

**LEARNING ASSESSMENT PRACTICES IN THE EDUCATION  
DEPARTMENT AT THE EASTERN CAPE TECHNIKON: AN  
EVALUATIVE CASE STUDY**

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**DECLARATION**

I, THE UNDERSIGNED, HEREBY DECLARE THAT THE WORK CONTAINED IN THIS THESIS IS THE RESULT OF MY OWN INVESTIGATION AND RESEARCH AND HAS NOT BEEN SUBMITTED IN PART OR IN FULL TO ANY UNIVERSITY FOR A DEGREE.

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## SUMMARY

The new education dispensation and the resultant reform movement have set in motion efforts to transform the assessment of learners' work and learning. The shift towards an integrated approach to education and training based on an outcomes model, is an attempt to raise standards of learning and teaching performance and depends in part on efforts to transform assessment practices at the micro, meso and macro levels. Policy documents and literature note that it is a matter of consensus that the type of assessment used in any education and training system affects both the curriculum and the teaching methodology.

In addition, the South African Qualifications Authority (1997) suggests that assessment is increasingly to be seen as a tool for learning. The National Guidelines for Assessment produced by the National Department of Education show the need for a major paradigm shift in assessment including a shift in its main purposes.

The aim of this study was to determine the nature of the current assessment practices in the Education Department of the Eastern Cape Technikon and to evaluate them using the principles of sound assessment derived from the literature study. The research strategy for this study was a qualitative case study. Qualitative data was generated through semi-structured interviews with students and lecturers in the Education Department of the Eastern Cape Technikon.

The study concluded that the assessment practices in the Education Department of the Eastern Cape Technikon do not represent assessment characteristic of the learning paradigm and do not correspond with sound assessment practices. It appears that a shift from the traditional to the alternative paradigm is necessary in order to improve assessment practices currently in use in the department. Particular guidelines to this effect are offered.

## OPSOMMING

Die nuwe onderwysbedeling en die meegaande hervormingsbeweging het pogings om die assessering van leerders se werk en leer te transformeer aan die gang gesit. Die beweging na 'n geïntegreerde benadering tot onderwys en opleiding wat op die uitkomstemodel geskoei is, is 'n poging om onderrig- en leerstandaarde te verbeter. Dit berus gedeeltelik op pogings om assesseringspraktyk op die mikro-, meso- en makrovlak te transformeer. Beleidsdokumente en relevante literatuur noem dat daar konsensus is dat die tipe assessering wat in enige onderwys- en opleidingstelsel gebruik word, op beide die kurrikulum en die onderrigmetodologie 'n uitwerking het.

Die Suid-Afrikaanse Kwalifikasieraamwerk (1997) stel voor dat assessering toenemend as 'n middel ter bevordering van leer beskou moet word. Die Nasionale Riglyne vir Assessering wat deur die Nasionale Departement van Onderwys daargestel is, beklemtoon die noodsaaklikheid van 'n beduidende paradigmaskuif in assessering asook ten opsigte van die hoofdoel daarvan.

Die doel van hierdie studie was om die aard van die huidige assesseringspraktyke in die Opvoedkundedepartement van die Eastern Cape Technikon te bepaal en om die praktyke te evalueer. Vir die evalueringsproses is die beginsels van betroubare assessering, soos afgelei uit die literatuurstudie, gebruik. Die navorsingstrategie wat vir hierdie studie gebruik is, was 'n kwalitatiewe gevallestudie. Kwalitatiewe data is deur semigestruktureerde onderhoude met studente en dosente in die Opvoedkundedepartement van die Eastern Cape Technikon gegeneer.

Die gevolgtrekking is gemaak dat die assesseringspraktyke in die Opvoedkundedepartement van die Eastern Cape Technikon nie assessering verteenwoordig wat kenmerkend is van die leerparadigma nie. Dit kom ook nie met aanvaarde assesseringspraktyke ooreen nie. Dit blyk dat 'n skuif van die tradisionele na die alternatiewe paradigma noodsaaklik is ten einde assesseringspraktyke wat tans in die departement gebruik word, te verbeter. Besondere riglyne om dit teweeg te bring, word aangebied.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

OBE	Outcome Based Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
SAQA	South African Qualifications Authority
SERTEC	Certification Council for Technikon Education

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## CHAPTER 1

### BACKGROUND, CONTEXTUALISATION AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

#### 1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXTUALISATION OF THE STUDY

The current changes in curriculum development that are part of the transformation of education in South Africa form the background and context of this study.

##### 1.1.1 THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

The context of higher education in South Africa is changing as a result of, inter alia, the introduction of Outcomes-Based Education promoted by a National Qualifications Framework (NQF). Educational institutions have to operate within the NQF system and must translate SAQA guidelines into effective curriculum design. The paradigm suggested by SAQA has a formative focus for learning, as well as a summative one: it fosters a variety of instructional methods; it encourages deep learning; it emphasizes critical thinking and higher order thinking skills; and it specifies the diagnosis of learning problems at an early stage in students' progress (Moru and Rochford, 1999:142).

A number of policy documents have outlined the need for a paradigm shift in assessment practices across the education and training spectrum if South Africa is to meet the challenge of transformation. According to Sutherland and Peckham (1998:98) the successful implementation of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of October 1995 means that assessment can no longer assume a purely summative role in the learning process as it has often done in the past. The National Guidelines for Assessment produced by the National Department of Education shows the need for a major paradigm shift in assessment. Assessment is increasingly also to be seen as a tool for learning and several assessment methods such as portfolios, simulations and in situ workplace assessments related to real-life situations can be used for that purpose (SAQA Bulletin, 1997).

The principles of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) have serious implications for assessment. A fundamental principle of OBE is that learners must be able to demonstrate prescribed knowledge, skills and attitudes before they are deemed competent. The outcomes-based approach to curriculum design is strongly linked to assessment and therefore demands the implementation of valid and reliable assessment procedures.

The paradigm shift demonstrates the need for these changes to be reflected in assessment practices. Unless assessment is properly aligned with curriculum reform and teaching practices, the desired changes in education will be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to implement. The Eastern Cape Technikon, like other institutions of higher learning in South Africa, is faced with the challenges posed by the current developments in education and training.

### 1.1.2 EASTERN CAPE TECHNIKON

The Eastern Cape Technikon is a tertiary education institution established in 1989 to fulfil the needs of the Eastern Cape Province with special emphasis on serving the area covering the eastern part of the province from the Fish River up to the Umzimkulu River in the east. It has its main campus in Butterworth and established satellite campuses in Umtata (1993), Queenstown (1995) and East London (1996). It managed to satisfy the minimum requirements necessary to gain accreditation for the programmes it offers by the Certification Council for Technikon Education (SERTEC) during its period of operation as a national quality control body.

In the context of this study Department of Education refers to a section of the Technikon responsible for offering teacher education programmes in the form of National Diplomas.

## 1.2 RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

### 1.2.1 RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

It is generally accepted by the lecturing staff at the Eastern Cape Technikon that assessment practices need to change to be in line with current curriculum changes. The Staff Development Unit of the institution conducted one workshop on assessment for 20 members of the lecturing staff during the course of the academic year 2000. It was expected that these lecturers would in turn share the information gained at the workshop with their colleagues in their respective departments. Since academics are always pressed for time, the chances of such information sharing becoming effective are limited. On the other hand the institution's policy pertaining to traditional tests and examinations is clearly defined in terms of the number of tests and assignments to be given during the academic year. There are set dates for submission of each term's test marks to the examinations section. This puts great pressure on lecturers to prepare students to do well in the tests and examinations.

## 1.2.2 PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to determine from students and staff the nature of the current assessment practices in the Education Department and to apply a number of principles of sound assessment from literature to evaluate them.

## 1.3 POTENTIAL VALUE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH ORIENTATION

### 1.3.1 POTENTIAL VALUE OF THE RESEARCH

This research would be of potential value to lecturers in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon. It proposed an assessment programme that might be useful in improving the quality of student learning. The study would also benefit the Staff Development Unit at the Eastern Cape Technikon because its findings and recommendations might be used for staff development purposes in other departments. The Quality Assurance Unit would also benefit from the research findings since the information provided could be used to evaluate learning assessment practices in other departments.

### 1.3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Since the purpose of this research was to determine the nature of the current assessment practices in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon and evaluate them using some principles of sound assessment, the following research questions were asked:

- a. What is the nature of learning assessment practices in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon?
- b. To what extent do learning assessment practices in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon represent assessment characteristics of a learning paradigm?
- c. To what extent do learning assessment practices in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon correspond with sound assessment practices?

### 1.3.3 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

In tandem with the research questions, the specific research objectives of this study were:

- a. to determine the kinds of learning assessment practices used in the Education Department;
- b. to compare the utilized learning assessment practices with the characteristics of an undergraduate learning approach as suggested by Barr and Tagg (1995:16); and
- c. to evaluate the extent to which utilized learning assessment practices correspond with the characteristics of an outcomes-based approach.

### 1.3.4 DELIMITATIONS

The study was confined to the evaluation of learning assessment practices in the Education Department of the Eastern Cape Technikon. The study dealt with informal as well as formal assessment practices.

### 1.3.5 RESEARCH STRATEGY

This study was conducted within the qualitative paradigm since it seeks to discover what can be learned about some phenomena of interest, particularly social phenomena where people are participants (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:43). The research strategy of this study was an evaluative case study. The focus of the study was learning assessment practices in the Education Department at Eastern Cape Technikon. The case study seems an appropriate research strategy as the spotlight is focused on an individual instance (Denscombe, 1998:30).

