



# **Transforming Distance Learning: New Assessment Methods Impact on Student Success in First-year Public Administration at Free State**

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## **Transforming Distance Learning: New Assessment Methods Impact on Student Success in First-year Public Administration at Free State**

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## Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates the impact of revised assessment practices on student success in the first-year online module, Public Administration and Management Theories (EPAM1514), at the University of the Free State (UFS). Historically delivered in a traditional face-to-face format, the transition to online learning presented challenges, particularly in providing timely feedback on assessments. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of constructive alignment and Taylor's principles, this study explores how aligning learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment strategies can improve student success in an online environment. The research employed a qualitative desktop analysis, utilising document analysis and descriptive methods to analyse course documents, assessments, and student performance data. The findings indicate that aligning assessment practices with these principles positively impacts student success, primarily by enabling formative assessments and timely feedback. This approach empowers students to monitor their progress and take ownership of their learning. The study concludes that adapting assessment practices is crucial for enhancing student success in distance learning and emphasises the need for continuous evaluation to maintain alignment with learning outcomes. This research offers valuable insights for both educators and institutions aiming to optimise student learning and performance in online environments.

**Keywords:** Changing assessment practices; constructive alignment; public administration and management; student success; Taylor's.



## Introduction

Founded in 1904, the University of the Free State (UFS) has established itself as a prominent higher education institution in South Africa. It demonstrates a steadfast commitment to providing accessible and flexible education through distance learning (Centre for Teaching & Learning, 2021; UFS, 2020). The institution's journey in distance education is marked by significant milestones, evolving progressively from traditional correspondence methods to technologically advanced, blended, and fully online models. Key achievements include the strategic integration of robust Learning Management Systems (LMS) for 24/7 content access and collaborative tools, the successful adoption of blended learning approaches, and the pioneering of specialised online programmes such as the Advanced Certificate in Teaching (ACT). These advancements are underpinned by notable innovations like the pervasive integration of multimedia content, including interactive simulations and video lectures, and the development of comprehensive online support systems, such as virtual tutoring and digital libraries, facilitated by the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL). This institutional evolution aligns with the broader global phenomenon of online learning, defined by Joshua Stern (2018) as education delivered over the Internet, or 'eLearning', which enables teaching and learning from anywhere, anytime. However, the unprecedented and rapid rate at which this shift to online education has occurred (Hodges et al., 2020), has presented considerable challenges, often proving stressful for many instructors, despite the emergence of highly creative solutions.

Despite these strides, contemporary distance learning environments present myriad challenges for students, particularly impacting teaching and learning dynamics. The unprecedented shift to online education (Hodges et al., 2020; Dysthe, 2014) has amplified issues such as technological barriers, the demand for self-regulation and motivation, feelings of isolation, information overload leading to digital fatigue, and the complexities of work-life balance. These broader challenges are often exacerbated by prevailing assessment practices, where a continued reliance on traditional methods like written examinations and essays (Dikli, 2003) poses logistical hurdles for academic integrity and timely feedback, and often proves inadequate for authentically assessing practical skills and real-world application of knowledge (Kulieke et al., 1990). Furthermore, a critical contributing factor is the observed lack of instructor proficiency in leveraging the full spectrum of online assessment tools. At the same time, basic functions like grading may be digitised (Llamas-Nistal et al., 2013). Still,

many educators remain underequipped to design and implement diverse, secure, and effective online assessments that foster higher-order thinking and personalised knowledge application (Boud, 2007).

To address these assessment-related issues and enhance student learning outcomes, it is imperative to clarify fundamental assessment concepts and adopt innovative practices. Formative assessment serves as an ongoing process to monitor student learning and provide continuous feedback, guiding improvement. In contrast, summative assessment evaluates overall learning at the conclusion of a unit or course. In online learning, these concepts necessitate adapted approaches. Suggested improvements include authentic assessments (case studies, simulations, project-based learning), which mirror real-world applications and enhance engagement; formative feedback loops and low-stakes quizzes for continuous guidance; peer and self-assessment to foster critical thinking; e-portfolios for holistic skill demonstration; and collaborative assessments to build community and teamwork skills. It is pertinent for distance learning institutions to adopt these practices to resolve assessment problems effectively. Such adoption is crucial for genuinely enhancing educational quality and addressing the unique challenges faced by remote learners. The benefits include significantly improved student learning outcomes, as authentic assessments enhance the relevance and applicability of learning, ensuring graduates possess market-driven skills (UFS, 2020). The emphasis on continuous, formative feedback, as advocated by Black and Wiliam (1998), empowers students to take greater ownership of their learning, leading to deeper understanding and higher retention rates (Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2022).

Lack of knowledge on the use of online assessment tools has become a call for attention when it comes to the successful teaching and learning in the assessment of students. Students attend assessment sessions and are tested the traditional way, however, grading, reporting of results, and statistical analysis are performed digitally (Llamas-Nistal et al., 2013). The study focused on the following objectives:

- To examine the impact of changing assessment practices on student success in the first-year Public Administration and Management (EPAM1514) module in an online learning environment at UFS.
- To assess the effectiveness of online formative assessments in enhancing student engagement, motivation, and performance in distance learning.



- To evaluate the alignment of assessments with learning outcomes and their impact on student understanding and retention of course material.
- To provide insights and recommendations for lecturers and institutions seeking to enhance student success in distance learning through the revolutionization of assessment practices.

The EPAM1514 module at UFS's Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences serves as a prime case study for this transformation. This first-year module, historically delivered through traditional face-to-face methods, has recently undergone significant innovation in its delivery and assessment, including a strategic overhaul to support a 'community of inquiry' model and the integration of simulation-based case studies and virtual work-integrated learning (WIL) modules (Botha & Mbeki, 2021; Centre for Teaching and Learning, 2022). While previous student achievement was foundational, it may have been constrained by traditional assessment paradigms. Therefore, it is imperative to empirically verify if these new assessment techniques, which align with the faculty's commitment to research-driven curriculum development and fair assessment mechanisms (Phejane, 2022; UFS, 2020), lead to demonstrable improvements in student learning outcomes, particularly in achieving module objectives such as distinguishing public administration from public management and understanding theoretical developments.

