# JUGGLING ACCESS VS RETENTION AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE: THE EXPERIENCE OF A LECTURER TEACHING IN AN OPEN, DISTANCE E-LEARNING INSTITUTION

**S. G. le Roux**
Department of Early Childhood Education
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2850-3016

ABSTRACT

In response to the growing number of people requiring access to higher education, the student numbers at distance education institutions grew significantly over the last decade (Unisa 2013; 2020). Unfortunately, many students who enrol at open distance learning institutions are not ready for the demands of distance e-learning. More than half of students enrolled at the open distance learning institution where this study was done drop out and the reasons have been well researched (Joubert and Snyman 2018; Mashile, Fynn, and Matoane 2020).

It seems that universities' responses to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4.3 – equal access to technical, vocational and higher education) (Unesco 2021) may unintentionally have created new vulnerabilities for the very group of people they have targeted for progress to end poverty, hunger and discrimination. As nearly a third of all students in South Africa are enrolled at Africa's largest open distance learning institution (Unisa 2018), it becomes crucial not only to increase access, but simultaneously to prioritise student retention and academic performance.

This raises the question: How can and should lecturers teaching at distance-education institutions optimise the online teaching and learning environment in order to bridge the gap between access targets and academic performance targets? Following an autoethnographic research design, I share my own experiences of teaching two year-modules of the Bachelor of Education (B.Ed) Foundation Phase programme offered via a continuous assessment (CA) approach. Two theoretical frameworks, namely the socio-critical model of Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011, 184), and Luna's (2018) theory of layers of vulnerability guided my understanding of the challenges associated with distance learning as well as my research design.

My study reveals that the promise of CA does not always convert to optimal performance, and that contextual factors in distance education have a powerful impact on academic achievement despite the effort made by lecturers.

**Keywords:** access to higher education, at-risk students, continuous assessment, e-learning, layers of vulnerability, open distance-learning

## INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an integral component of the teaching and learning process. We assess for two

reasons: to learn more about the student and to learn more about the teaching. According to Hernández (2012), assessment concerns grading and reporting student achievement (referred to as assessment of learning) and supporting students in their learning (also known as assessment for learning). In general, the student pass rate is one of the key performance indicators a lecturer is measured against annually. Module improvement plans are then submitted to indicate how the pass rate is to be improved or maintained, as the case may be. It is not any different at this open distance learning institution where this study was done (hereafter referred to as this university).

In response to the growing number of people requiring access to higher education, student numbers at this university grew from 263,559 in 2009 to 380,876 in 2020 (Unisa 2013; 2020). However, many students who enrol at this university are not ready for the demands of distance e-learning. Open distance e-learning means that there is a physical distance between the university and its students, but, students connect with the university via the internet; it is the student's responsibility to plan their studies and manage their time effectively (Unisa 2023a). Joubert and Snyman (2018) have documented some of the reasons for this: a lack of commitment by students, who prefer interaction with lecturers; poor communication and interaction between lecturers and e-tutors; limited training in the use of the learning management system (LMS); and students' lack of access to technology (devices, data, and internet connectivity). All these factors contribute to the drop-out rate and/or poor performance.

It is only about 18 per cent of South African matriculants that can access South African universities, and of those nearly half (47%) will drop out. If distance learning is considered, that figure rises to 68 per cent.

It seems that universities' response to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4.3 – equal access to technical, vocational and higher education) (Unesco 2021) may unintentionally have created new vulnerabilities for the very group of people they have targeted for progress to end poverty, hunger and discrimination. As this university enrols nearly 30 per cent of all South African students (Unisa 2018), it becomes crucial to not only increase access but, at the same time, to prioritise student retention and academic performance.

For me, as a lecturer, this raises the question: How can and should lecturers teaching at distance-education institutions optimise the online teaching and learning environment in order to bridge the gap between access targets and academic performance targets? Following an autoethnographic research design, I share my own experiences of teaching two year-modules of the B.Ed Foundation Phase programme offered via a continuous assessment (CA) approach. I share the lessons I have learned and provide insights into the unintended consequences of policies and institutional strategies that policy-makers and institutional leaders need to be aware of.

## Assessment in higher education

Assessment in higher education can take many forms. In the more traditional, face-to-face institutions, students take a number of high-stakes, venue-based assessments which are supervised by institutions. Conversely, with a continuous assessment approach in an online environment, students are required to complete a series of formative assessments which are staggered throughout the year. These assessments will not only allow for pacing the student through the content, but also to attain various skills and familiarity with knowledge systems (Fynn and Mashile 2022; Hernández 2012).

Since 2020, this university has incrementally implemented CA. Most applications of CA include a summative assessment in the form of a timed examination. However, Hernández (2012) cautions against using CA and also have a summative assessment, as students may not receive effective feedback within the assessment cycles as they should. In line with Hernández's (2012) view, this university has implemented CA without an examination.

## Reasons for adopting a continuous-assessment approach

According to the literature, CA helps to reduce the negative effects of high-stakes, end-of-year examinations, which are characterised by rote learning and memorisation, cramming, and high levels of anxiety (Day et al. 2018; Fynn and Mashile 2022; Hernández 2012). Various types of assessments, for example, quizzes, forum discussions, and essay-type assignments with different weightings are used in CA. The formative assessments can be either graded or non-graded.

As opposed to summative assessments, which merely provide a constrained snapshot, one small data point that signals some sort of end of learning, CA provides a longitudinal, holistic view of learning, an overview of the student's entire learning journey. Continuous-assessment practices encourage students to partake in ongoing learning, to learn as they complete tasks and not merely at the end of the year. If a student gets something wrong in the final examination, that is the end of the matter. Continuous assessment, on the other hand, provides students with opportunities to gain knowledge they do not yet possess (Day et al. 2018).

## Conditions for continuous assessment

Since CA implies a cycle of teaching, learning, and feedback, students need quality feedback timeously – and then they require an opportunity to apply the feedback.