### 1.3.6 DATA GENERATING TECHNIQUES

Data generating techniques used in this study were:

- A literature study involving current literature on learning assessment.
- Semi-structured interviews of students registered for the National Diploma in Education and lecturers in this programme. This study utilized semi-structured interviews because they “permit key issues to be explored, whilst allowing participants to express their meanings for situations or events, namely their feelings, beliefs, ideas and thoughts” (Merriam, 1998:72).
- Semi-structured interviews of staff lecturing in the National Diploma in Education programme.

### 1.3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994:121) the qualitative researcher's goal is to understand more about a phenomenon and to describe what is learnt with a minimum of interpretation. Glaser and Strauss's constant comparative method of data analysis was used to analyse the interview data.

### 1.3.8 STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE RESEARCH VALIDITY AND RELIABILITY

Pilot interviews were conducted to try out the interview questions. This helped to identify questions that might have been confusing and needed rewording, questions that yielded useless data and questions that, suggested by respondents, should have been included (Merriam, 1998:75).

Validation of data was facilitated through triangulation by using multiple sources of data (Denscombe, 1998:83). The sources in the case of this study were literature, the students and the lecturers.

## 1.4 DESCRIPTION OF KEY TERMINOLOGY

For the purposes of this study, key terms and concepts were described as follows:

### **Assessment**

According to Van Rensburg (1999:82) assessment is the means of obtaining information that allows teachers, learners and parents to make professional judgements about learners' progress. Boud (1995:40) suggests three stages in the development of assessment. The first stage is that of conventional examinations taking place after a period of study and it is concerned with controlling learning results. The second stage is educational measurement that is based on the same assumptions as the first one but has the intentions of making assessment more efficient and rational in technical terms. The third stage is competency and "authentic" assessment where emphasis is more on criterion- than norm-referenced assessment, more on impact on the learning process than on control.

In the study "assessment" was understood to mean the process of gathering evidence about a learner's achievement of learning objectives in order to assist the learner's development and improve the process of learning and teaching.

## **Principles of sound assessment**

For the purposes of this study Ashcroft's definition of the principles of assessment was taken as a point of departure: "As with aspects of higher and further education, what we understand by quality in assessment is governed by values: our own and those espoused by the institution and those involved in quality assessment. These determine what is assessed, why it is assessed, for whose purpose assessment is carried out and the conduct of assessment" (Ashcroft, 1995:112).

The principles that were utilised in the study relate mainly to the promotion of deep learning by students. These include the integration of assessment in teaching and learning; the use of a variety of assessment methods; explicit assessment criteria; opportunities for self-assessment as well as providing of feedback to students about their progress.

## **The learning paradigm**

According to Barr and Tagg (1995:13) the Learning Paradigm stands for the idea that an institution of higher learning "is an institution that exists to produce knowledge". Furthermore in the Learning Paradigm an institution's purpose is not to transfer knowledge but to create environments and experiences that bring students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves, to make students members of communities of learners that make discoveries and solve problems. The college devoted to learning first identifies the knowledge and skills it expects its graduates to possess, without regard to any particular curriculum or educational experiences. It then determines how to assess them reliably. It assesses graduating students, and the resulting information is then used to redesign and improve the processes and environments leading to such outcomes. In this manner, enhancing intellectual skills such as writing and problem solving, and social skills such as effective team participation, become the focus of all learning programmes and structured experiences.

Whereas in the Instructional Paradigm teaching is judged on its own terms, in the Learning Paradigm the power of an environment or approach is judged in terms of its impact on learning. To know this in the Learning Paradigm students would be assessed routinely and constantly. This calls for classroom assessment as described by Angelo and Cross (1996:4).

## **Outcomes-Based Education (OBE)**

According to Killen (2000:23) Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) is “an approach to planning, delivering and evaluating instruction that requires teachers and students to focus their attention and efforts on the desired results of education- results that are expressed in terms of individual student learning”.

The main emphasis in OBE is on outcomes with specific reference to skills such as communication skills, thinking skills and life skills. Another important emphasis is on learners as active learners rather than passive recipients. Another shift is from content to process, as rigid syllabi are replaced by planning for outcomes. In the process of conducting instruction, content is related to relevant materials and also to the providing of study skills. Melton in Kotze (1999:32) balances the emphasis on outcomes with the role of assessment in the teaching process when he states that learning outcomes are statements of desired outcomes of learning that are expressed in such a way that it is clear how measurement (assessment) can be achieved.

Outcomes-Based Education requires institutions of higher learning to focus their attention on the desired end-results of learning as well as on teaching and learning processes that will guide learners to these end results. Learning outcomes therefore are statements describing what the learner knows, understands or can do.

### **1.5 SUMMARY**

In this chapter, the background and context of the study were outlined as relating to the current curriculum developments affecting institutions of higher education. The rationale and problem statement of this study were also discussed and key terms and concepts were described. In the next chapter the theoretical framework of the study will be discussed.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The discussion document on assessment (Department of Education, 1997:22) states that the new dispensation with its education reform movement has set in motion efforts to transform the assessment of learners' work and learning. The movement towards an integrated approach to education and training based on the outcomes-based model is an effort to raise standards of learning and teaching performance and must rest in part on efforts to transform assessment practices at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. The transformation of assessment practices at micro-, meso- and macro-level is necessary for the movement towards an integrated approach to education and training. Miller, Bradbury and Lennon (2000:166) echo the idea expressed above when they remark that with an emphasis on programmes and outcomes-based education, the role of assessment is brought sharply into focus and questions are asked about the purpose and effectiveness of traditional examinations.

In setting out the National Policy on assessment, the discussion document on assessment (Department of Education, 1997:8) states that *"dissatisfaction with many aspects of current assessment practices is widespread and there is a need for a clear overview of how to improve the situation"*. The document further notes that there is consensus that the type of assessment used in any education and training system affects both the curriculum and the teaching methodology.

Miller et al. (2000:166) agree with this idea as they argue that assessment methods such as final examinations are far from neutral and may strongly influence both the content and form of a learning process that culminates in an assessment that yields an index of success and failure. Jacob, Luckett and Webbstock (1999:118) also concur with this idea when commenting that it is generally acknowledged that the way in which student learning is assessed is a clear indicator of the quality of the curriculum and of the student learning taking place.

This chapter seeks firstly to conceptualise the term "assessment", secondly to discuss the purpose of assessment, thirdly to examine the relationship between assessment and learning, fourthly to outline the changes that have occurred in assessment practices and finally to identify principles of sound assessment.

## 2.2 THE CONCEPT OF ASSESSMENT

Despite increasing attention on assessment, there is no consensus concerning the topics and processes that are encompassed by it. According to Brown in Freeman and Lewis (1998:8) the term “assessment” comes from the Latin *ad sedere*, which means to sit beside. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that assessment is primarily concerned with providing guidance and feedback to the learner. The word “assess” is used with the meaning “*to judge the extent of student learning*” (Freeman and Lewis, 1998:3). Engelbrecht (1998:3) maintains that most researchers describe assessment as a process by which information is systematically gathered concerning a learner’s qualities, characteristics and environment. Engelbrecht argues that the description of the process by which this information is gathered changed in the 1980’s from focusing mainly on formal assessment with a heavy reliance on norm-referenced tests to assessment strategies that make assessment more integral to teaching and learning, and not merely as a means of monitoring or auditing learner performance by lecturers. The changed view on assessment is in accordance with the Latin meaning of assessment mentioned above. Evidence of the extent of students’ learning comes from their behaviour that may be specific to a course or more general; it may encompass a wide range of activities (oral, written or practical). What is assessed may be focused on a product such as a report or a poem, on the process by which a product is created, or on process alone; or any combination of these.

Freeman and Lewis (1998:9) contend that when we assess, we make inferences about students’ current and future performance. This view of assessment distinguishes assessment from “evaluation”. Assessment focuses on the learning of the student, evaluation on the way the various components of a course perform such as the syllabus, resources and teacher. Evaluation is a process of determining the worth or merit of an activity, programme, persons, or product (Freeman and Lewis, 1998:9). Assessment results are one source of information used for an evaluation.

Spady in Lombard (2000:84) considers assessment to be a generic term for the process of gathering information on the quality of a product, performance, or demonstration that typically implies the use of methods other than traditional paper and pencil testing. The definition of assessment advanced by Freeman and Lewis is in agreement with that offered by Erwin in Brown and Knight (1994:12) where assessment is defined as the “... *systematic basis for making inferences about the learning and development of students...the process of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analysing,*



*interpreting, and using information to increase students' learning and development*". The idea of assessment of student learning is further developed in paragraph 2.4.

In explaining developments in thinking about assessment, Knight (1995:40) makes reference to conventional assessment, educational measurement, competency and authentic assessment. His contention is that in conventional assessment it was taken for granted that assessment follows teaching and that the aim of assessment is to discover how much has been learned. Learning was viewed quantitatively in terms of the amount of the teaching that had been absorbed. However, more radical concerns were later raised as to whether assessment revealed any useful information about what a given student could actually do and whether assessment had a backwash effect on learning. This brought about small shifts from norm-referenced towards criterion-referenced assessment.

Knight (1995:40) points out that educational measurement took for granted the basic assumptions of conventional assessment, that is, that testing follows teaching, that the links between subject content and assessment technique are unproblematic and that assessment is quantitative. The main concerns of contemporary educational measurement are to make assessment more rational, efficient and technically defensible. Competency and authentic assessment have developed out of concerns about validity.