This verification is crucial for distance education provision to ensure pedagogical innovations genuinely enhance educational quality. Observing these changes and their implications is vital for all critical stakeholders in distance education, namely students, instructors, administrators, and policymakers. It informs continuous improvement, resource allocation, and the strategic evolution of flexible learning pathways that meet the demands of a dynamic public sector, ensuring the module's assessment practices are fair, reliable, authentic, and flexible. The study focused on the following research questions:

- How does changing assessment practices impact student success in the EPAM1514 module in an online learning environment at the UFS?
- How can aligning learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessments promote successful student teaching and learning on online platforms?
- To what extent do formative assessments enhance student engagement, motivation, and performance in distance learning?

A qualitative research case study methodology was employed to answer the above research questions and objectives to explore the impact of changing assessment practices on student success in first-year EPAM1514 in an online learning environment at UFS.

## Theoretical framework

The rapid rise of distance learning has necessitated a critical re-evaluation of assessment practices within higher education. For this study, constructive alignment, paralleled with Taylor's institute for teaching and learning principles of effective and meaningful online assessments, was incorporated into the theoretical framework to analyse the relationship between assessment practices, learning outcomes, and student success in the EPAM1514 module.

Rooted in learning theories developed by Bruner (1990), Dewey (1916), Piaget (1972), and Vygotsky (1978), constructivism-learning theory is defined as the active creation of new knowledge based on a learner's former experience. Woolfolk (1993) states that the key idea is that students actively construct their knowledge; the student's mind mediates input from the outside world to determine what the student will learn, and learning is active mental work, not passive reception of teaching. Therefore, constructive alignment becomes an outcomes-based approach to teaching where the learning outcomes students intend to achieve are defined before teaching occurs. Teaching and assessment methods are then designed to best practice, to achieve those outcomes, and to assess the standard at which they have been achieved (Biggs, 2014; Rundle, 2016).

Constructive alignment is a theoretical framework widely used to develop effective assessment practices in higher education. It involves aligning learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessments to ensure that all components of the educational process work together to achieve the desired learning outcomes. According to Biggs and Tang (2011), constructive alignment is particularly important in distance learning as it provides a framework for ensuring that assessments are aligned with the learning objectives and that students are adequately prepared to meet the assessment requirements. Constructive alignment, proposed by Biggs (Goodyear, 2005), underlines the critical need for aligning learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessments. This emphasis recognises that effective learning relies on a seamless interplay between what learners aim to achieve (outcomes), how they are guided towards those goals (activities), and how their progress and understanding are evaluated (assessments).



Constructive alignment aims to guarantee that students effectively acquire the desired knowledge, skills, and values by ensuring a coherent connection between these elements.

This alignment ensures that assessments accurately measure the desired learning outcomes and that teaching activities effectively support students in achieving them. According to Biggs and Tang (2011), implementing constructive alignment in distance learning environments positively impacts student engagement, motivation, and success. This framework provides a foundation for evaluating the impact of changing assessment practices in the EPAM1514 module. Constructive alignment is a crucial framework for aligning learning, activities, and assessments for effective learning. It emphasises clear communication of outcomes, activities relevant to those outcomes, and assessments that measure their achievement. The alignment is particularly beneficial in distance learning, ensuring assessments are relevant and students are prepared.

Taylor's principles, derived from study on successful distance education, emphasise the importance of creating interactive and engaging learning experiences, providing timely feedback, offering robust learner support, and maintaining clear organisational structures (University of Calgary, 2021). For interactive engagement through clear communication, the success of distance learning hinges on fostering interactive and engaging environments, as highlighted by Taylor's (University of Calgary (2021) principles, which align with the emphasis on clear communication within effective assessment practices (University of Calgary, 2021). Both frameworks promote active student engagement by ensuring transparency in assessment criteria, learning objectives, and expectations. Students equipped with a well-defined roadmap are empowered to navigate the course content actively and participate meaningfully in online discussions and collaborations.

To achieve meaningful feedback as a cornerstone for improvement, both Taylor's principles and effective assessment practices underscore the importance of timely and constructive feedback. Such feedback, as envisioned by University of Calgary (2021), serves as a cornerstone for student improvement. Well-designed assessments, adhering to principles of reliability and clarity (University of Calgary, 2021), offer opportunities for precisely this type of feedback. By enabling instructors to provide specific and actionable feedback based on student performance, these assessments support individual learning journeys and enhance student satisfaction. Integrating Taylor's principles with effective assessment practices, fosters a synergistic approach to distance learning

success. By combining an engaging learning environment with clear communication and meaningful feedback through well-designed assessments, educators can empower students to take ownership of their learning and achieve successful outcomes. According to Taylor's principles, enhancing student success in online learning is the institute's core. Taylor's principles further guide enhancing student success in online learning environments. These principles focus on clear communication, active student engagement, and meaningful feedback. Clear communication ensures that students comprehensively understand course expectations, assessment criteria, and learning objectives. Below (Table 1) is a combined illustration of Biggs' (2014) and Taylor's (University of Calgary, 2021) principles:

**Table 1: Comparison of Biggs and Taylor's principles of assessment**

<b>Principle (Biggs, 2014)</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Taylor's Principle (University of Calgary, 2021)</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Alignment with Learning Outcomes</b>	Communicate learning outcomes to students. Ensure they understand what knowledge, skills, and abilities they are expected to demonstrate.	Focus on Learning	Assessment tasks should directly measure student learning and promote the development of desired competencies.
<b>Alignment with Learning Activities</b>	Assessments should directly relate to the learning activities undertaken by students, which reinforces acquired knowledge and skills.	Balance Structure with Flexibility	Assessments should provide a clear framework while allowing for diverse learning styles and approaches.
<b>Opportunities to Demonstrate Achievement</b>	Provide students with opportunities to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes through relevant tasks and assessments.	Clear Instructions and Quality Feedback	Assessments should have clear instructions and provide timely, specific, and constructive feedback to guide student learning.