Continuous assessment provides a mechanism for the pacing of learning and encourages students to remain up to date with their work. It allows them to gradually acquire the

competencies covered in the course work while providing feedback to both lecturer and students on the progress and the effectiveness of the work being undertaken (Poza-Lujan et al. 2016). Such an approach relies on students' intrinsic motivation and their ability to undertake self-directed learning. According to Vahed, Walters, and Ross (2021), it is built on the premise that higher quality learning outcomes can be attained when the relationship between student's understanding of a subject and the application of such knowledge becomes visible to them.

Furthermore, with CA, the cycle of teaching and learning allows for the acquisition of knowledge as well as skills development, thus, according to Poza-Lujan et al. (2016), enabling students to become knowledgeable practitioners.

Before lecturers in the Department of Early Childhood Education at this university adopted CA, question-types largely focused on rote learning of content, and a ratio of 40 per cent lower-order thinking skills, 20 per cent middle-order, and 20 per cent higher-order thinking skills were used as the norm for examination question papers (Bloom et al. 1956). In addition, the final examination paper contributed 80 per cent towards the year mark. The remaining 20 per cent was covered by one multiple-choice quiz with a weighting of 10 per cent, and one essay-type assignment with a weighting of 10 per cent. Since the implementation of CA approaches, the difficulty level of questions has been adapted to provide for 20 per cent lower-order thinking skills, 40 per cent middle-order, and 40 per cent higher-order thinking skills (Bloom et al.1956). Formative assessment tasks now constitute 100 per cent of the year mark.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In my study, I draw from both Luna's (2018) layers of vulnerability theory as well as from Subotzky and Prinsloo's (2011) socio-critical model for explaining, predicting, and enhancing students' performance.

According to Luna (2018), multiple barriers to learning are viewed as different layers of vulnerability; these layers may be acquired or removed one by one. Considering barriers as layers of vulnerability involves moving away from stereotyping or labelling sub-populations of students as disadvantaged and vulnerable simply because they are female, or black, or from a rural area, or poor. Labelling students suggests a simplistic answer to what is often a more complicated problem. This may be especially true for this university which for the past decade has focused on providing access to previously disadvantaged students. However, increased access may have created new vulnerabilities due to conditions of historical economic, social, and political exclusion. We do not face a solid vulnerability, but, in fact, different vulnerabilities or layers of vulnerabilities. It is no longer about what students have or do not have. Students do not drop out because they are not intelligent enough, unmotivated, or lazy. Neither should we

believe that students fail or drop out because of a lack of support. It is simply that there are too many factors involved. Once we understand the barriers as layers of vulnerability, we can work on finding strategies to either minimise or eliminate these layers.

According to Tinto's (1975) seminal work, student success should be seen as a result of personal, institutional, and broader contextual factors impacting on the student's ability to learn. Subotzky and Prinsloo's (2011, 184) socio-critical model for explaining, predicting, and enhancing students' success draws from Tinto's work and acknowledges that both students and the institution as partners have a joint responsibility. According to Subotzky and Prinsloo (2011), complexities and nuances across all spheres should be acknowledged if we are to improve academic performance.

The results of this study illustrate the complexity involved in the implementation of CA in an open, distance e-learning environment that has the aim of improving student retention and academic performance. I share my experience of teaching two undergraduate modules of the B.Ed. Foundation Phase programme in an open, distance e-learning environment. In particular, I share my experience of prioritising student retention and academic performance in the course of an increase in the number of students.

## METHOD

The data collected includes only course management statistics and reports that were harvested from the online LMS; collection did not involve any direct interaction with students other than that which was provided as part of normal teaching. Only data on students who were registered for the CHL2601 and LSP1501 modules in 2022 was collected.[1] These modules are year modules offered as part of the B.Ed. Foundation Phase programme in the College of Education. Since 2022, both of these modules have been offered using a CA approach based on the expectation of higher student engagement and better achievement (Day et al. 2018; Fynn and Mashile 2022; Holmes 2018). Course completion statistics were harvested from both the CHL2601 and LSP1501 module sites and the data was captured in Excel to allow for an analysis and creation of graphical representations.

## FINDINGS

In line with the theoretical frameworks discussed above, I have organised my discussion of the findings based first on factors relating to students' personal contexts and, second, on institutional factors, which includes my social, academic, and cognitive presence as a lecturer (Anderson and Dron 2011).

## Student information

### *Enrolment*

As open distance-learning universities are not limited by physical infrastructure such as classrooms and classroom sizes, they can enrol more students than can contact universities. However, according to the *Times Higher Education*'s world university rankings for 2021, whereas most universities globally have a student–teacher ratio of less than 30, the student–teacher ratio at this university is 179.9 (*Times Higher Education* 2023). This rather high number of students per lecturer limits the personal contact with lecturers that students are often seeking (Joubert and Snyman 2018).

For both of these modules, enrolment from 2020 to 2022 exceeded 4,000 students (see Figure 1).

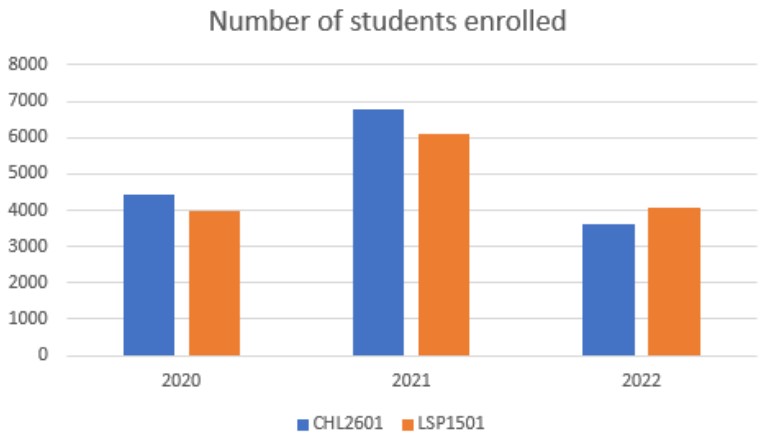


**Figure 1:** Student enrolment for CHL2601 and LSP1501 from 2020 to 2022 (Source: created by using institutional XMO data)

In 2021, the Minister of Higher Education requested that this university reduce its first-year intake by 20,000 students due to it having exceeded its enrolment numbers the previous year. This decision was eventually overturned by a court ruling (University World News 2021). The limitation on the intake of students was seen as a violation of the 20,000 students' right to higher education, as per Section 29, Sub-section 1(b) of the South African Constitution. The question here is whether such high enrolment figures and the university's level of effectiveness in managing such large student numbers do not unintentionally put students at risk.