The concept of assessment can also be better explained by considering the different types of assessment, namely norm-referenced, criterion-referenced and ipsative. Norm-referenced assessment is used to establish a rank order of students in terms of their achievement. The performance of students is assessed in relation to that of others in the group, such as class or year (Freeman and Lewis, 1998:16). It is the view of these authors that the purpose of this form of assessment is to differentiate between the students, comparing one with another. In norm-referenced assessment improvement for the student means moving up the rank order at the expense of other students in the group. The authors also note that whatever level is fixed as being the norm will always leave some students below this point.

Norm-referenced assessment as such makes sense when used for selection purposes, for example when a number of places have to be filled by the best candidates. Freeman and Lewis (1998:17) warn that norm-referenced assessment - when used for purposes other than selection - can imply that assessment is being made to a standard when no such standard has been defined.

Students' results therefore depend on those of their colleagues. The standard achieved depends not only on the quality of the student's own performance, but also on the quality of the performance of others. Such assessment does not reveal what students can or cannot do, or know or do not know.

Pahad (1997:5) defines criterion-referenced assessment as assessing a learner's performance with reference to an agreed set of criteria. Freeman and Lewis (1998:20) are of the same opinion as they contend that criterion-referenced assessment measures the students' performance against an explicit, previously determined standard with no attempt made to compare students with one another, as is the case with norm-referenced assessment. The only two relevant factors are students' performance and the standards.

According to Freeman and Lewis (1998:20) when properly used, criterion-referenced assessment first establishes publicly stated standards and then measures learners against these. Sometimes this results in a learner being said to have or not to have reached the standard. The emphasis in criterion-referenced assessment is on identifying what the student has achieved and has yet to achieve. It tends to be more informative than the normative-referenced assessment, providing specific information on which students and others can act. Sutton (1994:5) agrees as he claims that to generate specific information about learning strengths and needs, the first step is to be clear about what is to be learnt, and to describe those expectations as precisely as possible. This type of assessment focuses on student learning and competence, not on grading or competition among students. It links assessment closely to the desired learning outcomes. Criterion-referenced assessment appears to be best suited for the new context of higher education in South Africa within the framework of the South African Qualifications Authority that focuses on learning outcomes.

Rowntree in Freeman and Lewis (1998: 21) introduces a third type of assessment, namely ipsative assessment, which deals with "*...how well the student has performed compared with their own previous efforts*". This form of assessment becomes appropriate when students formulate their own learning outcomes, and in self-assessment.

In this study with its focus on learning assessment practices the view of assessment as the process of collecting, interpreting and using information through a wide range of activities to promote student learning, is adopted.

### 2.3 PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

Reviews of the role and development of assessment have varied in the precise number of purposes identified for assessment, but the range has traditionally revolved around issues of selection, guidance and the prediction of future performance within what has been called a measure-oriented or psychometric paradigm. Gipps in Torrance and Pryor (1998:1) identifies three broad purposes of assessment, namely those of certification of student achievement (with attendant implications for selection), the accountability of schools and the education system as a whole through publication and comparison of results, and the promotion of learning through the provision of helpful feedback. The third purpose, which is based on the interrelation of assessment and learning, is primarily the concern of this study.

Sutherland and Peckham (1998:99) offer three categories of the purposes of assessment, namely diagnostic, formative and summative. Diagnostic assessment aims at prediction; is carried out for administrative reasons and has remediation as its end result. On the other hand, formative assessment aims at improving the quality of learning and is developmental in nature; serves the needs of the students and has the end result of testing the effectiveness of learning outcomes. Summative assessment aims at accreditation of knowledge (also referred to as gate-keeping), is extrinsically motivated to serve the needs of the external world and is used for educational decision-making.

Chalmers and Fuller (1996:41) suggest two major functions of assessment. One function is to enable the institution to grade students and to certify that they have met course requirements by using formal assessment tasks, for example, tests, examinations, assignments and projects. The emphasis is on finding out how much students have learned and making a summative judgement about the adequacy of their performance. The other function is to support student learning by using less formal assessment tasks aimed at finding out about the quality of students' learning, providing students with feedback and suggesting ways in which they can improve their learning and understanding. These authors believe that when students are being assessed to support their learning, it does not matter if they demonstrate some lack of understanding or skill, for this provides the teachers and students with an indication of an aspect of learning that needs attention.

Boud (1990:102) concurs with the view expressed above by identifying two major functions of assessment, the first being to improve the quality of learning.

For this purpose students engage in the problems and discourse surrounding assessment, and are encouraged through feedback so that they can become more effective in their learning. This is known as formative assessment or assessment for learning. The second function that concerns the accreditation of knowledge or performance whereby students are assessed to certify their achievements, is referred to as summative assessment or assessment for the record. Both functions of assessment involve judgement, but the first directly serves the needs of the student and the second primarily serves the needs of the external world.

Boud (1990:102) believes that assessment also contributes to motivation through the recognition of achievement. However, the author however points out that the relationship between certification and motivation is a complex one because just as there are many high-achieving students who are encouraged and stimulated by their high grades, there are others who are discouraged and alienated by their lesser grades. Boud's view is that it is unfortunate that resource pressures increasingly lead us to protect assessment for accreditation at the expense of assessment for learning.

In line with the ideas expressed above Gravett (1996:76) argues that despite the significant role that assessment procedures play in student learning, the assessment of learning is still approached in a routine manner in many higher education institutions, with lecturers unthinkingly clinging to outdated assessment habits.

Mehrens and Lehmann in Newble and Cannon (1995:93) identify the following purposes of assessment:

- Judging the mastery of essential skills and knowledge
- Measuring improvement over time
- Diagnosing student difficulties
- Evaluating teaching methods
- Evaluating the effectiveness of the course
- Motivating students to study.

Newble and Cannon (1995:94) also differentiate between summative and formative assessment. These authors caution that in dealing with summative assessment, by which is meant assessments on which decisions about the students' future are to be made, all effort must be made to ensure that all assessments are fair and based on appropriate criteria. They further suggest that formative assessment, which refers to assessments for the benefit of the students in terms of guiding their further study, can be organised more informally.

It is their contention that “*such assessments must be free of threat, as the aim is to get the students to reveal their strengths and weaknesses rather than to disguise them*” (Newble and Cannon, 1995:95).

Ashcroft (1995:113) is of the opinion that the purposes of assessment are closely related to those of education. Atkins et al. in Ashcroft (1995:113) define the first purpose of education as “*the provision of educational experience of intrinsic value in its own right: for example, the development of a trained mind and attributes conducive to lifelong learning*”. Higher education institutions in South Africa need to embrace this purpose if the National Qualifications Framework is to succeed in bringing about lifelong learning.

Torrance and Pryor (1998:1) have noted, however, that different stakeholders prioritise different purposes for assessment. Policy makers and assessment researchers are focusing on the role that assessment can play in monitoring and raising educational standards across the system as a whole. For policy makers the issue is how to design an assessment system that embodies high standards and monitors performance through testing programmes, that is, focusing on procedures and products of assessment. For educators and assessment researchers the issue has more to do with how the process of assessment might assist in learning in the classroom. It is interesting to note that the purposes of assessment outlined above make certain demands on the effort and skill of the lecturer and might result in one purpose becoming central to assessment at the expense of the other.

The list of the main purposes of assessment proposed by Sambell and McDowell (1998:108) includes the following:

- **To help learning:** assessment should be a means of establishing progress during a course, to motivate student learning, to give feedback to students and to enable them to consolidate their learning at set points throughout their studies.
- **To certify what has been learnt:** Assessment must verify what a student has achieved at the end of a course or stage and determine whether they are fit to enter graduate employment or to practise in a professional area.
- **To predict future performance:** Assessment results may be used as selection criteria to identify likely success and suitability for employment, further study or research.
- **To indicate educational effectiveness:** Assessment results can provide lecturers with feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching or may be used to demonstrate that educational provision has met required standards.

- **To transmit social norms and values:** It has been proposed, for example, that competitiveness within the educational assessment system reinforces the idea that competitiveness is a quality that is highly valued in society and thus assessment acts as a “preparation for life”.

In terms of this study the most appropriate purpose of assessment that was considered concerns helping learning whereby assessment is used to establish progress during a course, to motivate student learning, to give feedback to students and to enable them to consolidate their learning at set points throughout their studies. It is thus important to elaborate on the relationship between assessment and learning.

## 2.4 ASSESSMENT AND LEARNING

One cannot discuss assessment without analysing its relationship to both learning and teaching, as the three act in concert to shape the curriculum. Shay (1998: 162) claims that assessment can also inform a teacher’s critical reflection on curriculum design and practice and argues that “...*while the primary purpose of assessment is promoting and measuring student learning, an important spin-off is that students’ performance on assessment tasks can also give lecturers the opportunity to reflect on their own performance (e.g. curriculum design and delivery)*”.

Referring to the disregard for the significance of assessment for student learning in the past, Boud (1990:103) argues that until the late 1980s assessment practices focused mainly on formal assessment, relying heavily on norm-referenced or standardised tests that compare an individual’s performance to that of a representative peer group. The role of the teacher was that of an expert transmitting information to passive learners whose role, in turn, was to absorb the information and spout it back when tested. Assessment, in the main, took the form of written examinations and tests that were almost invariably summative, i.e. assessment at the end of the period of learning; summing up what had been learnt. The curriculum focused on the content to be taught, learnt and tested, promoted a view that knowledge was uncontested and neutral, and that the primary purpose of assessment was to measure and quantify how well students had memorised the information imparted.

