African Perspectives of Research in Teaching & Learning 5(1): (2021) APORTAL VOL5 (1)

Evaluation of an academic support workshop on assessment by hospitality lecturers at a university in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Assessment of and for learning plays a critical role in helping students achieve the intended learning outcomes, as well as providing a mechanism with which to determine the extent to which learning outcomes have been attained. Without pedagogically sound assessment strategies, lecturers and universities will not succeed in their roles of promoting student learning and success. Consequently, research into assessment and how it is understood by academics needs to be foregrounded. The aim of the study was to assess perceptions of hospitality lecturers on the efficacy of a workshop on assessment conducted at a university in South Africa. A qualitative research design was used, in which the written responses of 5 purposively selected participants were used to evaluate the workshop. An open-ended questionnaire was used to collect data from participants. Data were analysed using thematic content analysis and verbatim statements from participants. The results indicated that participants benefited from the workshop and intended to use formative, summative and criterion-referenced assessment in the evaluation of learning outcomes. The need to capacitate university lecturers on how to design and implement differentiated assessment strategies was therefore the major recommendation of the study.

Key words: formative assessment; summative assessment; criterion-based assessment; measurement; learning.

INTRODUCTION

University lecturers operate within a challenging area of professional practice, as they are normally expected to possess both discipline-specific and educational expertise in order to function effectively (Council on Higher Education, 2016; Machingambi, 2020; Maphosa and Mudzilwana 2017). Paradoxically, most universities worldwide continue to hire academics on the strength of their research capacity and not on their pedagogical grounding. This largely explains why academic professional development (APD) has emerged as an area of practice in higher education (HE) so as to help academics acquire the critical pedagogical

skills, theories and competencies that would enhance their facilitation of learning strategies. Of necessity, conceptualisations of APD across the world and within the country vary as universities try to respond to different teaching and learning contexts, institutional cultures, curriculum transformation, forces of globalisation, diminishing resources, community educational needs and changes in student demographics. However, they share the common vision of trying to influence the quality of teaching and learning with a view to enhancing student learning outcomes.

At the international level, the search for a solid conceptualisation of APD, its purpose and philosophy was most intense during the period 1979-2000 (Frick and Kapp, 2007). In New Zealand, APD programmes centred mostly on the need to improve teaching. They were mainly championed by units or centres created within the universities. However, these were largely peripheral endeavours, as the APDs were not strategically positioned to have the desired impact on improving teaching, learning and assessment (Akerlind, 2007). The work on APD in the US is brought into the spotlight by researchers such as Lieberman (2005) who depict APDs as laboratories for learning in universities.

In the South African Higher Education system, academic development is mostly championed by teaching and learning centres. These are strategic units which have various designations across universities. Some universities refer to these units as Academic Support Units, Centre Teaching and Learning, Centre Excellence in Teaching and Learning or Centre for Higher Education Research, Teaching and Learning. These units or departments carry out research that helps lecturers improve their teaching assessment methods (Matthews, Duck, and Bartle, 2017). There is a need to continue offering teaching and learning support and enhancement services to ensure that teaching, learning and assessment activities are sustainable and effective. Teaching and learning departments in universities perform evaluations for lecturers to assess teaching ability and the departments help lecturers in designing teaching content that is suitable or appealing to students. Content that is appealing, engaging and well-structured helps students to like lectures, which usually results in high lecture attendance (Subbaye and Dhunpath, 2016).

This study looked at perceptions of hospitality lecturers of an academic support workshop on assessment. The content of the workshop included formative assessment, summative assessment, criterion-referenced assessment, the use of taxonomies in assessment, and the backwash effect of assessment.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Concept of educational assessment and its permutations

Assessment is defined by Brown (2004) as the process of collecting, measuring, analysing, synthesising and information about student interpreting performance, which could be collected through a variety of practices and tools in relation to curricula objectives. Assessment information could be obtained using a range of practices and assessment instruments both quantitative and qualitative, such assignments, tests, examinations, class quizzes, oral presentations, portfolio exhibits and practical demonstrations. Closely related to the issue of assessment is the concept of measurement. evaluation and Bachman (2004) conceives evaluation as a process of allocating a numerical value to traits associated with students' performance. The concept of measurement largely finds expression in assessment models that result in the allocation of points, scores or percentages.