### *Registration region*

Although the rationale behind distance learning is to provide tertiary education to students who for some reason do not have physical access to contact universities, most students who were enrolled for both modules in 2022 were resident within Gauteng, more specifically, in Pretoria,

where the university's main campus is situated (see Figure 2). This may also explain the unintended pull towards more traditional modes of teaching and learning that the university had gradually moved towards before 2020. In 2020, the Minister of Higher Education appointed a task team to investigate what he referred to as "mission-drift" by the university in its becoming more full-time, when such a plan had never been supported by the national government (Siebritz 2022). In 2020, the task team recommended measures to ensure that the university was strategically aligned with its original mandate and mission. Since 2020, there have been deliberate moves to strengthen modes of online teaching and learning, including the incremental implementation of CA approaches, and, in 2022, the mass migration to Moodle as the new online LMS. However, as may be observed from the results presented below, it seems as though many students struggle to cope with the demands of online teaching and learning.

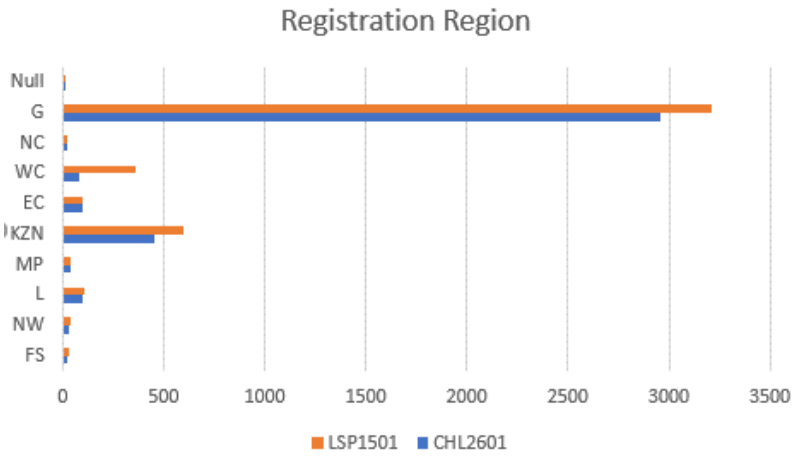


**Figure 2:** Registration regions (Source: Created by using institutional data)

### *Home Language*

Although most of the students registered were from within Gauteng, most indicated that their home language was isiZulu, which is the dominant language in KwaZulu-Natal (see Figure 3).

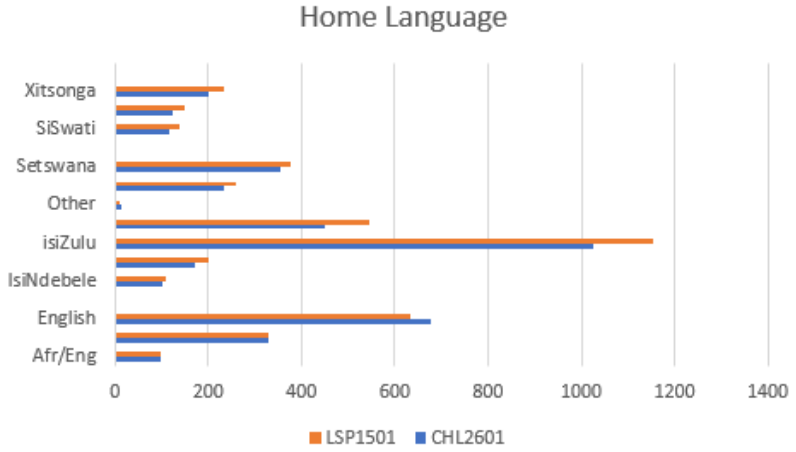


**Figure 3:** Home Language (Source: Created by using institutional data)

Although there are efforts to strengthen the indigenous African languages as academic

languages, the university's official language of teaching and learning is English. According to Lewin and Mawoyo (2014), a lack of English proficiency poses a significant barrier to most black South African students as well as to white Afrikaans-speaking students.

### *Gender*

Foundation-phase teaching has traditionally been dominated by female teachers; hence, it comes as no surprise that most students indicated their gender as being female (see Figure 4). According to a study conducted by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2016), African female enrolment has increased steadily over the past few years; however, graduation and throughput rates are still low.

Recent studies have also found that women experience a lower drop-out rate than men and have a better likelihood of graduating on time than men do (Day et al. 2018; Schreiber and Yu 2016; Van Broekhuizen and Spaull 2017). Van Broekhuizen and Spaull (2017) refer to this phenomenon as the Martha effect. However, the benefits of the Martha effect are perhaps curtailed by the fact that only 5 per cent of black female matrics will graduate with a degree within six years, compared to 33 per cent of white female matrics (Van Broekhuizen and Spaull 2017). At this university 80 per cent of students are black Africans (Unisa 2023b). According to Van Broekhuizen and Spaull (2017), the best explanation for the superior performance of white women is their superior performance at school. According to the General Household Survey 2021 (RSA 2022), 70.2 per cent of learners aged 5 years and older attend non fee-paying schools. Due to the strong parallels between school poverty, quintiles[2], and race, it may be observed that the legacy of apartheid is ongoing and still affects performance in higher education (Van Broekhuizen and Spaull 2017).