This approach to assessment is no longer relevant as changing views on assessment in accordance with an emphasis of a human rights and empowerment perspective have brought a move toward new assessment strategies with the goal of making assessment more integral to teaching and learning. This new move is seen to have provided a multidimensional picture of assessment. For assessment to improve learning, it should respect learners' diversity in ways of understanding and should suggest actions that lecturers can take to improve the educational development of their students and the quality of teaching.

Boud (1990:37) suggests that assessment for accreditation or certification cannot be separated from assessment for learning. Boud believes that assessment always leads to learning in that every act of assessment gives a message to students about what they should be learning and how they should go about it. The message is coded, is not easily understood and is often read differently and with different emphasis by staff and students. Good assessment is not just a matter of finding the *"...appropriate method and using it sensibly in conjunction with a given subject matter"* (Boud, 1990:37).

In support of the view expressed above Knight (1995:37) points out that there are always unintended consequences in assessment. Students will learn to adopt surface approaches to study in some circumstances and will adopt deep approaches in others. In so doing they will be prompted partly by the forms and nature of assessment tasks. According to Knight, assessment is the most significant prompt for learning. Ramsden in Knight (1995:37) reports that one of the most important outcomes of research on student learning is the recognition that learning must fundamentally be seen as being relational. Learning is thus a function of both teaching and the context in which it occurs, with the interpretation of knowledge and the actions as a result of these interpretations playing a major role.

According to Brown and Knight (1994:12) assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time, and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates. They conclude that it is not the curriculum that shapes assessment, but assessment that shapes the curriculum and embodies the purposes of higher education.

In agreement with the ideas of Brown and Knight, Jacob et al. (1999:118) advise that the truth about an educational system lies in its assessment procedures as they give an indication of student qualities and achievements that are valued and rewarded by the system.

Rowntree in Ramsden (1992:67) concurs with this idea when he concludes that the spirit and style of student assessment defines the de facto curriculum. Ramsden (1992:68) supports these ideas with his claims that the methods used to assess students are one of the most critical of all influences on their learning. He is of the contention that “...*unsuitable assessment methods impose irresistible pressures on students to take the wrong approach to learning tasks*” (Ramsden, 1992:68). Entwistle and Entwistle in Sambell and McDowell (1998:392) add to this by noting how preparation for examinations hinders students’ efforts towards genuine understanding of course material. Students themselves may perceive that assessment “contaminates” their learning.

According to Ramsden (1992:181) assessment is a serious and often tragic enterprise, hence he proposes that for the proper assessment of student learning teachers should combine the various forms of knowing. He maintains that it will nearly always be necessary to grade students in some way so that a summary of progress in an area of learning can be provided both for students and for others who may wish to know something about the students’ general level of performance. He, however, cautions that it should be recognised that assessment is a way of teaching more effectively through understanding exactly what students know and do not know. Assessment concerns the quality of teaching as well as the quality of learning. It involves teachers in learning from their students’ experiences and is about changing teachers as well as their students.

The results of a study by Jacob et al. (1999:118) in which they examined student perceptions of assessment procedures to which they had been exposed, support the view that assessment plays a significant role in learning. Their report indicates a correlation between good assessment practice and improved learning.

#### 2.4.1 CLASSROOM ASSESSMENT

Whereas in the Instructional Paradigm teaching is judged on its own terms, in the Learning Paradigm the power of an environment or approach is judged in terms of its impact on learning. To know this in the Learning Paradigm students would be assessed routinely and constantly. This calls for classroom assessment as described by Angelo and Cross (1996:4).

Angelo and Cross (1996:3) maintain that the fundamental goal shared by all educational institutions is to produce the highest possible quality of student learning, that is, to help students learn more effectively and efficiently than they could on their own.

Lecturers and students need better ways to monitor learning throughout the semester so that the gaps in knowledge or understanding can be identified before it is too late to remedy problems.

These writers recommend the use of Classroom Assessment to check how well students are learning at the initial and intermediate points and to provide information for improvement when learning is less than satisfactory. Classroom Assessment is an approach designed to help teachers find out what students are learning in the classroom and how well they are learning it (Angelo and Cross, 1996:4). This approach is learner-centred, teacher-directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context-specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice.

Ramsden (1992:182) supports the idea that assessment plays a key role in determining the quality of student learning when he argues that if students perceive that their learning will be measured in terms of reproducing facts or implementing memorised procedures and formulae, they will adopt approaches that prevent understanding from being reached. The widespread use of surface approaches to learning, and the related fact that students may successfully complete their courses while never gaining an understanding of fundamental ideas which the teachers of those courses themselves desire their students to gain, together indicate beyond reasonable doubt that much assessment in higher education is flawed. The majority of courses and lecturers in higher education do not operate from the understanding of assessment as being fundamentally about helping students to learn and teachers to learn how best to teach them.

## 2.5 THE CHANGING ROLE OF ASSESSMENT – A SHIFT IN PARADIGM

There has been a growing demand for innovative curriculum development and quality teaching in higher education in recent years (Gravett, 1996:76). Gravett sees it as a matter of concern that the assessment of learning is often not considered when reform in higher education is addressed. Kotze (1999:31) adds to this by commenting that assessment is not a separate part of a learning experience and should be integrated throughout a learning experience.

Formative assessment in particular comprises an integral part of learning in the new shift to outcomes-based education, as opposed to the traditional teacher-centred education in South Africa with its major emphasis on summative assessment.

A paradigm shift that is reported by Barr and Tagg (1995:13) to have taken hold in American Higher Education, has become necessary in South African institutions of higher education with the introduction of the integration between learning and assessment in outcomes-based curriculum. In the past lecturers developed learning content then formulated learning objectives and only once assignments had to be compiled did they individually decide on which assessment methods to use.

The adoption of the South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Act of October 1995 means that assessment can no longer assume a purely summative role in the learning process, as it has often done in the past (Sutherland and Peckham, 1998:98). The SAQA Bulletin (1997) suggests that assessment is increasingly to be seen as the tool for learning. Assessment practices are influential in determining whether students adopt a deeper or surface approach to learning. In addition to the SAQA Bulletin (1997) the Department of Education (1998) also points out the need for a major paradigm shift in assessment. This reflects a changing perception world-wide of the nature of assessment and of its main purposes.

According to Sutherland and Peckham (1998:99) research which focuses on teaching and learning with limited resources already suggests that teaching staff should move away from the traditional methodologies of assessment to alternative ones, in order to cope with increasing numbers of inadequately prepared students. The changing context of higher education in South Africa within the framework of SAQA has provided the opportunity to develop assessment criteria and to determine assessment methods in conjunction with the formulation of specific and generic learning outcomes.

In the paradigm shift espoused by Barr and Tagg (1995:13) there is the move from the college being an institution that exists to provide instruction towards a new paradigm of a college being an institution that exists to produce learning. The traditional, dominant paradigm is referred to as the “Instruction Paradigm” and the new paradigm is known as the “Learning Paradigm”. Barr and Tarr (1995:14) maintain that the dominant paradigm mistakes a means for an end by taking the means or method, called “instruction” or “teaching”, and making it the end or purpose of instruction.

In the new paradigm the mission of the institution is not instruction but rather producing learning for every student by whatever means works best. Boggs (1995:25) echoes these ideas when he writes that there is a need for a new paradigm for institutions; one that defines them as learning rather than teaching institutions.

The mission should be student learning, and the effectiveness of the institution should be measured based upon student learning outcomes. This paradigm regards learners as the most important component of institutions.

Under the learning paradigm institutions are responsible for student learning although students also remain responsible for their own learning. Everyone in the institution should be evaluated based upon contribution to student learning, and the focus should be on the continuous improvement of the environment for learning. Although the process of paradigm change is not easy, paradigms have to change when they lose their capacity to solve problems and generate a positive vision of the future as is the case with the present traditional assessment methodologies in education. The more that is learnt about learning outcomes the more it is realised that change in our assessment methods is imperative. The question that needs to be answered is how things (assessment in particular) would be done if learning were put first (Engelbrecht, Engelbrecht, Du Preez, Rheeder and Van Wyk, 2000:72).

This points to a shift towards alternative assessment methods, as educationists are stimulated to design more effective learning environments that would get better results than had been achieved in the past. Barr and Tagg (1995:24) are of the opinion that a restructuring is needed because the gap between what is wanted of higher education and what its structures provide is very wide.

Ramsden (1992: 183) concedes that the majority of courses and lecturers in higher education do not operate from the understanding that assessment is fundamentally about helping students to learn and teachers to learn how best to teach them. The lecturers subordinate the task of comprehending the quality of student learning to the requirement to define, select, classify, motivate and report on students. Assessment is traditionally regarded as an addition to teaching, rather than an essential part of it. The proof of a good memory has become more important than the application of the knowledge gained.

Gray (1989:24) concurs with this contention by Ramsden (1992) when he comments that it is not that institutions fail to engage in assessment, but rather that institutions may lack systematic and reflective examinations of the purpose that assessment serves and the compatibility of practices with realising the selected purposes. It would appear that the large portion of assessment activities in institutions of higher learning is directed more at summary description and periodic judgements about quality than at specific diagnoses for the improvement of performance.

Even when instructional objectives, materials and procedures are changed it is not necessarily true that tests or other performance measures of student achievement are equally changed.

If assessment is about ascertaining the amount and the kind of learning that has taken place, then the move from a former system of summative assessment to a system of formative assessment makes sense. The change to the continuous assessment approach shifts the focus to a system that is more flexible and representative of the learning outcomes. The focus is now not on the attainment of general objectives or outcomes, but on the specific individualised feedback on the progress of the learner.