Testing (or examining) is a type of assessment consisting of a set of questions administered during a fixed time under reasonably comparable conditions for all students (Miller, Linn and Gronlund, 2009). Evaluation is conceived by Vandeyar and Killen (2007) as the process of making

judgements about the worth of something and is concerned with the quality of a measured result. In other words, evaluation forms part of assessment, and assessment is the practice of judgement. Assessment is regarded as a powerful tool that can either enhance or hinder students' learning. It is therefore critical that assessment should be well understood and conducted in a pedagogically sound manner. Ghaicha (2016) maintains that whatever model of assessment a lecturer selects, adopts or adapts for his/her classroom assessment practice, it should be:

- (a) guided by a theory of how learning happens
- (b) aligned with the outcomes of the learning that is being assessed.

Brown (2004) identifies key aspects for an effective classroom assessment as including the following:

- (a) It must have clear standards and criteria
- (b) It must involve multiple measures
- (c) It must communicate assessment results
- (d) It must enable the use of assessment data to inform teaching and learning

This resonates well with the criteria for high quality assessment that require assessment measurements not only to be compatible with a variety of instructional models, but also to assist in addressing important educational decisions (Biggs and Tang, 2011). Crotty (1994) and Lopez and Pasquini (2017) advance the view that classroom tasks should be predicated on reallife tasks that call for the use of higher-order thinking skills by students. This is the essence of authentic (contextual) assessment, which Bell and Cowie (2001) contend should involve intellectually engaging tasks that assess a wider range of learning outcomes through various assessment modes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The backwash effect of assessment

The backwash effect of assessment is an embodiment of the belief that the quickest way to change the learning outcomes and the way students learn is to change the form of assessment (Biggs, 1987). This is an acknowledgement of the tremendous role of assessment in shaping the learning of students. As Boud (1995) contends, if assessment tasks are set to evaluate critical and deep understanding, this will predispose students to approach their studies in a critical and deep manner. Similarly, if students are assessed through tasks which call for reproduction of what was presented in lectures, this give rise to a narrow instrumental approach to learning that is understanding devoid of deep independent activity. Lecturers' beliefs about learning and assessment and how the two are related need to change if they are to deliver appropriate assessment. In other words, a lecturer's views and practices of assessment is a reflection of his/her beliefs about what it means to have learned something (Posser and Trigwell, 1999).

Formative assessment

Formative generally assessment encompasses all activities undertaken by teachers and learners that provide information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities (Black and William 1998; Anderson, 2017). It is sometimes referred to as an ethereal and multifaceted concept that could imply selfassessment, peer-assessment or interim assessment (Dunn and Mulvenon, 2009).

Some regard it as an informal assessment in which the lecturer interacts with students to have a sense of what they can do and the problems they are facing in their learning.

Evaluating students' understanding of the subject matter regularly throughout a teaching unit enhances learning and it helps lecturers adjust their teaching methods in accordance with the students' learning needs or performance (Pinger, Rackoczy, Besser and Klieme, 2017). In this context, formative assessment is associated with assessment, which leads to self-regulated learning and peer-assessment, and which improves learning through peer-assisted learning (Anderson, 2017). Lecturers adjust their teaching methods and students adjust their information acquisition skills based on the feedback they get during formative assessment (Anderson, 2017). Formative assessment helps lecturers identify student needs through the provision of teaching and learning exercises such as tests, quizzes or essays. Students could use the feedback they get to inform the lecturer about their understanding of the content taught and areas in which they encounter difficulties. The involvement of learners in teaching and assessment, which is referred to as shared assessment, contributes positively to student learning and academic growth (Lopez-Pastor and Sicilia-Camacho, 2016). Formative assessment is assessment for learning, which could be improved using feed-forward techniques. These involve giving feedback with specific direction on how to improve performance on subsequent or future tasks of a related nature. Feed-forward should be used timeously and constructively to improve performance on the next assignment (Hine and Northeast, 2016).