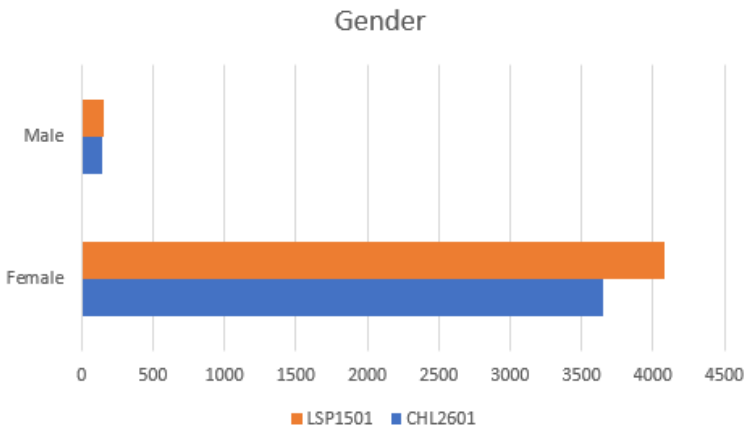


**Figure 4:** Gender (Source: Created by using institutional data)

### *Part-time vs full-time students*

The rising cost of education and the rising cost of living put higher education out of reach for many students. Open distance-learning is a more affordable way for students to obtain access to tertiary education (Mashile, Fynn, and Matoane 2020) as they can study from their homes while working. Although open distance institutions cater for the more mature student with high self-directed learning skills, new entrants are increasingly fresh from school (Mashile, Fynn, and Matoane 2020) in what is perceived as one of the worst-performing education systems in the world. In 2020, this university had 96 per cent of students studying part-time and 4 per cent studying full time (Unisa 2021). While student employment in itself is not problematic, it may take students longer to complete a degree as students have to juggle work, studies, and family responsibilities (Carpenter and Roos 2020).

In South Africa, most students fall within low socio-economic groups and due to food and housing insecurity may have to increase their work hours, which impedes their academic success. Other studies have found that employment may enhance academic performance, within reasonable hours (Neill 2015; Triventi 2014). This may be due to the fact that students who also opt to work may improve their soft skills, such as managing their time, their ability to solve problems, and to take responsibility (Dundes and Marx 2007; Darolia 2014).

Whether part-time students work or not, financial assistance has become increasingly important for students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In 2021, 38 per cent of the university's students were funded by the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). It is important to understand that these students not only come from financially disadvantaged households, but that they also tend to come from communities with poor levels of schooling, meaning that they are not ready for the demands of higher education (Wildschut, Megbowon, and Miselo 2020). According to Wildschut et al. (2020) disadvantaged students do not only drop out because of financial reasons, but also because many other social and psychological challenges impact on their ability to learn and study. Mngomezulu, Dhunpath, and Munro (2017) have found that students who receive financial assistance sometimes have no choice but to use the funding to support their families. This supports Luna's (2018) layers of vulnerability theory. Too many of these layers of vulnerabilities may have a negative impact on academic performance.

### *Access to devices, data, and internet connectivity*

According to the General Household Survey of 2021 (RSA 2022), about 10 per cent of South Africans have internet access at home, while 77.5 per cent of South African households have at least one member who has access to the internet at other locations such as at work (17.6%), an educational institution, internet cafes, or public hot spots (13.6%). About 69.4 per cent of South

Africans access the internet via their mobile phones. Many of this university's students have only a mobile phone for accessing the LMS and for participating online. A lack of data and internet connectivity, together with persistently high levels of loadshedding also negatively impacts on students' online participation. In 2022, the university provided 30Gb of data per month (10Gb anytime and 20Gb night-time) to all registered students living in South Africa. However, this may not be sufficient to ensure active engagement in an open distance-learning environment.

### *Pass-rate trends*

This brings me to the pass rate for both of these modules. With the move to CA, there was an expectation of much higher levels of student engagement and much better results. However, reality soon disappointed. Figure 5 shows the steady decline of the pass rate for both modules over a period of three years. In 2021, enrolment for both modules was at an all-time high, with student numbers reaching almost 7,000. In the same year, proctoring tools were introduced for LSP1501. In 2022, CA was implemented for both modules.

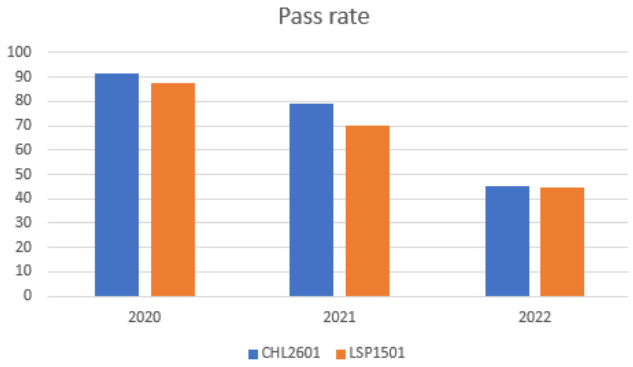


**Figure 5:** Pass rate from 2020 to 2022 (Source: created by using institutional XMO data)

Already in 2012, Hernández's study had cautioned that CA often fails to support assessment for learning, irrespective of the great efforts of academics. This was most certainly my experience.

In the next section, I focus on my efforts to establish an academic, social, and cognitive presence on the LMS. The findings provide feedback on students' engagement in various online teaching and learning activities.

## Lecturer support and module arrangement

The year mark for both modules comprises a series of formative assessments only, with no summative assessment at the end of the academic year. Assessments are designed with principles of authentic assessment in mind. Assessments consist of both low-stakes assessments (low weightings) and high-stakes assessments (high weightings; see Table 1). Assessment

opportunities include a variety of assessment types, including a participation mark for attendance of online classes, quizzes, forum discussions, and essay-type assignments. Each assessment has an opening and a closing date. Timeous marking with cycles of feedback characterises the pacing of assessments. As attendance of online classes is synchronous, and the time of the class may not be convenient for all students to attend, a recording of the online class is made available and students who were unable to attend, have the opportunity to submit responses to a quiz based on the information shared in the online class (an asynchronous assessment opportunity). For students to have meaningful and constructive learning experiences, the feedback from the lecturer is extremely important (Hernández 2012; Vahed et al. 2021). In both modules, feedback is provided after every round of assessment in order to allow students to improve on their next assessments. According to Brown (1999), feedback should have three components. First, students must know what is going to be assessed. This is accomplished by creating non-graded forum discussions which allow for question-by-question support before submissions are due. In this manner, the "feed-forward" principle is applied. Second, students' need feedback on their graded assessments. This is accomplished by grading the assignments. Lastly, feedback to students should help them to address the gap between what they know and what is expected of them. This is accomplished by timeously releasing comprehensive feedback files after every round of assessments to allow students to compare their marked assignments with the feedback provided. This approach simultaneously addresses the learning-oriented approach already proposed by Carless in 2007 (Carless 2007). A learning-orientated approach proposes that a) assessment tasks should be designed as learning tasks, b) feedback that aims to support students should be provided throughout the process of learning – rather than focusing on offering feedback after assessments – and c) students be engaged in managing and monitoring their learning.