Both the way in which assessment takes place and the results of the assessment are more valuable to the learner to ascertain his/her own status as far as mastery of the specific content or skill is concerned. Continuous assessment is also timeous in allowing for the learner to take corrective steps if the results of the assessment are found to be not satisfactory at that time. A view of teaching as a transmission of authoritative knowledge by a subject specialist has little space to accommodate the idea that different methods of assessment may be appropriate for the evaluation of different parts of the subject matter, or that assessment techniques themselves should be the subject of serious study and reflection.

There are a variety of terms used to describe the “new” assessment, the generic term being “alternative assessment”. However, in South Africa, education policy documents on assessment use the terms “alternative”, “authentic” and “continuous” almost interchangeably.

As a way out of the terminological confusion, Brown and Hudson (1998: 657) suggest, “*we view portfolio, conferences, diaries, self-assessment and peer-assessment not as alternative assessment but rather as alternatives in assessments*”.

Table 2.1, adapted from Sutherland and Peckham (1998: 100), appears useful in clarifying and summarising the differences between the traditional paradigm and the alternative paradigm.

**Table 2.1: The traditional and alternative assessment paradigms**

<b>Traditional assessment paradigm</b>	<b>Alternative assessment paradigm</b>
Summative focus (for grading)	Alternative focus (for learning)
Judgemental in nature	Developmental in nature
Focuses on content	Focuses on the learning process
Teacher-led assessment	Student-led assessment
Separate from course design	Perspective of the curriculum
Isolated from learning process	Integral part of the learning process
Reliance on examinations	Variety of learning process
Implicit criteria	Explicit criteria
Self-referenced criteria or criterion-referenced	Norm-referenced criteria
Over-emphasis on memory and lower order thinking skills	Emphasis on critical thinking and higher order thinking skills
Encourages surface learning	Encourages deep learning
De-conceptualised assessment	Authentic assessment practices

(Adapted from Sutherland and Peckham, 1998)

Assessment practices used by individual lecturers could lie on a continuum somewhere between the two poles illustrated in table 2.1.

## 2.6 PRINCIPLES OF SOUND ASSESSMENT

The outcomes-based approach to curriculum design is strongly linked to assessment and therefore demands the implementation of valid and reliable assessment procedures (Van Rensburg, 1999:88-90). For assessment to be effective and informative Pretorius suggests that it should have the following features:

- relevant to the curriculum;
- integral to teaching and learning;
- balanced, comprehensive and varied;
- valid and reliable;

- fair;
- time-efficient and manageable; and
- recognises individual achievement and progress.

In agreement with this idea Gravett (1996:76) maintains that because of the important role that assessment procedures play in student learning, assessment development is a powerful instrument for promoting the aims of higher education. She believes that any attempt to reform higher education will fail if assessment arrangements do not feature prominently. Gravett (1996:77) suggests that a holistic approach to assessment brings about harmony between assessment procedures and the lecturer's educational approach. She further reasons that it is unfair to expect critical reasoning of students in the constrained situation of an examination if the lecturer's teaching was focused mainly on the mere transmission of information and students were, therefore, never offered the opportunity of becoming adept at reasoning.

Gronlund (1998:17-21) maintains that if assessment is closely integrated with instruction the result will be the improvement of student learning. In line with the ideas expressed above he suggests a basic set of guidelines that must guide assessment and that provide a general framework for using student assessment effectively. These guidelines can be summarised as follows: Effective assessment requires a clear conception of all intended learning outcomes, a variety of assessment procedures that are relevant to the instruction, an adequate sample of tasks, procedures that are fair to everyone, criteria for judging success, timely and detailed feedback to students, and a grading and reporting system that is in harmony with the assessment programme.

Gravett emphasises that a clear connection between aims, teaching approach and assessment procedures is imperative for the promotion of the aims of higher education. Gravett (1996:77) and Banta, Lund, Black and Oblander (1996:10) are in agreement about the use of a variety of assessment methods. According to Rowntree in Gravett (1996:77) this is necessary because multiple aims demand multiple methods and different assessment methods call for different qualities from the student. Banta et al. (1996:10) recommend a variety of assessment methods, as they believe that assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated and revealed in performance over time.

They maintain that learning entails not only what students know but what they do with what they know, it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom. It is their contention that assessment should reflect these understandings by employment of a diverse array of methods.

The third principle of sound assessment suggested by Gravett is that of overt assessment criteria, since she argues that assessment criteria that are negotiated with or clearly communicated to students can be powerful in guiding students towards achieving the aims of the course. Gravett (1996:77) recommends that assessment should promote and reward desired learning activities and outcomes.

Gravett (1996:79) is mindful of the argument against providing students with information about assessment which contends that explicit and overt assessment criteria will encourage students to narrow their learning only to meet these criteria. She counters this argument by stating that if assessment procedures and criteria are properly designed and therefore reflect the aims of the course, overt and explicit assessment criteria provide lecturers with an opportunity to direct student energy into the important areas of the course. According to Gravett, discussing the nature of the assessment with the students helps them understand how the assessment procedures relate to course aims.

Banta et al. (1996:23) are of the opinion that assessment requires attention to outcomes but also and equally to the experience that leads to those outcomes. Information about outcomes is of high importance because where students “end up” matters greatly. In order to improve outcomes it is necessary to know about students’ experience along the way, namely the curricula, teaching and kind of student efforts that lead to particular outcomes. Assessment can help lecturers understand which students learn best under what conditions and with such knowledge comes the capacity to improve all of their knowledge.

Another guiding principle proposed by Gravett (1996:77) relates to the choice of assessment forms and methods. This guideline brings forward the unlikelihood of any single method suitable for the assessment of all the important aims in the course. Brown and Knight in Gravett (1996:78) emphasise the importance of having lecturers informed on a variety of assessment methods and not their adhering to a single traditional method.

There appears to be consensus on the idea that assessment should provide feedback to students regarding their progress. Rowntree in Gravett (1996:80) considers feedback so vital that he calls it the “*life-blood of learning*”. In agreement with these ideas Brookefield (1990:35) maintains that constructive assessment is mainly consistent with the assessment criteria which were communicated to students and should thus reward what is valued in a course, that it identifies areas of strengths and weaknesses clearly, is phrased as positively as possible so as not to damage student motivation, indicates ways of improving future performance, and is rapid. It is generally acknowledged that while explicit personal feedback to each student is the ideal, it is not easy to provide to large groups. Detailed feedback can, nevertheless, still be provided to a large group by using an assessment information sheet.

According to Gray (1989:24) feedback resulting from both informal and formal means of student assessment can aid the learning process if that feedback is specific, timely and on target with clear performance expectations. A test score or grade without such diagnostic feedback and explanation lacks completeness for the learner. Gray further contends that the formative use of student assessment can help learners to become more proficient in their own self-assessment and in learning how to learn, as well as in acquiring substantive knowledge and skills.

Gravett (1996:80) concurs with Gray as she states that the development of intellectual autonomy is an important educational aim for higher education and opportunities for self-assessment can play a significant role in this regard. Intellectual autonomy implies primarily that one must be able to appraise and monitor the quality of one’s own performance.

Boud in Gravett (1996:81) stresses that there is evidence that students are able to make sound judgements about their own learning and that by providing them with opportunities to do so independence and responsibility can be enhanced. It is in line with the view expressed by Jacob et al. (1999:124) that “*assessment of students is a key factor in any quality improvement in higher education*” that this study is conducted. Gravett (1996:81) also is of the opinion that assessment procedures deserve much more thoughtful attention than is currently the case because assessment is fundamental to teaching and learning.

Bitzer (1999:21) adds to the principles of sound assessment by summarising the values that Brown, Race and Smith (1996) believe should underpin assessment. These are as follows:

- Assessment should be based on an understanding of how students learn and should play a positive role in the learning experiences of students.
- Assessment should accommodate the individual differences of students. Therefore a diverse range of assessment instruments and processes should be employed, accommodating and encouraging student creativity and originality.
- The purposes of assessment should be clearly explained. Staff, students and “the outside world” need to be able to see why assessment is being used and the rationale for choosing each individual form of assessment in its present form or context.
- Assessment needs to be valid. This means that an assessment method should directly assess that which it is intended for.
- Assessment instruments and techniques need to be reliable and consistent. Marks or grades should be allocated with the maximum degree of objectivity, independent of the assessor of the work.
- All forms of assessment should allow students to receive feedback on their learning and their performance. Assessment should be a developmental activity.
- Assessment should provide students and staff with opportunities to reflect on their practice and their learning. Assessment instruments should therefore be the subject of continuous evaluation and adjustment.
- Assessment should be an integral component of programme design. Teaching and learning experiences should be designed in the full knowledge of the kinds of assessment students will encounter.
- The amount of assessment should be appropriate. Student learning should not be driven by an overload of assessment requirements nor should teaching be impaired by burdens of assessment tasks.
- Assessment criteria need to be understandable, explicit and public. Students need to be able to tell what is expected of them in each form of assessment they encounter.

A change in the assessment practices along the lines of the principles of sound assessment discussed above would improve the quality of the curriculum and of the student learning.

## 2.7 CONCLUSION

The literature review in this chapter has raised important issues in relation to the assessment of learning. These issues include the tendency of students to focus their learning on what they regard as important for assessment purposes and consequently the significant role that assessment plays in student learning. The relevance of classroom assessment as a means of monitoring learning was also examined.

The need for a shift in paradigm from the traditional assessment paradigm to the alternative assessment paradigm was discussed. Principles of sound assessment were explored and would be used to evaluate the learning assessment practices in the Education Department at Eastern Cape Technikon.