Principle (Biggs, 2014)	Description	Taylor's Principle (University of Calgary, 2021)	Description
		Alternative Forms of Assessment	Consider incorporating various assessment methods (e.g., essays, quizzes, simulations, presentations) to cater to different learning styles and assess diverse skills.
		Promote Academic Integrity	Assessments should be designed to minimise the potential for cheating and plagiarism while encouraging honest and independent work.

The theoretical framework for the current study synthesises Biggs' (Goodyear, 2005) principles of constructive alignment with Taylor's guidelines for effective online assessment, offering a comprehensive lens for examining the link between assessment practices and student success in distance learning. Constructive alignment posits that learning is most effective when intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessments are coherently aligned. This provides a foundation to evaluate whether assessments in the EPAM1514 module correspond with its objectives. Taylor's principles complement this by emphasising clarity, flexibility, and the creation of meaningful learning experiences tailored to online learners.

As illustrated in Table 1, the integration of these frameworks forms a holistic approach, ensuring that assessments accurately reflect learning outcomes, teaching activities effectively prepare students, and guidance and feedback support learner success. The model also incorporates practical considerations, including alternative assessment methods and the promotion of academic integrity, bridging theoretical

principles with the operational realities of online education. By combining these perspectives, the framework establishes a robust, multi-dimensional model for evaluating and enhancing assessment practices, ensuring both pedagogical alignment and practical applicability within distance learning contexts.

## Literature review

### The challenges and opportunities of assessment in the evolving landscape of South African online learning

As highlighted in the presented research, the rise of online learning (e-learning) at South African institutions necessitates a critical examination of assessment practices in this evolving educational landscape. Students' Access to and Use of Learning Materials (SAULM) 2020 survey report, the abrupt move from traditional modes of teaching and learning to online platforms such as Blackboard and QuestionMark assessment platforms, showed difficulties that have been encountered (UFS, 2020). For example, it has become increasingly difficult for students to catch up on their tasks and succeed in their studies. Therefore, the lack of knowledge on using online assessment tools has become a call for attention when it comes to successful teaching and learning in the assessment of students.

Distance learning has emerged as a transformative mode of education, offering the potential to transform teaching and learning practices. As South African institutions increasingly adopt online learning platforms, there is a need to examine the impact of changing assessment practices on student success within these environments. Distance learning, also known as e-learning, has gained momentum globally due to its potential to increase the accessibility and affordability of education (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

In South Africa, the shift towards online learning has been accelerated by the need to expand educational opportunities to a larger number of students (Bennett, 2018; Ramsden, 2003). The transition from face-to-face instruction to online delivery has posed challenges for lecturers and students, particularly in assessment practices (Zawacki Richter et al., 2019). Asynchronous communication and limited opportunities for immediate feedback have been identified as major obstacles (Dennen & Burner, 2008). To address these challenges, aligning learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessments become crucial.

Smith and Johnson (2021) showed how alternative assessments like performance-



based tasks, simulations, and collaborative projects benefit students in distance learning programmes. The research highlighted that these methods increased student engagement, fostered critical thinking skills, and ultimately led to improved academic achievement (Andrade, 2017). Their findings suggest that moving beyond traditional assessments in online learning environments can positively impact various aspects of student success (Bennett, 2018; Smith & Johnson, 2021).

Furthermore, a comprehensive review by Brown and Thompson (2022) explored the role of technology in redefining assessment practices in higher education. Their analysis revealed that the integration of digital tools and platforms, such as online quizzes, interactive assignments, and virtual simulations, enhances the authenticity and relevance of assessments, leading to improved learning outcomes and increased student satisfaction (Andrade, 2017; Brown & Thompson, 2022; Salmon, 2013; Wilson et al., 2016).

According to Goodyear (2005), Biggs posited that assessment practices that relate to learning targets and teaching activities provide a cohesive learning experience, boost student engagement, and ultimately lead to greater student achievement. In online learning, constructive alignment can guide in designing effective assessment practices that support student success (Phillips & Schaffhauser, 2016). For instance, a study by García-Peñalvo et al. (2020) on online assessment practices found that aligning assessments with learning outcomes positively influenced student performance and satisfaction.

Similarly, Lim and Morris (2009) demonstrated that incorporating interactive and authentic assessments improved student engagement and learning outcomes in online courses. Furthermore, Brown and Thompson (2022) conducted a detailed analysis of the influence of technology in redefining assessment practices in higher education. The research (Brown & Thompson, 2022) found that incorporating digital tools and platforms such as online quizzes, interactive assignments, and virtual simulations improves the authenticity and relevance of assessments, resulting in better learning outcomes and higher student satisfaction.

## **Distance learning and the advantages thereof**

Distance learning, often facilitated through online platforms, offers numerous advantages for students and institutions (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). These advantages can be broadly categorised into increased flexibility, improved accessibility, and

potential cost reduction. Increased flexibility means that distance learning platforms allow students to access course materials and complete coursework at their own pace and convenience (Simonson et al., 2019). This flexibility is particularly beneficial for students with work or family commitments, allowing them to pursue their education without disrupting their existing schedules (Moore et al., 2011).

Improved accessibility indicates that online learning eliminates geographical barriers, making education more accessible to students residing in remote locations or those unable to attend traditional on-campus classes (Bates, 2019). This expanded access can contribute to a more diverse student body and increased educational equity (Rumble, 2012). Lastly, potential cost reduction denotes that e-learning has the potential to reduce costs associated with education for both students and institutions. Students may save on expenses like transportation and accommodation, while institutions can benefit from reduced costs related to physical infrastructure maintenance and classroom resources (Rovai, 2003; Allen & Seaman, 2017). These advantages, along with the increasing availability of technology and online learning platforms, have prompted South African universities, including UFS, to adopt online learning to enhance educational opportunities and cater to the evolving needs of a diverse student population.

## Challenges in assessment practices in distance learning

While distance learning offers various advantages, it also presents unique challenges regarding assessment practices (Jonassen, 2012; Picciano et al., 2017). Effective assessment is critical to evaluating student learning and progress, however, online contexts necessitate adaptations to traditional assessment methods. Limited feedback opportunities mean the absence of face-to-face interaction in distance learning environments can hinder the ability to provide immediate feedback to students (Gronlund & Brookhart, 2008). This lack of real-time feedback can impede student development and engagement, as timely feedback allows students to identify and address any misunderstandings or areas requiring improvement (Sadler, 1989).