Both the modules have their own module page or course site where teaching, learning, and assessments are offered. All teaching and learning activities take place online, and assessments have to be submitted online via the module pages. Table 1 below illustrates the approved assessment plans for the modules, showing the number and type of assessments, as well as the contribution of each to the year mark.

**Table 1:** Assessment plans for CHL2601 and LSP1501

| CHL2601 | | | LSP1501 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Assessments** | **Assessment type** | **Weighting** | **Assessments** | **Assessment type** | **Weighting** |
| Assessment 1 | Online workshop | 1% | Assessment 1 | Online workshop | 3% |
| Assessment 2 | Forum discussion | 2% | Assessment 2 | Forum discussion | 2% |
| Assessment 3 | Quiz | 2% | Assessment 3 | Quiz | 10% |

| CHL2601 | | | LSP1501 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Assessments** | **Assessment type** | **Weighting** | **Assessments** | **Assessment type** | **Weighting** |
| Assessment 4 | Quiz | 10% | Assessment 4 | Quiz | 2% |
| Assessment 5 | Online workshop | 2% | Assessment 5 | Quiz | 2% |
| Assessment 6 | Quiz | 1% | Assessment 6 | Written assignment | 25% |
| Assessment 7 | Written assignment | 25% | Assessment 7 | Quiz | 1% |
| Assessment 8 | Quiz | 2% | Assessment 8 | Quiz | 1% |
| Assessment 9 | Forum discussion | 1% | Assessment 9 | Written assignment | 25% |
| Assessment 10 | Written assignment | 25% | Assessment 10 | Online workshop | 2% |
| Assessment 11 | Quiz | 2% | Assessment 11 | Quiz | 2% |
| Assessment 12 | Quiz | 2% | Assessment 12 | Written assignment | 25% |
| Assessment 13 | Written assignment | 25% | Assessment 13 (elective) | Written assignment | (25%) |
| Assessment 14 (elective) | Written assignment | (25%) | | | |

Each module represents 12 credits, which translates into 120 notional teaching hours (including assessments).

The discussion below demonstrates student participation and performance in the various types of assessments and non-graded activities that are offered as part of the teaching, learning, and assessment plan.

### *Submission of low-stakes assessments*

The low-stakes assessments range from quizzes to forum discussions and participation marks in online classes. If students are unable to attend the online classes (synchronised learning), they can access the class recordings and submit a quiz based on the information shared in the online class (asynchronous learning). Based on the statistics presented in Figures 6 and 7, the level of submission of the low-stakes assignments was, on average, high, as was the general performance. For LSP1501, the students' general performance for the group of low-stakes assessments was 72.67 per cent; for CHL2601, it was 74.22 per cent.

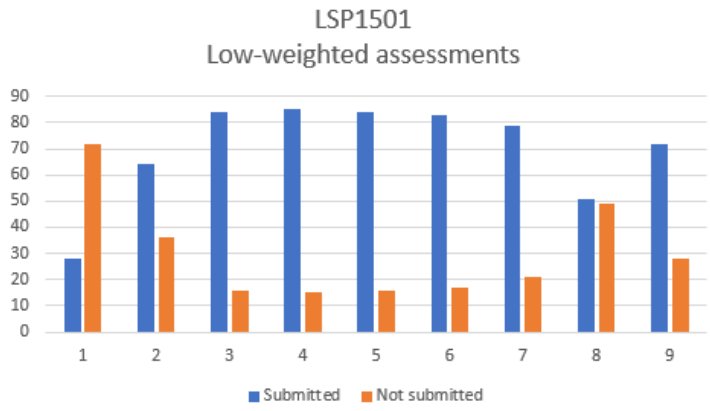


**Figure 6:** Submission of low-stakes assignments for LSP1501 (Source: created by using 2022 course management data on the LMS)

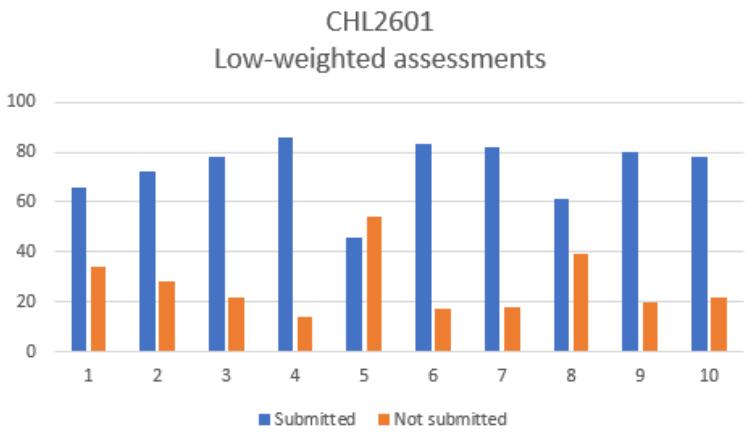


**Figure 7:** Submission of low-stakes assignments for CHL2601 (Source: created by using 2022 course management data on the LMS)

### *Submission of high-stakes assessments*

Each module has three high-stakes assessments and one elective. The format of the high-stakes assessments is that of an essay-type file upload, and each one is graded out of 100 marks. The elective is optional – students can opt to submit the elective if they wish to improve the mark of the lowest of the group of high-stakes assessments. Figure 8 shows that the submission rate for the high-stakes assessments was somewhat lower than that for the low-stakes assessments. Average performance for the four high-stakes assessments was also much lower than for the low-stakes assessments. For CHL2601, the average percentage for the four assessments in this group was 47 per cent, and the average percentage of the four LSP1501 assessments was 42.4 per cent. As the highest three marks for the group of four high-stakes assessments contribute 75 per cent to the year mark, the average mark for the group of high-stakes assessments correlates with the pass rate for each module.