These issues are significant for the Diploma in Education programme investigated in this study, as it is a teacher education programme. The students will practise what they learn in the programme when they become teachers. It is therefore imperative that what they learn about the theory of assessment is supported by appropriate experiences of assessment in the programme. Furthermore the Education Department at Eastern Cape Technikon should take the lead in the implementation of new policies regarding curriculum design including teaching, learning and assessment, as it has staff qualified in education. The staff development unit of the institution also looks up to the Education Department for assistance with matters relating to teaching and learning.

In the following chapter the research design and methodology for this study will be discussed.

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains and justifies the research paradigm informing this study, the data generation procedures and the methods employed to analyse the data. In addition, issues of validity and ethics are considered throughout the chapter.

#### 3.2 THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Mouton (1996:107) defines a research design as “*a set of guidelines and instructions to be followed in addressing the research problem*”. He identifies the main function of a research design as enabling the researcher to anticipate what the approximate research decisions should be so as to maximize the validity of the eventual results.

The research design is embedded in an underpinning research paradigm and contains a research strategy as well as methods of data generation. Maykut and Morehouse describe a paradigm (1994:4) as a “*set of interconnected assumptions about the nature of reality*”. Mouton (1996:36) maintains that paradigms are not merely collections of research methods and techniques, but also include certain assumptions and values regarding their use under specific circumstances. Paradigms underpin the actions of the researcher and the methods used in the research project. A paradigm provides the largest framework within which research takes place.

Merriam (1998:4) distinguishes three orientations (paradigms) to research, namely positivist forms of research, interpretive research and critical research. According to the positivist paradigm education is seen as the object or phenomenon to be studied and knowledge gained through scientific and experimental research as objective and quantifiable. In interpretive research, education is considered to be a process and understanding the process constitutes the knowledge to be gained from an inductive mode of inquiry. Critical research, on the other hand, considers education to be a social institution designed for social and cultural reproduction and transformation, and knowledge generated through this mode of research is an ideological critique of power, privilege and oppression in areas of educational practice.

Of the three orientations to research, my research can be described as having been conducted within an interpretive paradigm rather than within positivist or critical forms of research. Interpretive research seeks to understand the meaning of the experience from the perspective of the participants (Merriam, 1998:4).

The research strategy that seemed to be most appropriate to my needs in this study was the qualitative case study. According to Maykut and Morehouse (1994:43) “*research studies that are qualitative are designed to discover what can be learned about some phenomenon of interest, particularly, social phenomena where people are participants*”. Qualitative studies generally examine people’s words and actions in narrative or descriptive ways more closely representing the situation as experienced by participants (1994:3). McMillan and Schumacher (1993:14) express a similar view when they point out that qualitative research is more concerned with understanding the social phenomena from participants’ perspectives.

The central focus of my research, examining assessment practices in the Education Department at Eastern Cape Technikon, entailed a qualitative approach towards generating data. Denscombe (1998:30) maintains that in case study research the spotlight is focused on an individual instance rather than on a wide spectrum. The focus of my research is assessment practices in the Education Department of the Eastern Cape Technikon. The case study strategy seemed appropriate for this study as the spotlight is focused on “*one instance of a particular phenomenon with a view to providing an in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences or processes occurring in that particular instance*” (Denscombe, 1998:30).

Yin in Merriam (1992:27) concurs with the ideas expressed above when he defines a case study as “*an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context*”. Merriam further comments that qualitative case studies have special features of being particularistic, descriptive and heuristic.

The characteristic of being particularistic refers to case studies focusing on a particular situation, event, program or phenomenon. By the descriptive characteristic it is meant that the end product of a case study is a rich (thick) description of the phenomenon under study. Being heuristic means that case studies illuminate the reader’s understanding of the phenomenon under study. The research questions, which involve evaluating the assessment practices, could be addressed by an evaluative research.

Guba and Lincoln in Merriam (1992:39) are of the opinion that the case study is the best reporting form for evaluations. According to these authors the case study provides thick description, is grounded, is holistic and lifelike, simplifies data to be considered by the reader, illuminates meanings and communicates tacit knowledge. Stake (1995:96) also contends that the more qualitative evaluator usually emphasizes the quality of activities, portraying them in narrative description and interpretative assertion.

### 3.3 SAMPLING

As this study was conducted by means of a qualitative approach, non-probability sampling was used to select participants. Merriam (1992:61) maintains that since generalization is not the goal of qualitative research, non-probability sampling should be the method of choice for most qualitative research. The form of non-probability sampling that I used is “purposeful” sampling. Purposeful sampling is based on the assumption that the investigator wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned. Patton in Merriam (1992:61) is cited as arguing, *“the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for study in depth”*. Information rich cases are described as *“those cases from which the researcher can learn more about issues central to the purpose of the research”*.

In order to do purposeful sampling, Merriam (1992:61) emphasizes that it is important to determine the selection criteria based on the purpose of the study. The criteria that I used in this study were as follows:

- Second-year students in each of the National Diplomas in Education with specialization in commercial, technical and adult education, because they have had enough exposure to the learning assessment practices used in the Department.
- Lecturers teaching in the three National Diplomas, because they are directly involved in the learning assessment of students.

Denscombe (1998:15) concurs with the ideas expressed above when he states that with purposive sampling the sample is “hand picked” for the research. He contends that the advantage of purposive sampling is that it allows the researcher to *“hone in on people or events which there are good grounds for believing will be critical for the research”* (Denscombe, 1998:15).

According to Bailey (1994:182) the advantage of purposive sampling is that the researcher can use his or her research skill or prior knowledge to identify respondents that might potentially render information rich data.

Merriam (1992:65) contends that two levels of sampling are usually necessary in qualitative case studies. The sample within the case for this study was selected while data were being gathered. This was done in accordance with the recommendation by Lincoln and Guba in Merriam that sampling be done until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached. Saturation is reached when no new or relevant information is being uncovered. In purposeful sampling the size of the sample is determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units; thus redundancy is the primary criterion.

I initially intended to interview 18 students but ended up with 14 interviews, by which time the data were saturated, that is, no new information was coming up. I interviewed four lecturers teaching in the National Diploma programmes. The four lecturers are the only fulltime lecturers for this programme. This is in agreement with the views of Denscombe (1998:26) that the composition and size of the sample in a case study is not completely predictable at the outset and that the estimation one makes in view of the time and resources available cannot be treated as a rigid and inflexible part of the research design if the qualitative research is to adhere to the “discovery” route.

### 3.4. DATA GENERATION

The nature of the research problem and the aim of the study necessitated the use of interviews as a data collection method. According to Patton in Merriam (1990:71), when a researcher wants “*to find out what is in and on someone else’s mind*” This author further explains that “*we interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe ... we cannot observe feelings, thoughts and intentions*”. The other reason for choosing interviews is motivated by the view of Denscombe (1998:111) that the use of interviews can be justified on the grounds that the data being collected is based on privileged information. In the case of this study the key sources with privileged information are students and lecturers.

### 3.4.1 THE METHOD OF DATA GENERATION

The data was generated by means of semi-structured interviews because they permit key issues to be explored, whilst allowing participants to express their meaning for situations or events, namely their feelings, beliefs, ideas and thoughts (Merriam, 1998:72).

An interview schedule, which is an interview format made up of a set of open-ended questions, was employed in the interviews (see Annexure 1). Probing and clarifying questions were also used as support to the open-ended questions (Patton, 1990:324). Denscombe (1998:113) is of the contention that “*with semi-structured interviews the researcher is prepared to be flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered, and, perhaps more significantly, to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely on the issues raised by the researcher*”. They also afford the interviewer the opportunity to clarify, expand and ask for reasons for responses given.

#### 3.4.1.1 ADVANTAGES AND LIMITATIONS OF INTERVIEWS

The fact that interviewers can probe for more specific answers and can repeat a question when the respondent misunderstands, is cited as an advantage of interviews by Bailey (1994:182). The interview situation allows the interviewer to decide what questions are appropriate. The interview tends to have a better response rate than the mailed questionnaire. Another advantage is that the interviewer is present to observe nonverbal behaviour and to assess the validity of respondents' answers. Furthermore, the interviewer can standardize the interview environment by making certain that the interview is conducted in privacy, and that there is no noise, unlike with the mailed study, where the questionnaire may be completed by different people under drastically different conditions (Bailey, 1994:182). I made an appointment with one interviewee at a time and the interview was conducted in an office to ensure privacy.

Among the limitations of the interview identified by Bailey (1994:183) is the fact that the interview offers less anonymity than the mailed questionnaire study because the researcher typically knows the respondent. While the flexibility of being able to probe or to phrase the same question differently can be an advantage, it can also be a disadvantage if it makes it difficult for the researcher to compare the respondents' answers. Denscombe (1998:4) reports that it has been demonstrated fairly conclusively that people respond differently depending on how they perceive the interviewer. The data are affected by the personal identity of the researcher.

My personal identity was a factor in these interviews because I lecture to some of the students who were interviewees in the study. Before starting the interview I explained why I was conducting the interviews, that is, the purpose of the study, and why the interviewee had been selected. I also explained that they did not have to identify the subjects and the lecturers to which they were referring in their responses. I further reassured the interviewees that their interview responses would be used for purposes of this study only. The interviewees appeared generally relaxed and eager to share their experiences of assessment with me.

#### 3.4.2 THE PROCESS OF DATA GENERATING DATA

To gain the perspectives, feelings and views of each interviewee I personally conducted all interviews. A tape recorder was used to record the data electronically. Fourteen students from the three National Diploma programmes offered in the Education Department at Eastern Cape Technikon and four lecturers lecturing to these students were interviewed. Interviews were conducted on a one-to-one basis. An appointment was first made with each interviewee. Before interviewing the participants I explained to them why I had asked to interview them. Thereafter I assured them of the confidentiality of the information and their names. I obtained permission from each interviewee to tape record the interview and to take notes during the interview.