Summative assessment

Summative assessment is an evaluation of learning. It tends to focus on a limited number of cognitive outcomes, thereby reducing the content of the curriculum (Lopez and Pasquini, 2017). Summative assessment comes at the end of the course, teaching unit or a teaching period and it emphasises tests, examinations and grades (Lopez-Pastor and Sicilia-Camacho, 2016). The purpose of summative assessment is to establish the overall achievement of a student on a particular course. The characteristics of summative assessment are that it is done at intervals when achievement has to be reported and it is performed to show learning progress against set criteria (Harlen and James, 1997). It utilises reliable assessment methods that do not compromise validity and it takes stock of quality assurance procedures. Summative assessment relies on material that is taught or covered during teaching and learning to examine students' understanding of the subject matter (Harlen and James, 1997). The dominance of summative assessment in higher education is perceived with mixed feelings. There is a negative sentiment in tertiary education, locally and abroad, that high-stakes testing is not good for learning, as students would be preoccupied with getting good grades and passing to such an extent that they might not be interested in studying material that is not included in a test or examination (Harrison, Konings, Schuwirth, Wass, and van der Vleuten, 2017). High-stakes testing as assessment of learning or summative assessment results in sanctions for students who fail and rewards for successful students. The penalty could be in the form of low grades, exclusion from the deregistration from the university, failing to

graduate on time, failure to secure scholarships, bursaries, government study grants such as the National Student Financial AID Scheme (NSFAS) or expulsion from the university.

Criterion-referenced assessment

Criterion-referenced assessment involves judging each student's work against set standards or criteria without regard to the performance of other students in the same class (Lok, McNaught, and Young, 2016). The majority of students, even all students, could get distinctions as long as they meet the set assessment standard, and in the same way the entire class could fail when the assessment criterion is not met. Grade inflation occurs when the majority of students are awarded distinctions, and when most graduates obtain distinctions for a particular degree. Grade inflation could erode public confidence in the qualifications churned out by universities (Lok et al., 2016). Criterion- referenced assessment rubrics are used to make sure that student responses are judged on the set criteria (Burton, 2015). Criterion-referenced assessment rubrics provide details of standards by which students' assignments are assessed (Broadbent, Panadero and Boud, 2017). The rubrics show the expected outcomes that a student should meet. The assessment protocol shows evaluative criteria, quality definition and a scoring strategy (Broadbent et al., 2017). Students use the rubrics to evaluate their own work before submitting their work for assessment by the lecturer (Broadbent et al., 2017). This is a democratic process that shows the responsibility of the student to adhere to the requirements of the task and the responsibility of the lecturer to mark work based on shared criteria or standards kept by both the student and the lecturer. This is done to ensure fairness, reliability and validity of assessment as grades are linked to the marking criteria.

Use of Bloom's taxonomy in assessment

Bloom's taxonomy has hierarchical levels of complexity that a student goes through during learning and mastery of the subject matter. Students demonstrate mastery when they reach the peak of the reasoning pyramid. Bloom's six cognitive levels, starting with the lowest, are knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis. synthesis and evaluation (Forehand, 2010). Bloom's taxonomy has been revised and the new hierarchical structure starting with the lowest level is as follows: remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating (Forehand, 2010). The first level - that is, knowledge or remembering - represents lower level of thinking. It requires students to remember or demonstrate knowledge through recalling, recognising, identifying naming, or (Ramirez, 2017). Another lower level of reasoning up the cognitive ladder is comprehension or understanding. A lecturer operating at this level would ask students to understand, explain, paraphrase, summarise examples give to demonstrate comprehension of the subject matter (Ramirez, 2017). Higher levels of thinking application (applying), analysis (analysing), synthesis` (evaluating) and evaluation (creating). Application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation denote the old cognitive structure, while applying, analysing, evaluating and creating represent the revised cognitive structure. Tasks requiring higher levels of thinking at application level have questions that use a new but similar situation (Ramirez, 2017). At analysis level, students are expected to deconstruct perspectives, explore options and to parse data in a way that shows ability to down information into simple, understandable units (Ramirez, 2017). The characteristics of assessments at synthesis level are tasks that ask students to create, generate, design or formulate phenomena. At the apex of the cognitive pyramid is the evaluation level. At this level student are expected to 'critically examine' or 'make informed judgement' (Ramirez, 2017). Lecturers incorporate the taxonomies into the tasks that students work on in order to accommodate students at different cognitive levels.