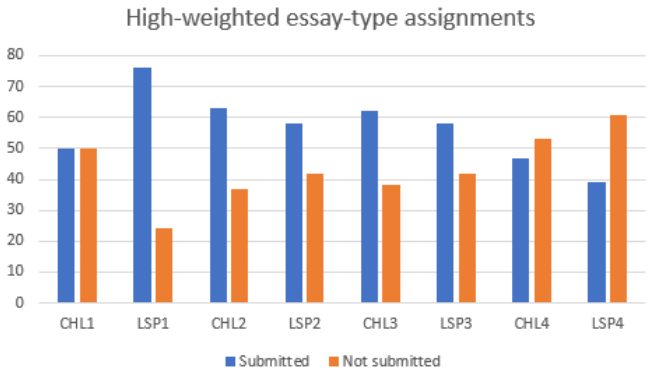


**Figure 8:** Submission of high-stakes assessments for both modules (Source: created by using 2022 course management data on the LMS)

In Schreiber and Yu's (2016) study, education faculty students performed at a significantly lower level when assessed on higher order thinking skills such as their ability to apply, identify, analyse, and synthesise information. This is significant, since the high-stakes assessments in my study focus on exactly these skills.

According to Fynn and Mashile (2022), within the CA system, many students experience assessment overload as they enrol for many CA modules. As many assessments are due on the same date, students consequently resort to plagiarism and cheating, which was found to have occurred in both of these modules. According to Fynn and Mashile (2022), students who juggle full-time employment and studies, find CA modules difficult to manage. Although distance-education students are expected to be able to study independently, and to have a high level of self-directed learning skills, it is a challenge to complete all the online activities in CA.

## Non-graded activities

All assessments, whether formative or summative, graded or non-graded, are designed to improve learning.

The official study material for both these modules takes the form of a study guide. There are no prescribed textbooks. Additional teaching is provided online, in learning units. The statistics provided in Figure 9 demonstrate that only about 4 per cent of students participate in this online teaching.

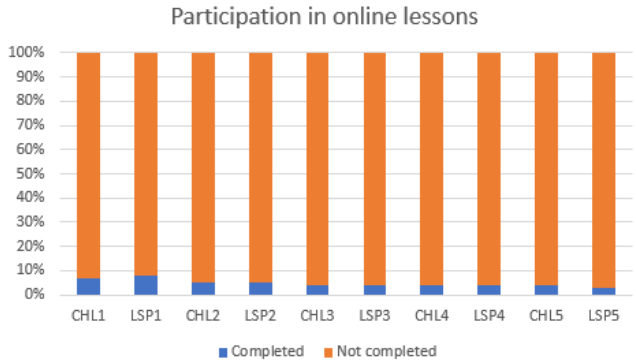


**Figure 9:** Participation in online lessons for both modules (Source: created by using 2022 course management data on the LMS)

In CA, the design of the cycle of teaching and learning allows students to take greater responsibility for their own learning, to manage their time better, and to use the feedback after every round of assessment to reflect on their own learning. Turner and Biggs (2018) find that subsequent assessment performance improves when students receive detailed feedback; however, my experience with the class of 2022 was very different. Students can only benefit from feedback if they access it. According to Schreiber and Yu (2016), the level of student

engagement correlates with student performance. However, Harper and Quaye (2009) caution that engagement is more than merely participation. Real engagement requires dynamic sense-making and the student appropriately responding to the educational activity. Figure 10 shows that this dynamic sense-making probably never occurred because students did not access the feedback.

Participation in the non-graded forum discussions, which were designed to provide feed-forward support as well as feedback, was disappointingly low, with an average of only 4 per cent of students having accessed the information.

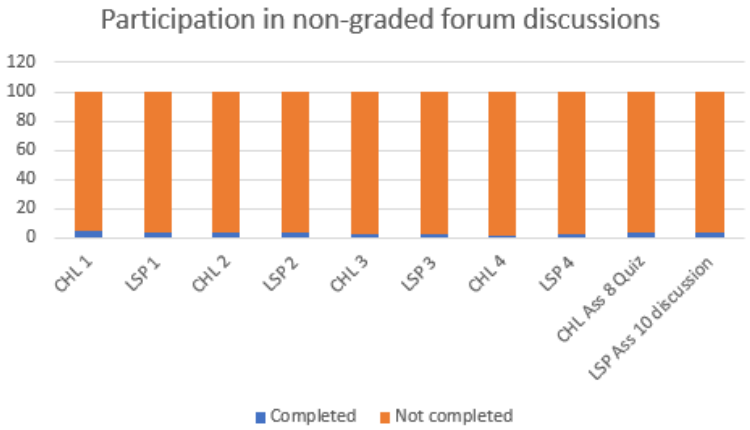


**Figure 10:** Participation in non-graded forum discussions (Source: created by using 2022 course management data on the LMS)

A first observation confirms the findings of research that indicate that students only participate in activities that carry marks (Fynn and Mashile 2022; Holmes 2018).

Second, the low participation rate for non-graded activities shows that most students view assessment in isolation from learning. This experience confirms both Yorke (2007) and Hernández's (2012) observations to the effect that providing grades and feedback does not support formative assessment purposes – students in their studies also ignored the formative feedback and only noted the grades. In their observations, as well as mine, the students regard feedback as a means for lecturers to justify the marks. Assessments themselves have failed to motivate students to engage in deep learning.

This raises the question of how best to enhance students' ability to study independently, develop autonomy as well as the responsibility for monitoring and managing their own learning.