Academic integrity concerns indicate that increased flexibility and autonomy inherent in online learning can raise concerns regarding academic integrity, such as plagiarism and cheating (Simonson et al., 2019). The ease of access to online information and the potential for collaboration outside of the instructor's direct supervision dictate the implementation of robust measures to ensure the authenticity



of student work (Chen & Li, 2015). These challenges highlight the need for lecturers to carefully design and implement assessment strategies tailored to the online learning environment. By incorporating various assessment methods, fostering interaction and communication, and utilising appropriate safeguards against academic dishonesty, educators can promote effective assessment practices that contribute to meaningful learning outcomes in online courses.

## Method

This qualitative research case study employs document analysis and descriptive methods to investigate the impact of changing assessment practices on student success in first-year EPAM1514 in an online learning environment at UFS. According to Fleming and Zegwaard (2018), a qualitative approach is a way to conduct qualitative research in general. This study described the purpose of a qualitative study through explicitly or implicitly analysing data, and the researcher being an integral part of the process.

The research design for this study is a qualitative desktop research case study. It was chosen because it allows for an in-depth exploration of the impact of changing assessment practices on student success in an online learning environment. The case study approach is useful in exploring complex phenomena and allows for collecting data from multiple sources, which can provide a rich and detailed description. The case study method can be used as both a teaching and research strategy. A single intrinsic case study design (Stake, 1995; Lieberman & Lin, 2017) involving qualitative data collection in line with the interpretive research paradigm is followed (Tight, 2012).

## Data collection

This qualitative case study employed document analysis and descriptive methods. Data for the study were systematically collected from a variety of sources to ensure a comprehensive overview of assessment practices and their impact on student success. These materials included official course documents such as assignments and rubrics, as well as semester tests and aggregated student marks. These materials were obtained from UFS's Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences website, the Learning Management System (Blackboard), and directly from the course coordinator. Permission to use the module and access to anonymised student data was

formally obtained from the EPAM1514 course leader. This process was conducted in accordance with the ethical clearance granted by the General Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) at UFS (Record number UFS-HSD2024/0442), ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of all participant information.

## Data analysis

The data analysis for the current qualitative case study was conducted through a rigorous descriptive thematic analysis, following the systematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013) and Nowell et al. (2017). The process was a structured and systematic method for deriving the study's core findings. It began with familiarisation, involving an intensive immersion in the collected data to gain a comprehensive understanding of its content (Elo et al., 2015). This was followed by initial coding, where preliminary labels were systematically assigned to segments of text and data that represented salient features or concepts relevant to the research questions. These initial codes were then grouped into broader, potential themes during the search process for themes stage, where recurring patterns and interrelationships were identified. The identified themes subsequently underwent a review process to ensure they accurately and comprehensively represented the entire dataset. Finally, each theme was precisely defined and named, articulating its essence and significance in addressing the research questions. This systematic process allowed for a transparent and structured identification of core ideas and recurring patterns within the data, thereby providing a robust foundation for the study's findings and conclusions.

Furthermore, the research sought to evaluate the assessment reliability, assessing the consistency and dependability of the new online approaches in yielding comparable results under similar conditions. A key analytical dimension involved examining assessment authenticity, determining the extent to which the redesigned online assessments genuinely mirrored real-world tasks and applications pertinent to the public administration discipline. The assessment flexibility was also a central concern, exploring the adaptability and accessibility of these new methods for a diverse cohort of distance learning students, considering their varied contexts and technological access. Beyond these specific assessment attributes, the study aimed to identify recurring challenges and benefits encountered by both students and instructors during the implementation and ongoing utilisation of the online assessment framework. Ultimately, the investigation sought to derive broader implications for distance education provision, offering insights into how the evolving assessment practices



within the EPAM1514 module could inform future strategies and policies at UFS and other higher education institutions engaged in distance learning.

## Results

### The EPAM1514 module

The EPAM1514 module is available as a first-year module at UFS's Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences. This module was previously delivered in a traditional face-to-face teaching-learning-and-assessment. In the module, the outcomes are determining the origins of the public administration field, identifying the major contributors to the study discipline, distinguishing between public administration and public management, and establishing the development of theories and approaches related to administration and management. The main reason why the EPAM1514 module is used in the current case study, is because of the phenomenon of moving from traditional methods of assessment to online assessment, and to determine whether the module's assessment practices are fair, reliable, authentic, and flexible according to the principles of online assessments. The study collected data from various sources, including course documents, semester tests, and student marks. The findings are presented under the following themes:

### The impact of changing assessment practices on student success

This study investigated the impact of changing assessment practices on student success in the first-year EPAM1514 module offered through online learning. The findings revealed a positive correlation between the implementation of new assessment methods and improved student learning outcomes. A key factor contributing to this success was the incorporation of formative assessments, such as online quizzes and discussions. These frequent, low-stakes assessments served several purposes aligned with the principles of effective online assessment (Biggs, 2014; University of Calgary, 2021). Formative assessments allowed students to monitor their progress throughout the course, providing them with a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses in the learning objectives (Sadler, 1989). These assessments functioned as learning activities, helping students solidify their understanding of course material through practice and application (Biggs, 2014).

Furthermore, the timely feedback provided by lecturers on these formative assessments was crucial for student success. Research emphasises the importance of

constructive feedback in online learning environments, as it allows students to address any misunderstandings or areas requiring improvement before summative assessments (Gronlund & Brookhart, 2008). By receiving prompt feedback on their formative work, students were empowered to adjust their learning strategies and ultimately achieve better results in summative assessments. The study found that changing assessment practices positively impacted student success in the EPAM1514 module by about 5%. Using formative assessments, such as quizzes and online discussions, helped students monitor their progress and identify areas that needed improvement. Students also appreciated the timely feedback provided by lecturers, which helped them address their weaknesses before summative assessments. The positive feedback on the new assessment practices aligns with the concept of assessment for learning (Wiliam & Black, 1998). This approach emphasises the use of assessment to guide and improve student learning rather than solely for grading purposes. By actively engaging with formative assessments and receiving timely feedback, students in the EPAM1514 module were equipped to take ownership of their learning and demonstrate their understanding of the course material more effectively.