Statement of the Problem

Traditionally, assessment has been viewed narrowly as a terminal activity that is meant to measure understanding and certify students. The role of assessment was thus reduced to that of certifying existing knowledge and giving students feedback on current learning. Little or no attention was paid to the role of assessment in promoting learning for the longer term, which is the essence of sustainable assessment. Sustainable assessment focuses not only on content, but also on the processes of learning and how students would continue to learn and solve learning problems beyond the timescale of a given course or module (Boud and Soler, 2016). Lecturers are therefore encouraged to think beyond the immediate classroom context and design assessments that prepare students for a lifetime of learning and work. The aim of the study was to assess hospitality lecturers' perceptions of a workshop on assessment and how they would use assessment knowledge to improve teaching and learning for the longer term.

METHODOLOGY

This study was located within a qualitative research methodology, since it sought to gain a deeper understanding of how hospitality lecturers felt about the efficacy of a workshop on assessment and how the acquired experiences would influence their future approach to teaching in general and assessment in particular. McMillan and Shumacher (2020) contend that qualitative research enquires into the ways in which people interpret and derive sense from what they have experienced. **Oualitative** methodology was considered appropriate, since it enabled the researcher to collect and interpret detailed narrative data from the participants through an unstructured questionnaire. The use of open-ended questions was therefore key to the generation of rich, descriptive data that forms the mainstay of qualitative research.

The research employed a crosssectional design in which data collection occurred at one time without pre-test and post-test assessments. The study was a case study in which one comprehensive university in South Africa was involved. Creswell (2013) contends that qualitative research uses strategies of inquiry such as narratives and case studies to gain detailed descriptions of reality. Neuman (2011) conceives a case study as a method in which the researcher explores one setting, or single subject, or one event. The views of hospitality lecturers based on their experience of an academic support workshop on assessment guided the findings.

Participants and sampling

The convenience sampling strategy was used to engage with the responses of 10 hospitality lecturers who had fully participated in the academic support workshop on assessment that was conducted at the university under study. Participants to the workshop were recruited by email and the purpose of the workshop was explained to all prospective participants. Each lecturer attended once and only the responses of those lecturers who attended the workshop in full were conveniently selected, since these would provide a complete picture of what was needed. The workshop was conducted in two training sessions with seven participants attending each session. This was meant to accommodate the large group of lecturers in the section as well as promoting interaction amongst the participants. The sample comprised seven males and six female academics teaching in the school of hospitality.

Instrument

An open-ended questionnaire that sought to elicit hospitality lecturers' perceptions about the usefulness of the assessment workshop was developed and completed by each willing participant at the end of the workshop. The items on the questionnaire required participants to express their rich views and narratives on the usefulness of the assessment workshop to their teaching, learning and assessment. The researchers analysed the detailed responses to evaluate the perceived usefulness of the assessment workshop.

Procedure and ethical considerations

Participants attended the sessions after consenting to participate in the assessment workshop. At the end of the academic workshop, participants voluntarily completed the questionnaire that was distributed to them as a means of evaluating the workshop. Participants were informed that they were required to share their honest views on the workshop, as their views were critical in improving the quality of future workshops offered by the Academic Support Services Division of the university. They were informed that their views would be kept confidential. Anonymity was guaranteed, as no names of participants were written on the questionnaire and none would appear on any part of the study.

DATA ANALYSIS

analysed Data were using interpretational analysis approach (Gall et al., 1996). This refers to examining the data for themes, patterns and constructs that can be used to describe and explain the issue being studied. First the individual responses from each participant were read and analysed several times to become familiar with the data (Bryman, 2012) and to form a clear understanding of the information. The data were coded using open coding and. analysed inductively thereafter, examining it closely to develop patterns, themes and categories (Creswell, 2009). Common themes were developed for the combined data for all participants. Thematic content analysis coupled with verbatim statements from the participants were therefore the main mechanism by which data were analysed.

FINDINGS

Data for this study were subjected to the interpretational analysis approach (Gall et al., 1996) The following key themes were developed to guide the presentation of findings: usefulness of the workshop, the use of assessment to influence students' learning styles, usefulness of Bloom's taxonomy, types of assessment and strategic use of assessment to influence students' approaches to learning.