## DISCUSSION

Relative to Luna's (2018) theory of layers of vulnerability and Subotzky and Prinsloo's (2011) socio-critical model for explaining, predicting, and enhancing students' success, the findings of my study confirm that the students who enrolled in my modules in 2022 performed poorly not

because they are financially disadvantaged, but because of many layers of vulnerabilities. These layers of vulnerabilities lie within the domain of the students' contexts, which raises suspicions about the feasibility of intervention strategies and module improvement plans to which the lecturer must commit ever greater efforts to ensure that students perform better.

What became clear from the number of student enquiries after the year marks were released was that many of them failed to understand the effect of the weightings on their final mark. Many students ignored the weighting and calculated their year mark based on an average. They failed to understand that the high-stakes assessments contribute 75 per cent towards their year mark, despite all the communication explaining this.

The "backwash" effect of assessment also became evident. Low participation in the non-graded learning opportunities confirms that student learning is determined by the assessments and not by the curriculum. Although CA practices imply a cycle of teaching, learning, feedback, and assessment, many students were frustrated by the staggered release of the assessments. Student queries after registration all related to the frustration of not being able to access the assessments immediately. They do not want to work through the curriculum – they just need the assessments to get it done and out of the way.

Lastly, the assessments in themselves failed to motivate the students to engage in deep learning. As they were interested only in submission of assessments for the purpose of getting a grade, a significant rise in the number of plagiarised assignments was noted. According to Fynn and Mashile (2022), students perceive CA as being less flexible, and often have more than one assessment due on the same day. Due to assessment-bunching and choke points, more students resorted to plagiarism. In my case, most students who were flagged for plagiarism submitted answer files they bought off a website. This may be an indication that the students are not yet used to working consistently from day one nor use the 120 notional hours of teaching per module effectively.

This study demonstrates that students are unprepared to make the behavioural changes required for CA.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In my experience, it has been a challenge to convert promise into performance. Students need time to adapt to CA practices. According to Holmes (2018), patterns of online learning appear to become fixed early on in students' careers. Although much was done to prepare lecturers and the system to implement CA practices, the students have not been prepared for the change. The findings of this study confirm that the assessment literacy of students – the set of beliefs, knowledge, and practices about assessment and how assessment improves learning and

achievement – requires more focus and time. If this does not occur, the reality of policy implementation may lead to undesirable practices such as a lowering of standards.

Lastly, Wildschut et al. (2020) observe that the particular institution of study matters for the educational outcomes of different social groups in South Africa. Contextual realities matter. Although distance education has been identified as the vehicle for increasing access to institutions of higher learning (Brown et al. 2013), the unintended consequence of this is that it puts at risk the very same students that are targeted for transformation. Too many students who enrol at this open distance-learning institution experience too many layers of vulnerabilities. Although distance learning provides the access so many students desperately need to improve their lives, they are vulnerable and at-risk from the start. Interventions that require greater effort from lecturers are simply ineffective as the degree to which these layers can be minimised or removed falls outside the purview of the lecturer. According to Luna (2018), one should avoid the pitfall of labelling sub-populations as vulnerable, and rather consider a particular situation that makes or renders someone vulnerable. If the situation changes, the person may no longer be considered vulnerable. This raises the question: What needs to change if it is not possible for lecturers to minimise or even remove some of the layers of vulnerability? At policy level, a conversation regarding the view that distance education is the answer for all those seeking access to higher education is desperately needed. Access does not guarantee performance. Contextual realities are a considerable concern. The role of the lecturer within the larger contextual realities at play in distance education needs to be conceived of realistically. Institutions and policy-makers need to have a better understanding of the complex interplay of factors across the academic, personal, social, and institutional contexts at work within distance education, which in turn calls for holistic intervention efforts. If this does not occur, one may want to question the ethics of increasing access to distance-learning institutions yet unintentionally excluding students from the learning process.

In the words of the late Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu, “There comes a point where we need to stop pulling people out of the river. Some of us need to go upstream and find out why are they falling in” (Sandercock 2021). It is unrealistic to expect lecturers to continue to pull students from the river – even though they are trying really hard – without addressing the reasons for students falling in in the first place.

## LIMITATIONS

This study provides a snapshot of learning in two undergraduate modules in education within a distance-learning environment over the course of just one year. A longitudinal study would be well-suited to exploring student behaviour in CA approaches over time. Context strongly

informs the implementation of CA, and the specific implementation discussed in this article may not be relevant to other contexts.

## NOTES

1. In some instances, as with admissions and the pass rate, the pass rate for 2022 was compared with previous years in order to establish a trend.
2. The Department of Basic Education (DBE divides South African schools into five quintiles based on the level of subsidy they receive. The poorest schools (non fee-paying) are in quintile 1 while the wealthiest schools (fee-paying) are in quintile 5 (Roodt 2018).

## REFERENCES

Anderson T. and J. Dron. 2011. "Three generations of distance education pedagogy." *International Review of Research in Online and Distance Learning* 12(3): 80–97.

Bloom, B. S., M. D. Engelhart, E. J. Furst, W. H. Hill, and D. R. Krathwohl. 1956. *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals*. Vol. Handbook I: Cognitive domain. New York: David McKay Company.

Brown, S. 1999. "Institutional strategies for assessment." In *Assessment matters in higher education: Choosing and using diverse approaches*, ed. S. Brown and A. Glasner, 3–13. Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

Brown, M., H. Hughes, M. Keppel, N. Hard, and L. Smith. 2013. "In their own words: Student stories of seeking learning support." *Open Praxis* 5(4): 345–354.

Carpenter, R. and L. Roos. 2020. "Can we afford it? The association between financial aid and time to completion in Accounting Higher Education in South Africa: A literature review." *The Business and Management Review* 11(1): 222–232.

Day, I. N. Z., F. M. Van Blankenstein, P. M. Westenberg, and F. A. Admirall. 2018. "Explaining individual student success using continuous assessment types and student characteristics." *Higher Education Research and Development* 37(5): 937–951.

Carless, D. 2007. "Learning-oriented assessment: Conceptual bases and practical implications." *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 44(1): 57–66.

Darolia, R. 2014. "Working (and studying) day and night: Heterogeneous effects of working on the academic performance of full-time and part-time students." *Economics of Education Review* 38: 38–50.