## Challenges of implementing changed assessment practices

While the study revealed a positive impact of changing assessment practices on student success, it also highlighted some challenges faced by lecturers during implementation. These challenges offer valuable insights for lecturers considering the transition to online assessments. One key challenge identified was the lecturers' lack of familiarity with online assessment tools. Designing and delivering effective assessments require a strong understanding of the functionalities and limitations of these tools (Picciano et al., 2017). Lecturers who are unfamiliar with online assessment tools may struggle to create assessments that accurately measure student learning outcomes or utilise the full potential of these tools for engaging students (Simonson et al., 2019). This highlights the importance of providing faculty development opportunities to equip lecturers with the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate online assessment tools effectively. Workshops or training sessions focused on designing and implementing online assessments which can empower lecturers to overcome these challenges and leverage the benefits of technology to enhance student learning (Chen & Li, 2015).

The current study also revealed technical difficulties experienced by some students during online assessments. These technical issues, such as Internet connectivity problems, can negatively impact student performance and create feelings of frustration

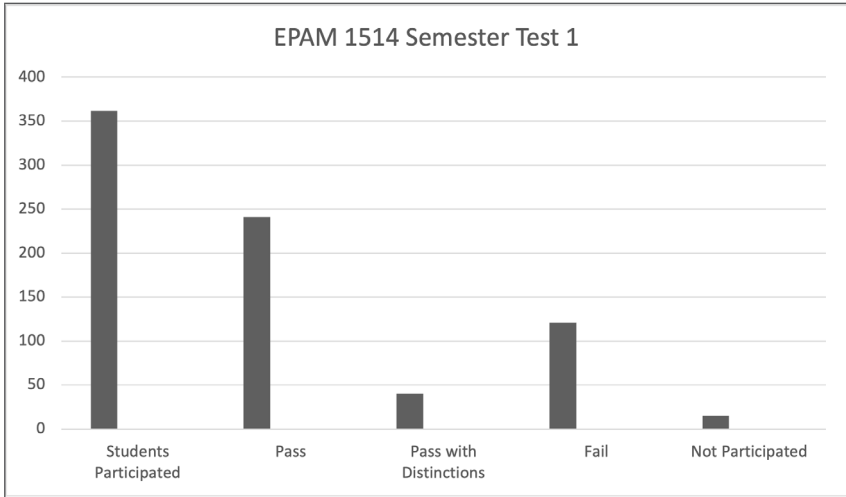


(Simonson et al., 2019). To mitigate these challenges, lecturers can implement strategies such as providing clear instructions on system requirements and troubleshooting tips beforehand (University of Calgary, 2021). Additionally, offering alternative assessment options or allowing students to retake assessments in case of technical difficulties can help ensure a fair and equitable learning environment (Picciano et al., 2017). The current study also identified some challenges lecturers faced when implementing changed assessment practices. The lecturer was unfamiliar with online assessment tools, making it difficult to design and deliver assessments effectively. Some students also experienced technical difficulties with the online assessments, which affected their performance.

### Results for online semester tests, assignments, and quizzes

While there is insufficient historical data for the EPAM1514 module, important insights were first gathered through correspondence with a former instructor in the Department of Public Administration and Management. However, the instructor is no longer affiliated to UFS, and no formal departmental paperwork proving module-level performance during that period is publicly available. According to the 2018 Annual Learning and Teaching Report, the Department of Public Administration and Management passed around 80% of its undergraduate modules. Although this figure does not break down data by module and so, does not directly reflect performance in EPAM1514, it is a good approximation for general first-year module success rates throughout that academic year. It is crucial to note that this data does not break out pass rates by specific modules or cohorts; thus, it cannot directly confirm the performance numbers for EPAM1514 in 2018 or 2019. As a result, in the absence of more detailed data, the departmental average serves as a contextual comparison. Figure 1 is a representation of the data made available at the time of the study:

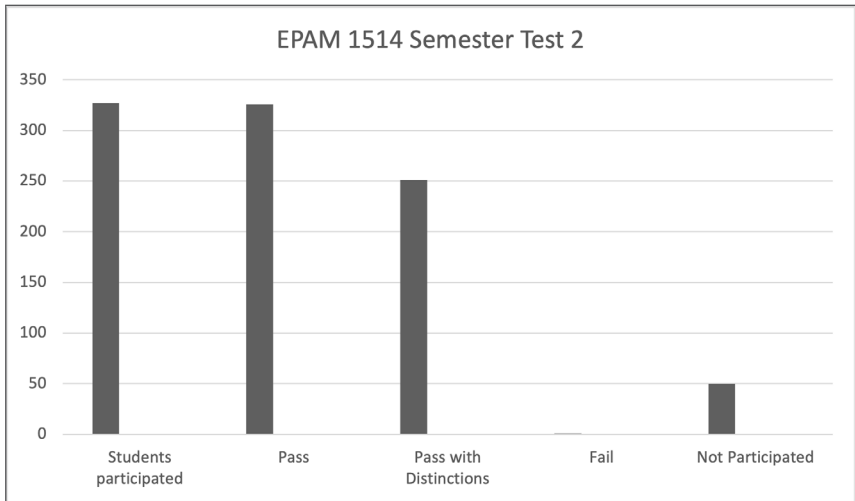
<b>Students participated</b>	362
<b>Pass</b>	241
<b>Pass with Distinction</b>	40
<b>Fail</b>	121
<b>Not Participated</b>	15



**Figure 1: Illustration of the online semester I students' pass rate**

Figure 1 provides a quantitative overview of student performance on the first semester test. The accompanying table details that out of 362 participants, a total of 241 students passed, with 40 achieving a distinction. In contrast, 121 students did not pass. The histogram provides a visual representation of the score distribution, with the highest concentration of students in the 50–59% range. This data indicates that the first semester test was a successful assessment for a large portion of the student body.