Usefulness of the assessment workshop

Participants were generally agreed that the assessment workshop was very empowering, as it helped them to acquire useful assessment skills, knowledge and competencies in the design of a variety of assessment tasks and instruments. Many participants indicated that they were ready to apply the knowledge they gained, not only to enhance their assessment skills, but to improve student learning outcomes in general. The following responses were representative:

I learnt how to assess students effectively, I have been doing surface teaching and I now want to focus on the application. (Participant 9)

The workshop should be made compulsory for all academics, as it empowers them in their facilitation and assessment activities. (Participant 9)

The strategic use of assessment to influence students learning habits

Academics were asked to share their understanding of how the assessments can be used strategically to influence students learning approaches. It emerged that several senior academics were familiar with how assessment tasks can be set in such a way that students change their approach to their studies. The quotations below were representative:

By setting your tests and assignment in a certain way, you are actually communicating to your students the way you would like them to approach their studies. For instance, if you want your students to adopt the problembased learning approach, then design your assessment tasks around problems. (Participant 5)

The best way to test students how to prepare a sauce in Hospitality is to ask them to demonstrate practically. You cannot assess this meaningfully through multiple-choice questions. (Participant 10)

However, the early career academics were not aware of the use of assessment to influence students' patterns of studying. For instance, some new lecturers indicated that their choice of an assessment is determined by the class size and convenience of marking.

Forms of assessment

Participants indicated that the assessment forms they learnt were useful and relevant to their work and they explained how they would use formative assessment, summative assessment, norm-referenced criterion-referenced assessment and assessment to improve teaching, learning and assessment activities. It also came to light that before the workshop, many participants had a narrow view of assessment, viewing it as a separate activity that comes at the end of a learning phase. The following responses were typical:

Formative assessment is a teaching strategy that helps the lecturer to prepare students for formative assessment. Before students are able to tackle tests and examinations (summative assessment), they need to be supported, guided, given feedback, which is the essence of formative assessment. (Participant 7)

The need to blend the use of different assessment strategies in line with student diverse needs was underlined. With regards to the distinction between formative and summative assessment, participants indicated that each of these plays a significant role in students' learning. In this way, it became clear that there is no single assessment strategy or method that is sufficient on its own. The integration of a variety of assessment strategies was therefore seen as key to effective teaching.

I was impressed with how I would be able to set outcomes for the course and the examination for the course. To test the achievement of these outcomes, I would need to assess students summatively. However, I need to guide, coach and mentor my students during every lesson or practical so that they are helped to realise the stated learning outcomes. This day-to-day coaching and mentoring require me to employ formative assessment. (Participant 7)

Criterion-referenced assessment appealed to participants. Participants raised the concern that it is not always easy for them to align their assessment with the learning outcomes and what is taught, which is the essence of criterion-referenced assessment. The workshop was therefore regarded as offering space for academics to acquire skills of aligning teaching with assessment. Their responses were supportive.

Criterion-referenced assessment helps me in setting learning outcomes and what assessment tasks to include and students will know what they will be assessed on in the test and examination. (Participant 10)

When students know the assessment criteria, I will be better equipped to do effective assessments with my students. (Participant 7)

It gives me confidence, as students would know what they would be assessed on and how. This makes all learning transparent and ethical. (Participant 7)

Bloom's taxonomy

Bloom taxonomy was already known to several academics, but they had challenges with implementing it, particularly at the higher levels. Academics raised the concern that it was not always easy to balance the questions in an assessment in accordance with Bloom's level of complexity. The following comments were noteworthy:

The challenge with our diverse classes, if you set too many questions at the higher order level, the students will fail and the lecturer is in trouble. If you set many questions at the lower levels of Bloom's taxonomy, all students will pass and this raises questions about the suitability of the paper. (Participant 9)

Timing of assessment

It was indicated by participants that training on assessment should be done before much teaching and learning starts, preferably at the beginning of the year. This was in recognition of the importance of the workshop to the lecturers. Selected comments can help clarify the point:

The workshop on assessment is empowering and should be held before any teaching starts in the faculties. (Participant 4)

The workshop should be made compulsory to all lecturers as it capacitates them in their teaching. (Participant 6)

Training workshops on assessment should be held regularly. (Participant 1)

Training should be done during periods when lecturers are relaxed. (Participant 10)

Training should not be done during examination time. (Participant 4)

DISCUSSION

From the findings, it is evident that the key to effective assessment is aligning learning outcomes with what is taught and what is assessed. This requires university teachers to state desired outcomes in the form of criteria that students are expected to achieve. As Biggs (2003) succinctly expresses, matching individual students' performances against set criteria requires making holistic judgments. This is the essence of criterion-referenced assessment, which is made even more effective through the use of criterion-referenced rubrics. The use of criterion-referenced rubrics helps make assessment democratic, progressive and fair. When students are given rubrics containing the dimensions on which they would be assessed, chances of student acrimony and complaints about marks diminish.