Department of Higher Education and Training. 2016. *Report on the Second National Higher Education Transformation Summit.* Durban.

DHET see Department of Higher Education and Training.

Dundes, L. and J. Marx. 2007. "Balancing work and academics in college: Why do students working 10 to 19 hours per week excel?" *Journal of College Student Retention* 8(1): 107–120.

Fynn, A. and E. O. Mashile. 2022. "Continuous online assessment at a South African open distance learning e-institution." *Frontiers in Education* 7: 791271.

Hernández, R. 2012. "Does continuous assessment in higher education support student learning?" *Higher Education* 64: 480–502.

Harper, S. and S. Quay. 2009. "Beyond sameness, with engagement and outcomes for all." In *Student engagement in Higher Education*, ed. S. Harper and S. Quay, 1–15. London: Routledge.

Holmes, N. 2018. "Engaging with assessment: Increasing student engagement through continuous assessment." *Active Learning in Higher Education* 19(10): 23–34.

Joubert, Y. T and A. M. Snyman. 2018. "Challenges experienced with online tutoring in an ODL

institution." *Progressio* 39(1): 126–145.

Lewin, T. and M. Mawoyo. 2014. *Student access and success: Issues and interventions in South African Universities*. The South African Institute for Advancement. Cape Town.

Luna, F. 2018. "Identifying and evaluating layers of vulnerability – a way forward." *Developing World Bioth*: 1–10.

Mashile, E. O., A. Fynn, and M. Matoane. 2020. "Institutional barriers to learning in the South African open distance learning context." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 34(2): 129–145.

Mngomezulu, S., R. Dhunpath, and N. Munro. 2017. "Does financial assistance undermine academic success? Experiences of 'at-risk' students in a South African University." *Journal of Education* (68): 131–148.

Neill, C. 2015. "Rising student employment: The role of tuition fees." *Education Economics* 23(1): 101–121.

Poza-Lujan, J. L., C. T. Calafate, J. L. Posadas-Yagüe, and J. C. Cano. 2016. "Assessing the impact of continuous evaluation strategies: Tradeoff between student performance and instructor effort." *IEEE Transactions on Education* 59(1): 17–23.

Republic of South Africa. 2022. *General Household Survey 2021*. Department Statistics South Africa. https://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182021.pdf.

Roodt, M. 2018. *The South African Education Crisis: Giving power back to parents (The South African Institute of Race Relations Report May 2018)*. Johannesburg, South Africa.

RSA *see* Republic of South Africa.

Sandercock, H. 2021. "Archbishop Desmond Tutu quotes: Christian leader's best lines on everything from apartheid to fishing." *National World* 26 December 2021. https://www.nationalworld.com/news/people/archbishop-desmond-tutu-quotes-christian-leaders-best-lines-on-everything-from-apartheid-to-fishing-3507493.

Schreiber, B. and D. Yu. 2016. "Exploring student engagement practices at a South African University: Student engagement as reliable predictor of academic performance." *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30(5): 157–175.

Siebritz, G. 2022. "Unisa under watchful eye as government launces investigation." https://www.careersportal.co.za/news/unisa-under-watchful-eye-as-government-launches-investigation. (Accessed 14 September 2022).

Subotzky, G. and P. Prinsloo. 2011. "Turning the tide: A socio-critical model and framework for improving student success in open distance learning at the University of South Africa." *Distance Education* 32(2): 177–193.

*Times Higher Education*. 2023. "World University Rankings 2022." https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2022/world-ranking.

Tinto, V. 1975. "Dropout from Higher Education: A Theoretical Synthesis of Recent Research." *Review of Educational Research* 45(1): 89–125.

Triventi, M. 2014. Does working during higher education affect students' academic progression? Economics of Education Review 41: 1–13.

Turner, J. and G. Biggs. 2018. "To see or not to see? Comparing the effectiveness of examinations and end of module assessments in online distance learning." *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education* 43(7): 1048–1060.

Unesco. 2021. "Sustainable Development Goal 4 and its targets." https://en.unesco.org/education2030-sdg4/targets.

Unisa. 2013. "Unisa Annual report 2013." Unisa, Pretoria, South Africa. https://www.unisa.ac.za/static/corporate_web/Content/News%20and%20Media/Publications/docs/2013_AnnualReport.pdf. (Accessed 7 April 2022).

Unisa. 2018. "Unisa Annual report. Unisa, Pretoria, South Africa." https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/News-and-Media/Publications/Annual-reports.

(Accessed 7 April 2022).

Unisa. 2020. "Annual report 2020." Unisa, Pretoria, South Africa. https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/News-and-Media/Publications/Annual-reports. (Accessed 7 April 2022.)

Unisa. 2023a. "Unisa: Unisa-and-postgraduate-studies." University of South Africa. https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/Apply-for-admission/Honours-degrees-&-postgraduate-diplomas/ODL,-Unisa-and-postgraduate-studies/Open-Distance-Learning-(ODL)-is-a-different-way-of-learning.

Unisa. 2023b. "Unisa: Facts-&-figures – Student-enrolments." University of South Africa. https://www.unisa.ac.za/sites/corporate/default/About/Facts-&-figures/Student-enrolments.

University World News. 2021. "Court sets aside Unisa lower first-year intake decision." SABC News 13 March 2021. https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20210313122112488.

Vahed, A., M. M. Walters, and A. H. A. Ross. 2021. "Continuous assessment fit for purpose? Analysing the experiences of academics from a South African university of technology. *Education Inquiry* 14(2): 267–283.

Van Broekhuizen, H. and N. Spaul. 2017. "The Martha effect: The compounding female advantage in South African Higher Education." *Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers: WP14/2017*. Stellenbosch. Department of Economics.

Wildschut, A., E. Megbowon, and A. Miselo. 2020. "Impact of funding on academic performance: An exploration of two South African Universities." *Journal of Education* 81: 29–49.

Yorke, M. 2007. *Assessment, especially in the first year of higher education: Old principles in new wrapping?* Paper presented at the REAP international online conference on assessment design or learner responsibility.