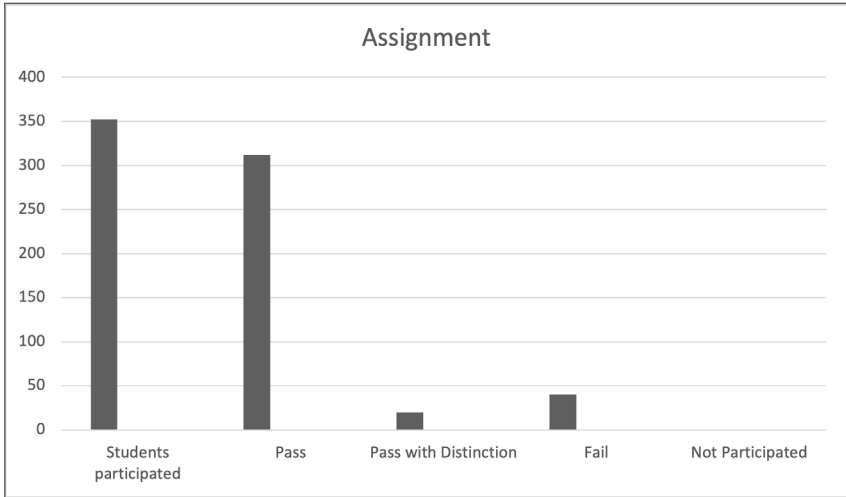
<b>Students participated</b>	327
<b>Pass</b>	326
<b>Pass with Distinction</b>	251
<b>Fail</b>	1
<b>Not Participated</b>	50



**Figure 2: Illustration of the online semester test 2 students' pass rate**

Figure 2 provides a quantitative summary of student performance on the second semester test. The table breaks down the results, showing that out of 327 participating students, a total of 326 passed and 1 did not pass. The accompanying histogram provides a visual representation of the score distribution. It indicates that the scores were primarily concentrated in the 70-79% and 80-89% ranges, highlighting that most of the students successfully navigated this specific assessment.

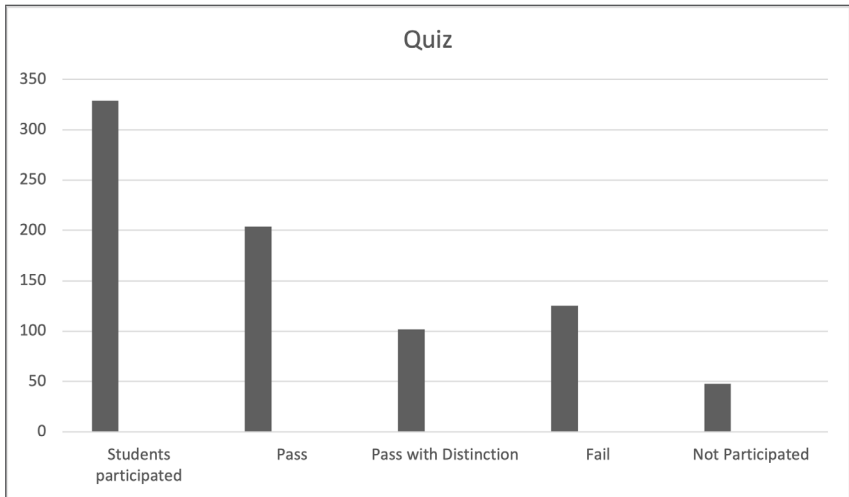
<b>Students participated</b>	352
<b>Pass</b>	312
<b>Pass with Distinction</b>	20
<b>Fail</b>	40
<b>Not Participated</b>	25



**Figure 3: Illustration of the online assignment students' pass rate**

Figure 3 provides a quantitative overview of student performance on the online assignment component of the module. As per Figure 3, out of 352 participants, a significant majority of 312 students passed, with 20 achieving a distinction. In contrast, 40 students did not pass. The histogram illustrates this success, showing a distribution of scores with the highest concentration of students in the 50-59% range. This data indicates that the online assignment was a highly successful assessment for a large portion of the student body, with many achieving top marks.

<b>Students participated</b>	329
<b>Pass</b>	204
<b>Pass with Distinction</b>	102
<b>Fail</b>	125
<b>Not Participated</b>	48



**Figure 4: Illustration of the online quiz students' pass rate**

Figure 4 provides a specific quantitative breakdown of student performance on the online quiz component of the module. The accompanying table reveals that out of 329 participating students, a total of 204 passed, while 125 did not pass. Notably, the data shows that 102 students passed with distinction, highlighting a significant number of high-performing students. The table further indicates that 48 students did not participate in the quiz. The histogram visually reinforces these statistics, showing a bimodal distribution of scores with prominent peaks in the 70–79% and 80–89% ranges. This graphical representation underscores the high achievement of a large portion of the students on the quiz. This result stands in contrast to the overall final exam results shown in the other image.

### Importance of alignment with learning outcomes

When assessments are meticulously crafted to mirror the course's learning objectives, students gain a clear understanding of what is expected of them and how they can achieve success (Biggs, 2014). The alignment serves to empower students by clearly communicating learning outcomes and aligning assessments accordingly. Students are empowered to take ownership of their learning journey. They can actively engage with course materials and assessments, accurately knowing what knowledge, skills, and abilities they are expected to acquire (Biggs, 2014). Another key purpose is focused

learning, wherein alignment ensures that assessments are not isolated events, but rather serve as learning activities themselves. Students can focus their efforts on mastering the skills and knowledge that will be directly assessed, leading to a more targeted and efficient learning experience (Biggs, 2014). Demonstrating achievement also shows that aligned assessments provide students with a platform to effectively demonstrate their understanding of the learning outcomes. Students can showcase their knowledge and skills through tasks and assessments directly related to the course objectives (Biggs, 2014).

Alignment between assessments and learning outcomes is particularly crucial in online learning environments, because the absence of face-to-face interaction can make it more challenging for students to gauge their progress and identify areas needing improvement (Gronlund & Brookhart, 2008). By aligning assessments, lecturers provide a clear roadmap for students, allowing them to navigate the online learning experience with greater clarity and purpose. The positive impact of aligned assessments aligns with the concept of assessment for learning (William & Black, 1998). This approach emphasises using assessments to guide and improve student learning, rather than solely for grading purposes. When assessments are aligned with learning outcomes, they become valuable tools for both students and lecturers. Students gain a deeper understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, while instructors can monitor student progress and adjust their teaching strategies as needed (Sadler, 1989). When assessments were aligned with learning outcomes in EPAM1514, students were able to understand what was expected of them and how to achieve the desired learning outcomes.