The study has shown that it is critical for all academics to be aware of the way in which assessments can be used to influence students learning, which is the essence of the backwash effect of assessment. Thus, the decision on which assessments to use in class needs to be informed by the impact of that

type of assessment on the students' future learning, and not on the mere ease of marking on the part of the academic. This links up very well with what Briggs and Tang (2011) refer to as constructive alignment, whereby all that is learned in class should be well related to what is taught in class and how it is taught (Anderson, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2014).

Although formative assessment was reported as useful in ensuring that assessment of outcomes is performed regularly so that feedback is used to improve subsequent learning activities (Anderson, 2017), it was accorded a low status as compared to summative assessment. This means that academics need to align their beliefs about formative assessment with practice on the ground. The limited use of formative assessment strategies in universities as compared to summative assessment gives credence to the argument that the university assessment system is still disproportionately examination centred. Without dismissing the value of summative assessment, it is crucial to point out that feedback, which is central to formative assessment, benefits both the lecturer and the student in improving the quality of teaching, learning and assessment (Pinger et al., 2017).

It is therefore critical to point out that while summative assessment remains vital, it should not become the dominant assessment strategy in the university (Lok et al., 2016).

It emerged that the principle of Bloom's taxonomy, while known to many academics, continues to present implementation challenges to academics, particularly at the higher levels of the taxonomy. There is therefore a need for more professional development programmes on

the incorporation of Bloom's taxonomies in the design of teaching, learning and assessment tasks. It is suggested in this study that poor student performance and inflated marks are associated with the lecturer's inability to mix questions in such a way that students are assessed on low, average and high cognitive skills (Forehand, 2010).

Educational Implications

This study has important implications for educational practice in general and assessment in particular. The fact that assessment influences the manner in which students approach their studies serves as a reasonable justification for universities to invest more in the continuous professional development of their staff in teaching, learning and assessment.

Lecturers should use various forms of assessment in order to stimulate and sustain the learning needs of their diverse student population. Assessment should be conducted on a continuous basis so that students could benefit from the feedback they receive to improve their academic performance. Examinations, tests and assignments should take into account Bloom's taxonomy so that all students' learning styles and cognitive abilities are accommodated in teaching, learning and assessment processes.

CONCLUSION

This study assessed the perceptions of hospitality lecturers on the efficacy of a workshop on assessment conducted at a university in South Africa. This study builds upon the existing knowledge on promoting quality student learning by exploring the issue of assessment and how it is conceptualised and implemented by academics in the school of hospitality at a

particular university in South Africa. Its empirical findings and the literature on current assessment practices in HE point to the need to engage academics in professional development programmes on assessment so as to develop their knowledge and skills as effective university teachers. The study has depicted assessment as a lever that does not only students' measure level understanding or skills level, but also influences the manner in which they approach their studies. It is therefore important that academics develop the necessary competencies to design, implement and evaluate pedagogically sound assessment protocols in their programmes. This places capacity development of academics in the ofassessment development, implementation and evaluation at the centre of the academic enterprise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Arising from the findings of this research, the following recommendations are made to inform higher education teaching practice in general and assessment of learning in particular. It is recommended that universities conduct induction programmes and short courses for academics that foreground the essence of assessment planning, implementation and evaluation. This is important, given the fact that many university academics are primarily employed on the strength of their disciplinary expertise, but with very little pedagogical grounding. Engaging academics professional in development on sound assessment practices will therefore be critical to the enhancement of effective professional practice and ultimately student learning outcomes. It is also suggested that universities actively promote the use of learning communities as spaces to enable university teachers to share,

critique and validate existing teaching and assessment practices in their programmes, schools and faculties with a view to enhance overall student learning outcomes.

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