I gave the interviewees an interview schedule to go through so that they could ask for clarification where they did not understand. Some asked for clarification. Thereafter I started asking them questions. The questions were in English and the interviewees were expected to answer in English. I chose English because it is the medium of instruction at the institution and the students have reasonable proficiency in the language.

My first interview served as a pilot interview. The pilot interview gave me a clear indication of the time that I would need to conduct one interview, as well as the opportunity to practise conducting an interview (Merriam, 1998:75). It also made me realize which of the questions I had planned to ask were ambiguous and which ones were useful in getting the relevant data.

The focus of the enquiry in this study is the nature of learning assessment practices used in the Education Department.

The following open-ended questions were therefore asked to students:

- Do you see assessment as part of teaching and learning in the department?
- The prompts to this question were:
  - What are the main purposes of assessment in the subjects that you are studying? (Why are you assessed?)
  - To what extent are you as a student involved in the planning of assessment in these subjects?
  - Do you always know what is expected of you in an assessment task?
- How is assessment conducted in the courses that you are doing?
- The prompts were:
  - What are the methods of assessment used in the subjects that you are studying?
  - How often are you assessed in your subjects?
  - What is the nature of feedback that you get to your assessment?

The questions for the lecturers were phrased as follows:

- Do you see assessment as part of teaching and learning in the subjects that you are teaching?
- The prompts were:
  - What are the main purposes of assessment for the subjects you are teaching?
  - How do you plan for assessment?
  - Do you consider students' workload?
  - How do you communicate your plan to the students?
  - Do the students always know what is expected of them in an assessment task?
- How do you conduct assessment in the subjects that you are teaching?
- The prompts were:
  - What are your main methods of assessment in the subjects you are teaching?
  - How do you give feedback to the students? How soon after assessing? In what form? Do you think they benefit from the feedback?

### 3.5 PROVISIONS FOR TRUSTWORTHINESS

According to Patton (1990: 416) the credibility of a qualitative inquiry depends on rigorous techniques and methods for gathering high-quality data that are carefully analysed. The implication drawn here is that there should be an element of trustworthiness.

In order to work towards trustworthiness, I built an audit trail. Maykut and Morehouse (1998:145) maintain that a detailed description of the process of research and outcomes provides readers with a basis for judging the credibility of a study. My audit trail comprised of interview transcripts and examples of units of meaning. I gave clear details of the research methodology used, in such a way that the reader should be able to follow why and how each step was carried out. The original interview transcript was provided as an example of an interview.

Merriam (1998:201) differentiates between internal validity and external validity. Internal validity in qualitative research refers to the degree to which the interpretations and concepts have mutual meanings between the participants and the researcher, that is, how people construct reality. To establish internal validity I requested one of my colleagues to comment on my findings before writing them up in line with what Merriam (1998:201) refers to as “*peer examination*”.

External validity has to do with detailed descriptions that help others to fully understand similar situations and extends these understandings to subsequent research. In my research I have tried to record clearly how this study was carried out, how data were generated and analysed as well as the findings of this study in order to increase the external validity of the study. Furthermore data triangulation, described by Denzin in Patton (1987) as “*the use of a variety of data sources in a study*”, was used to ensure external validity. People in different status positions, namely the students and the lecturers, were interviewed.

### 3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Merriam (1998:214) cautions that the standard data collection techniques in interviews present their own ethical dilemmas. Stake in Merriam (1998) agrees with this idea in pointing out that researchers in qualitative studies are guests who invade the private world of respondents. Researchers therefore need to have good manners and a strict code of ethics.

Before I could start with the interviews, I secured permission to interview students and lecturers from the Head of Department. Thereafter I requested the participants for their consent to participate in this research. I promised to treat their responses with confidentiality; hence I used pseudonyms to protect their identities.

### 3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Qualitative data analysis is a systematic process of selecting, categorizing, comparing, synthesizing and interpreting data to provide explanations of the phenomenon of interest (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:127-128). According to Merriam (1990:128) when analyzing data one is actually trying to make sense out of data generated. Glaser and Strauss's constant comparative method of data analysis was used to analyse the transcripts for recurring themes and patterns (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:126).

Data analysis began as soon as I had gathered the first set of data and it ran parallel to data collection because each activity informed other activities. This was done in accordance with the view of Patton (1990:390) that *"the patterns, themes, and categories of analysis come from the data, they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis"*.

Lincoln and Guba in Maykut and Morehouse (1994:134) are cited as describing the categorizing and coding process as follows:

*"The essential tasks of categorizing are to bring together into provisional categories those cards (data cards) that apparently relate to the same content; to devise rules that describe category properties and that can, ultimately, be used to justify the inclusion of each card that remains to be assigned to the category as well as to provide a basis for later tests of replicability; and to render the category internally consistent."*

The initial analysis was done after I had completed the first interview. My analysis consisted of three phases, namely the coding, unitizing and interpretation of data. These phases are briefly described below.

### 3.7.1 CODING OF DATA

I transcribed the recorded interview that had been conducted with TOZ. The data was typed and photocopied. The originals were put aside and the copies were used for analysis purposes. Coding was done as described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994:27) to enable the identification of the person with whom the interview had been conducted. For example, I allocated a code to each type of data, then the source of data and lastly the page number. The first page (1) of a transcript from the interview with Tozi was coded T / TOZ-1. This code was then placed at the right-hand top of every page and pages were numbered. The next step was to unitize data.

### 3.7.2 UNITIZING OF DATA

I carefully read through the photocopied transcripts and drew a line across the page to separate a unit of meaning from the next one. I wrote a word or a phrase carrying the essence of the unit of meaning in the margin (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:129; Macmillan and Schumacher, 1993:487-488). An example of a unit of meaning from the transcript of Tozi :

*“ Assessment is where the educator can say their goals or outcomes are achieved by the students, but there are those who do that but there are those who are not interested but they give assessment to students but they cannot be interested to know if they understand what they were taught, they have to reach the mark they want only.”*

The unit of meaning from above was “purpose of assessment”. After I had identified all the units of meaning I coded them accordingly. They were then cut out and pasted on their respective index cards. The contents on the cards were transferred to a discovery sheet and I then looked for recurring themes to form the provisional categories. The following provisional categories were identified:

- Purposes of assessment
- Planning for assessment
- Preparation for assessment
- Methods of assessment
- The nature of assessment
- Feedback
- Assessment criteria

### 3.7.3 INTERPRETATION OF DATA

The data were interpreted by using the discovery process whereby provisional categories were refined in order to arrive at final categories. After I had prepared a list of provisional categories, I placed each coded unit of meaning under the provisional categories. This was done by using the “look/feel-alike criteria” described by Maykut and Morehouse (1994:137). I continually used the “look/feel-alike criteria” to compare the data cards with provisional categories, and data that did not fit into a particular provisional category was put aside to form a new category or categorized elsewhere.

Categorizing was done until each provisional category contained approximately six unitized data cards. I was then in a position to draw up a “rule of inclusion” in order to facilitate the process further, and to refine the identified categories as suggested by Maykut and Morehouse (1994:138-139) and Merriam (1998:176). Lincoln and Guba in Maykut and Morehouse (1994:139) state that a rule of inclusion should be written in the form of a propositional statement which conveys the meaning of data contained in the data cards collected under a category name. The rules of inclusion provided a summary of the meaning of each category and all the remaining data were included on the basis of rules of inclusion.

The process of categorization continued until all the data were placed according to their respective categories and none was left. As I continued to explore the possible categories I gained understanding of categories that were beginning to form. The refined rules of inclusion for each category were then compared to identify those that stood alone and those that formed salient relationships and patterns. The propositional statements that developed were later written up as “outcome propositions”. These outcome propositions later formed the framework of the findings. I further prioritized the outcome propositions in the light of their importance in contributing to my focus of enquiry and their prominence in the data (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:158).

Table 3.1 below provides an excerpt of a provisional category, and includes the rules of inclusion and the applicable units of meaning.

**Table 3.1: Excerpts from a provisional category (Purposes of Assessment) with a unit of meaning, the rule for inclusion, as well as the corresponding responses from different interviewees**

<p><b>Purpose of Assessment</b></p>	<p><b>Rule for inclusion:</b> Assessment has different purposes for lecturers and students. Lecturers use assessment to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching, to check the progress of the students with the syllabus and to generate marks as required by the examinations office. On the other hand, assessment informs students about their levels of competence. This contributes to the grading of students.</p>
<p><b>Effectiveness of teaching</b></p>	<p>T/Mcu-1.... <i>at the same time I eeh think it is good for the lecturer to see or to know his own effectiveness and the areas he is supposed to improve, so I think assessment forms part of learning and teaching in the department of education.</i></p> <p>T/Man-1 <i>I think assessment also helps an educator to know if he teaches with success.</i></p> <p>T/Sbo-1 <i>I think assessment is helpful to us, because being learners we know how much we gain and also the teachers also see what they teach, on the other hand it is not helpful just because sometimes teachers assess us in order for them to have marks.</i></p> <p>T/Mat-1 <i>Its contribution to teaching and learning is that it helps teachers, learners and other stakeholders to make professional judgment about their progress.</i></p> <p>T/Mat-1...<i>assessment helps me to improve my teaching because it indicates on an on-going basis the performance or progress of my learners.</i></p> <p>T/Nog-1 <i>...we need to know whether we are making any progress in our teaching and for that now to take place we need to give students tests or examinations.</i></p> <p>T/Nog-2...<i>sometimes it might prove that my methods of teaching are not right.</i></p>

Table 3.1 shows an example of a provisional category named “purposes of assessment”, a rule for inclusion, a unit of meaning called “effectiveness of teaching” as well as corresponding responses from different interviewees.