## The need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation

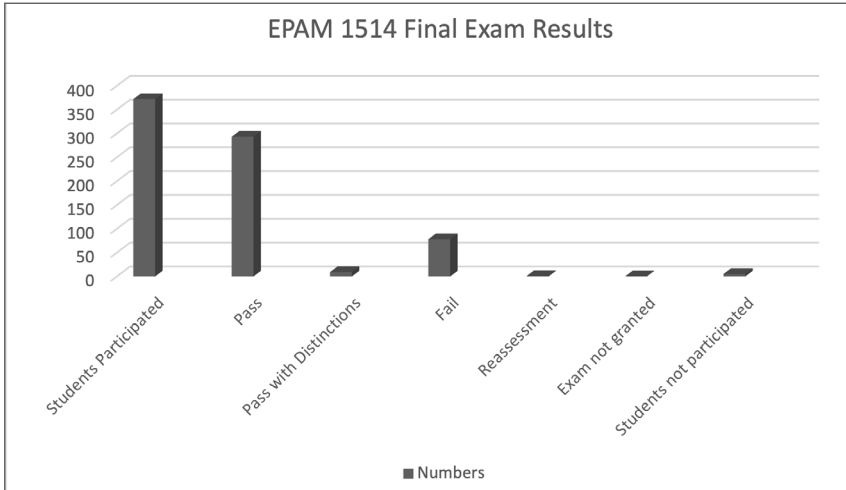
The current study emphasises the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation in online assessment practices to ensure continued alignment with learning outcomes and successful student learning support. The process of ongoing evaluation and adaptation is essential for maintaining alignment in an educational landscape that is constantly evolving, and learning outcomes may need to be adjusted accordingly. Regularly evaluating assessments helps to identify potential misalignments and ensures that assessments continue to accurately reflect the current learning objectives (Biggs, 2014). Another reason ongoing evaluation and adaptation are essential, is for evolving student needs and preferences that change over time. By continuously evaluating assessments, educators can identify areas for improvement and adapt assessment



methods to better cater to diverse learning styles and technological advancements (Picciano et al., 2017). Lastly, ongoing evaluation and adaptation are essential for maximising effectiveness, wherein the online learning environment itself is subject to change. New technologies and assessment tools emerge frequently, and ongoing evaluation allows lecturers to remain current in their practices and adapt assessments to leverage the most effective and engaging online tools available (Simonson et al., 2019). The emphasis on ongoing evaluation aligns with the principles of assessment for learning (William & Black, 1998). Just as student learning is a continuous process, so too should be the evaluation and adaptation of assessment practices. By engaging in this ongoing cycle, educators can utilise assessment, not only to measure student achievement, but also to identify areas for improvement and refine their teaching strategies to promote deeper learning (Sadler, 1989).

### Overall EPAM1514 results

<b>EPAM1514 Final Exam Results</b>	<b>Numbers</b>
<b>Students Participated</b>	372
<b>Pass</b>	293
<b>Pass with Distinctions</b>	9
<b>Fail</b>	78
<b>Reassessment</b>	1
<b>Exam not granted</b>	0
<b>Students not participated</b>	5



**Figure 5: Overall EPAM1514 results**

Figure 5 provides a quantitative summary of student performance in the EPAM1514 module. The table offers a clear breakdown of key outcomes, revealing that out of 372 participants, 293 students passed the module, whilst 9 students passed with distinction and 78 students did not pass. The data also reflects that one student required a reassessment, and five students did not participate in the final exam. The histogram visually reinforces these numbers, illustrating the distribution of student scores. It highlights that the largest concentration of students achieved scores in the 50-59% and 60-69% ranges, providing a more detailed look at the final grade spread within the module.

## Discussion

The findings of the current study suggest that changing assessment practices can contribute to student success in an online learning environment and provide valuable insights for lecturers seeking to optimise online learning environments and promote student success. Using formative assessments and timely feedback can help students monitor their progress and improve learning outcomes. The findings revealed a positive correlation between the implementation of new assessment methods and improved student learning outcomes. A key factor contributing to this success was the incorporation of formative assessments such as online quizzes and discussions. These frequent, low-stakes assessments served multiple purposes aligned with the principles of effective online assessment (Biggs, 2014; University of Calgary, 2021).

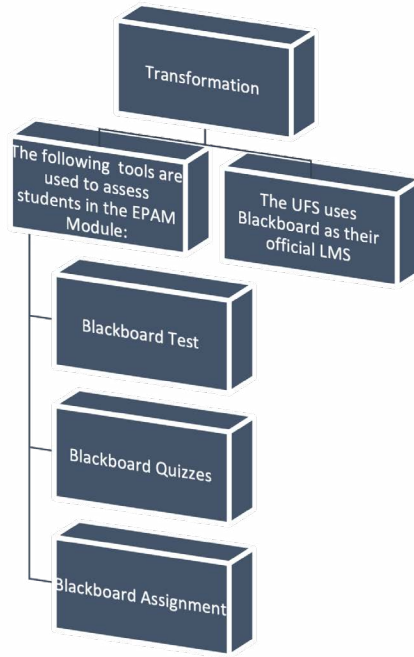


Firstly, formative assessments allowed students to monitor their progress throughout the course, and this ongoing feedback provided a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses with the learning objectives (Sadler, 1989). Secondly, these assessments functioned as learning activities themselves, helping students solidify their understanding of course material through practice and application (Biggs, 2014). Furthermore, timely feedback provided by lecturers on these formative assessments was crucial for student success. Research emphasises the importance of constructive feedback in online learning environments, as it allows students to address any misunderstandings or areas requiring improvement before summative assessments (Gronlund & Brookhart, 2008). By receiving prompt feedback on their formative work, students were empowered to adjust their learning strategies and ultimately achieve better results in summative assessments.

