus fostering greater student agency within higher education, and c) feedback cycles, for students and institutions, need to be incorporated into the use of admissions assessment. Below, we elaborate on these three principles.

CURRICULUM RESPONSIVENESS

Curriculum responsiveness is the ability of educational curricula to adapt to the changing needs, contexts, and goals of students, society, and the evolving landscape of knowledge and skills. It ensures that curricula remain relevant, inclusive, and effective in preparing students for their futures. Key aspects of curriculum responsiveness include relevance to students' needs; adaptation to societal changes; inclusivity and equity; interdisciplinary approaches; feedback and continuous improvement; and engagement with stakeholders (Hameed & Iqbal, 2021; Schleicher, 2018). Not all of these aspects are necessarily relevant to admissions assessment, though several are.

Relevance to students' needs requires the alignment of curricula with the diverse backgrounds, interests, and future aspirations of students to make learning more engaging and meaningful. Admissions assessment can be used to identify what students do and do not know, and to adapt curricula accordingly.

Inclusivity and equity must ensure that the curriculum is accessible and fair to all students, addressing barriers related to race, gender, socioeconomic status, and other factors as well as promoting diverse perspectives and voices within curriculum content. Here, again, admissions assessment can play a vital role in ensuring that curricular and pedagogic practices adequately address the learning needs of all students that enter higher education, better reducing barriers that may be introduced by race, gender, socioeconomic status and other demographic factors.

By focusing on these aspects, curriculum responsiveness should aim to create an educational environment that is dynamic, inclusive, and capable of preparing students to thrive in a rapidly changing world. As we have shown, admissions assessments can contribute to curriculum responsiveness.

STUDENT AGENCY

Student agency refers to the capacity of students to act independently, make choices, and influence their own learning and life outcomes (Klemenčič, 2023). It involves students taking active roles in their education, rather than being passive recipients of knowledge (OECD, 2019). Empowering student agency is crucial for fostering motivation, engagement, and lifelong learning skills. Our contention is that admissions assessment can be used to

enhance student agency. Key aspects of student agency include autonomy and choice; voice and participation; ownership of learning; critical thinking and problem solving; collaborative learning; real-world relevance; and developing self-efficacy. Again, some of these aspects are of particular relevance for admissions assessment.

Voice and participation involve students in discussions and decisions about curriculum design, teaching methods, and school policies as well as creating platforms for students to express their opinions, provide feedback, and participate in school governance. The use of the outcomes of admissions assessment for curriculum design is one way in which students' voice can be incorporated into the work of higher education teaching and learning.

Ownership of learning includes encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning outcomes and reflect on their learning processes and facilitating self-assessment and peer-assessment practices to help students recognize their strengths and areas for improvement. Here, admissions assessments results can be shared with students, with a view to them developing their own learning goals and assessing their own progress towards these.

Collaborative learning includes fostering collaborative projects and group activities that require students to work together, share ideas, and learn from one another as well as building a community of learners where students support each other's growth and development. Because students enter into higher education with varied knowledges and skills, the results of admissions assessments can be used to design activities that actively leverage the intended benefits of collaborative and peer learning.

Developing self-efficacy, like fostering ownership of learning, involves helping students build confidence in their abilities to succeed through positive reinforcement and recognizing their achievements as well as supporting students in setting realistic goals and developing resilience to overcome obstacles.

By fostering student agency, educators can create a more engaging, motivating, and empowering learning environment. This approach helps students develop essential skills for independence, critical thinking, and active participation in their communities and future careers. It cannot be overemphasized that individual students need to have agency to face their own challenges in higher education. Student agency often refers to student learning through activities that are meaningful and relevant to themselves. It is driven by student interests and is often self-initiated with suitable guidance from lecturers. Students who are equipped with the diagnostic information from university-entrance assessments are likely to understand the challenges they may face and can better prepare themselves. For students to engage in deep reflection without being supported

by the institution is not viable. It is up to institutions to promote and support deep reflection through curricular structures and assessment practices. It is not feasible to place the onus for navigating the academic institution and curricula on students alone: institutions, through curricula and lecturers, should better develop an environment where students can excel.

FEEDBACK

By incorporating admissions assessments into their curricular and pedagogic approaches, educators can create a more interactive and formative feedback environment, enhancing student engagement and success. This shift towards formative, student-centred assessment practices supports the development of autonomous, reflective learners who are better equipped to navigate their educational journeys. A more process-oriented approach to feedback, grounded in a sociocultural perspective, has gained prominence due to its emphasis on understanding and utilizing feedback for improvement (Boud and Molloy, 2013; Carless and Boud, 2018). This approach highlights the critical role of students in generating, processing, and responding to feedback information.

For students to effectively engage in this process, they need to develop *feedback literacy*, which encompasses the understandings, capacities, and dispositions necessary to leverage feedback opportunities (Carless and Boud, 2018). Feedback literacy involves not just receiving feedback but also interpreting it, making sense of it, and taking action based on it. To facilitate this shift towards student ownership of feedback, educational practices have begun to incorporate various forms of student dialogue into feedback processes. This move acknowledges the limitations of traditional teacher-telling feedback methods and the impracticality of one-to-one dialogues at scale. As Telio, Ajjawi, and Regehr (2015) point out, these dialogues need to be reimagined to occur across different times and spaces, often utilizing technology.

Additionally, integrating peers into the feedback process can prove beneficial. Peer feedback involves students providing feedback to each other, which can help in managing the scale of feedback interactions and fostering a collaborative learning environment. Nicol, Thomson, and Breslin (2013) emphasize the value of peer feedback in promoting deeper understanding and engagement among students.

By incorporating admissions assessments, process-oriented feedback can create a more interactive and participatory feedback environment. This environment supports students in becoming active agents in their learning journey, capable of interpreting and applying feedback effectively to enhance their academic performance and personal growth. In addition, feedback from students establishes mechanisms for regular review

and improvement of curricula based on feedback from students, educators, and stakeholders and employing data and research to inform curriculum adjustments and innovations.

CONCLUSION

This study uses particulars about two South African national assessments to show how admissions assessments can be transformative in that they can both identify the weaknesses and strengths of prospective students as well as challenge institutions and the higher education sector generally to reflect on the appropriateness of their curricula for the students they admit. It is our view that for assessment to be transformative it should tend towards being formative, *for* and *as* learning, criterion-referenced, and should promote social justice and inclusion. In particular, it should ensure that higher education curricula are responsive to the students they serve and facilitate student agency to ensure that they are responsible for their own learning. Lastly, it is important that feedback be used to ensure that assessment information is communicated to curriculum developers and to students in such a manner that curricula are adapted, and students are agents for their own learning. It should also be done in such a manner that students do not feel pathologized and in deficit, which can be an unintended outcome when admissions assessments are solely used for selection and/or placement decision-making.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

Robert Prince is a Senior Research Associate at the University of Johannesburg. His research facilitates the identification of educationally disadvantaged students who have the potential to succeed in higher education, given the appropriate academic support and curriculum structures to address their learning needs. His aim is to inform appropriate placement and curriculum development so that a wider range of students can be admitted and appropriately placed in order to succeed in higher education.

Zach Simpson is an Associate Professor of Engineering Education at the University of Johannesburg. His research interests include higher education studies, multimodal social semiotics, academic literacies and engineering education. Zach is also the Editor-in-Chief of the Scopus- and DOAJ-listed journal, *SOTL in the South*.

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