The positive student response to the new assessment practices aligns with the concept of assessment for learning (William & Black, 1998). This approach emphasises the use of assessment to guide and improve student learning rather than solely for grading purposes. By actively engaging with formative assessments and receiving timely feedback, students in the EPAM1514 module were equipped to take ownership of their learning and demonstrate their understanding of the course material more effectively.

The findings of the current study add to the growing body of research that highlights the benefits of using diverse assessment methods in online learning environments (Picciano et al., 2017). Moving beyond traditional exams and essays towards formative assessments like quizzes and discussions fosters a more interactive and engaging learning experience for students (Simonson et al., 2019). This engagement, coupled with timely and constructive feedback, can significantly contribute to improved student success in online courses. The study also highlights the importance of alignment with learning outcomes and the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of assessment practices.

## Transformation: The LMS and Online assessment tools



**Figure 6: A transformed EPAM1514 teaching, learning and assessment structure**

The information reflected in Figure 6 visually grounds the study within its specific technological context. The figure illustrates that UFS uses Blackboard as its official LMS, which serves as the central platform for online learning and assessment. Within this environment, the diagram highlights the three primary modalities used for assessment in the EPAM1514 module: Blackboard tests, Blackboard quizzes, and Blackboard assignments. This visual representation provides a clear and concise overview of the institutional tools under investigation, connecting the theoretical discussion of assessment practices directly to the operational environment of the study.

The study also underscored the critical role of alignment between assessments and learning outcomes. When assessments are meticulously crafted to mirror the course's learning objectives, students gain a clear understanding of what is expected of them and how they can achieve success (Biggs, 2014). This alignment empowers students, promotes focused learning, and allows for a more effective demonstration

of achievement. In online environments, where face-to-face interaction is limited, ensuring a strong alignment between assessments and learning outcomes is particularly crucial for student success (Gronlund & Brookhart, 2008).

Finally, the research emphasises the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of assessment practices (Picciano et.al, 2017). The educational landscape, student needs, and technological advancements are constantly evolving. Regularly evaluating assessments helps to ensure they remain aligned with learning outcomes and cater to diverse learning styles and the latest online tools available (Simonson et al., 2019). This continuous process aligns with the principles of assessment for learning, allowing educators to refine their assessment practices and create a dynamic online learning environment that fosters deeper student learning and success.

## Conclusion

This study explored the impact of implementing new assessment practices in the first-year EPAM1514 module offered through online learning at UFS. The findings contribute significantly to the ongoing transformation of distance learning by demonstrating the positive impact of these new methods on student success. A key advantage of the revised assessment practices was the incorporation of formative assessments, such as online quizzes and assignments, wherein these frequent assessments provided students with timely feedback, a feature often lacking in traditional face-to-face learning environments. This prompt feedback allowed students to identify areas needing improvement and adjust their learning strategies accordingly, ultimately leading to stronger performance (Gronlund & Brookhart, 2008).

The study also highlighted the importance of alignment between assessments and learning outcomes by ensuring a strong correlation between these elements; students gained a clear understanding of what was expected of them and how they could achieve success (Biggs, 2014). This alignment empowered students, fostered focused learning, and allowed for a more effective demonstration of their knowledge (Biggs, 2014). In online environments, where face-to-face interaction is limited, a strong alignment between assessments and learning outcomes is particularly crucial for student success (Gronlund & Brookhart, 2008). Furthermore, the research emphasised the need for ongoing evaluation and adaptation of assessment practices (Picciano et al., 2017). The educational landscape, student needs, and technological advancements are constantly evolving; therefore, regularly evaluating assessments helps to ensure they

remain aligned with learning outcomes and cater to diverse learning styles and the latest online tools available (Simonson et al., 2019). This continuous process aligns with the principles of assessment for learning, allowing educators to refine their practices and create a dynamic online learning environment that fosters deeper student learning and success.

The positive outcomes of the current study hold significant implications for lecturers and institutions seeking to enhance student success in distance learning environments. To effectively implement these changes, universities should provide training and support for both lecturers and students. Equipping lecturers with the necessary skills to use online assessment tools and align assessments with learning outcomes is crucial for creating an environment conducive to student success (Picciano et al., 2017). Additionally, supporting students in navigating online assessments and using feedback effectively can further enhance their learning experience. In conclusion, the current study demonstrates the transformative potential of new assessment methods in online learning environments. It contributes to the ongoing transformation of distance learning by demonstrating the positive impact of new assessment methods on student success in the public administration module at UFS. By incorporating formative assessments, providing timely feedback, ensuring alignment with learning outcomes, and embracing ongoing evaluation and adaptation, educators can create a more engaging and effective online learning experience, ultimately leading to a brighter future for both students and distance learning programmes.

## Limitations

A significant limitation of the current study is its reliance on a single case study design, which inherently restricts the generalisability of the findings to other modules, faculties, or institutions. The insights are derived from a single module, EPAM1514, within the Faculty of Economic and Management Sciences at UFS, thereby limiting the scope of its applicability.

Furthermore, the study is constrained by a notable absence of direct, verifiable, and module-specific historical data. The study's analysis of a previous pass rate is based on a contextual approximation, drawing on correspondence with a former instructor and a general departmental average from the 2018 Annual Learning and Teaching Report. The reliance on an unconfirmed historical baseline prevents a conclusive, quantitative comparison of performance before and after the intervention. Consequently, any



assessment of improvement is predicated on an inferential framework, rather than a direct empirical one. This limitation, rooted in the availability and comprehensiveness of historical data, necessitates caution when interpreting the magnitude of the observed positive impact on student success.

## Recommendations

The current study highlights the need for institutions to regularly review and adapt their assessment practices. Distance learning is a dynamic and evolving field, and as such, assessment practices should be continually evaluated to ensure they align with changing needs and technological advancements. Ongoing evaluation and adaptation will enable institutions to provide effective learning support and promote successful student outcomes in public administration and management. Institutions can enhance student success in online learning environments by changing assessment practices and aligning them with learning outcomes. By implementing these recommendations, lecturers and institutions can play a crucial role in facilitating student success and promoting a more accessible and affordable education system.

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