The process of categorization continued until all the data were placed according to their respective categories and none was left. As I continued to explore the possible categories I gained an understanding of categories that were beginning to form. The refined rules for inclusion for each category were then compared to identify those that stood alone and those that formed salient relationships and patterns. The propositional statements that developed were later written up as “*outcome propositions*”. These outcome propositions later formed the framework of the findings. I further prioritized the outcome propositions in the light of their importance in contributing to my focus of enquiry and their prominence in the data (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994:158).

### 3.8 CONCLUSION

In this chapter the qualitative case study, non-probability sampling as a method of selecting participants, the semi-structured interview as data generating technique and the constant comparative method of data analysis were discussed. In chapter four the findings from the interviews conducted with students and lecturers are presented and discussed.

## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS FROM EMPIRICAL WORK AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

#### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study was to evaluate the assessment practices for student learning in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon. The interviews that were prepared focused on eliciting information in order to understand the nature of assessment practices for student learning and the extent to which assessment practices for student learning correspond with sound assessment practices. The outcomes from the data analysis process were prioritised according to my focus enquiry and prominence in the data. The categories and sub-categories formed the basis for the findings of this research.

In this chapter I am going to present and discuss the findings of this study under two sections, namely findings from interviews with students and findings from interviews with lecturers. In each section there are four categories and each category with its subcategories is discussed immediately after its presentation. The four categories are the purposes of assessment, the planning of assessment, the forms of assessment, and feedback on assessment. Excerpts from interviews are used to illustrate the main line of feedback. In the discussion I am also making reference to related relevant literature in order to substantiate the findings and draw parallels between them. I then conclude the chapter with a summary of the findings.

#### 4.2 FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS

The views of the students registered for the National Diploma in Education were sought via semi-structured interviews as outlined in chapter 3. A total of 14 students participated on a voluntary basis in these interviews. The overall impression I came to during these interviews was that assessment is mainly used to judge students' progress with the syllabus as well as to generate marks that are used to determine their progress in the programme. It also appeared that students play a minor role in the planning of assessment, that is, approving dates that are sometimes not adhered to. One disturbing finding is that students are not familiar with any other method of assessment besides tests and assignments. In addition, it appears to be the view of students that the feedback they get is seldom beneficial for their learning except to show them where they stand in relation to their peers.

## 4.2.1 STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE MAIN PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

The question about the main purposes of assessment was asked because what the students see as important in assessment influences how they approach their studies. I hoped to find out whether students see assessment as contributing to deep learning. Under "Purposes of Assessment" in table 4.1 the units of meaning from students' responses to the question about purposes of assessment are summarised. The outcome statement in the same table is the result of the refining of the rules for inclusion done during data analysis and reported in chapter 3. It is a summary of the meaning of the students' responses to this question.

**Table 4.1: Summary of students' views on assessment purposes in the National Diploma in Education programme**

Purposes of Assessment	Outcome Statement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To see how much content students have learnt.</li> <li>• Students can see their own level of performance.</li> <li>• For lecturers to give marks which leads to the grading of students.</li> <li>• To meet deadlines set by examinations section, hence too much assessment close to final submission of marks.</li> </ul>	<p>Assessment is used to check the progress of the students with the syllabus and informs students about their levels of performance. On the other hand, assessment is used to generate marks as required by the examinations office for the exam entry as well as for the promotion of students.</p>

From table 4.1 it appears that students in the National Diploma in Education programme see the main purpose of assessment is to establish how well they have mastered what they have been taught-usually the content of the subjects they are studying. They view the marks one gets in an assessment task as proof of one's mastery of the content. Tozi said, "*...being learners through assessment we know how much we gain and also lecturers see what they teach, on the other hand it is not helpful just because sometimes teachers assess us in order for them to have marks.*" Manci adds to this by saying, "*...through assessment you will be able to know your mistakes and your performance and it will help you to study further or to improve your performance.*"

One implication of such views is that students see measurement of learning and not learning as the central purpose of assessment.

According to Boud (1990:103) such assessment is typical of assessment practices used until the late 1980's with the focus mainly on formal assessment, and relying heavily on norm-referenced or standardised tests that compare an individual's performance to that of a representative peer group. The role of the teacher in such educational situations is that of an expert transmitting information to passive learners whose role, in turn, is to absorb the information and "regurgitate" it when tested. Assessment, in the main, takes the form of written examinations and tests that are almost invariably summative, i.e. assessment at the end of the period of learning; summing up what had been learnt. The curriculum focus is on the content to be taught, learnt and tested, and promotes a view that knowledge was uncontested and neutral, and that the primary purpose of assessment is to measure and quantify how well students have memorised the information imparted.

The students also suggest that another important purpose of assessment is the allocation of marks. Nzala put it as follows: "... *the lecturers give me the test in order to have marks and I force myself to read since I want to have marks.*" Chalmers and Fuller (1996:41) note that in grading situations it is important for students to conceal a lack of understanding and limitations in their learning in whatever way they can in order to gain enough marks to achieve their goals. These authors further contend that many teachers in higher education place emphasis on the grading function of assessment and overlook its function in supporting learning. Mcunu points out that marks also encourage competition among the students as he says, "...*there is some sort of competition because if you have been given marks as students sometimes there is a tendency of showing each other marks, and if you've got less marks than your classmates you improve so as to get higher marks.*"

This attitude is a typical result of assessment that emphasises marks because improvement to the students means getting more than one's peers. Such an attitude also discourages co-operation among students as they are in competition with each other. Freeman and Lewis (1998:16) believe that norm-referenced assessment is used to establish a rank order of students in terms of their achievement and the performance of students is assessed relative to others in the group, such as class or year. Such assessment does not reveal what students can or cannot do or know.

The requirements for marks on set dates by the examinations section of the institution is viewed as another reason for assessment by the students. Ncoko commented on this by saying, "...*towards the final date for the submission of marks there is an influx of assessment tasks where one has to do two tasks in one subject.*" The pressure under which the students sometimes work encourages them to resort to surface learning strategies.

According to Gravett (1996:76) students tend to focus their learning mainly on what they regard as important for assessment purposes. Students will memorise facts consciously and at the expense of understanding, if they regard the reproduction of facts as a prerequisite for passing tests and examinations as the students also tended to do.

#### 4.2.2 STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE MANNER OF PLANNING OF ASSESSMENT

The question on the manner of assessment planning was asked obtain information about issues that are taken into account when planning assessment, for example students' workload and also whether students were involved in the planning, especially in the discussion of assessment criteria. Responses to this question would reveal whether assessment was planned as part of teaching and learning or whether it was just an afterthought.

**Table 4.2: Summary of students' views on the manner of planning of assessment in the National Diploma in Education programme**

Planning of Assessment	Outcome Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student involvement in planning for assessment is limited to approval of dates for assessment.</li> <li>• There is a lack of collaboration when lecturers plan assessment. As a result there is no consideration for students' workload.</li> <li>• Planning is restricted by institutional policy about the number of tests and assignments.</li> <li>• No clear instructions are given on assessment tasks.</li> </ul>	<p>Students are not involved in the discussion of assessment criteria and choice of assessment methods. They are only presented with dates. Institutional policy prescribes the timing and frequency of assessment allowing lecturers limited scope for coordination of individual assessment plans.</p>

It appears from table 4.2 that students see their involvement in the planning of assessment as being limited to approving dates set by the lecturers. Tozi stated, "...*We all agree to the dates set that you are going to write a test or an assignment, but as the year goes it does not happen like that.*" Mancini echoed this feeling when he said, "...*they don't stick to the dates because maybe the date arrives and the lecturer has not covered that part, so he ends up postponing the test.*" In agreement with this Homza said, "...*what we are given is just the number of tests and assignments we are going to get but not the way it is to be done.*"

Students also remarked that there is lack of coordination in the planning of assessment. Ncoko put it as follows, “...without collaborating with others the lecturer just looks at his subject as the only subject that is done by the students.” The students expressed awareness of the effects of the examinations section’s demands on assessment plans. Mcunu expressed this feeling when he said, “...you find yourself sacrificing because the test is supposed to be written now, the marks are supposed to be with the exams section, so you write even if you did not know there was going to be a test.” Bitzer (1999:21) cautions that the amount of assessment should be appropriate. Student learning should not be driven by an overload of assessment requirements, nor should teaching be impaired by burdens of assessment tasks.

It is apparent that the students’ focus in this programme is mainly on preparation for assessment and not on improving learning, as assessment is usually done for summative rather than formative purposes.

Entwistle and Entwistle in Sambell and McDowell (1998:392) note how preparation for examinations hinders students’ efforts towards genuine understanding of course material. Students themselves may perceive that assessment “contaminates” their learning. The students pointed out that they were not given clear instructions in the assessment tasks. NCA put it as follows: “*In the case of an assignment he only gives us questions and he refers us to the library. In the case of a test, he tells us which chapters to stick to, and sections to practice.*” This was echoed by Ncoko: ... “*With most subjects we are just given a test, you do not know what exactly is wanted from you.*”

The assessment criteria are often imposed upon the students and most of the time explained after the task has been done. Students do not understand what is expected of them in assessment tasks. In the words of Ncane “*Sometimes we write a test and maybe we fail or pass it and the lecturer sits down with us and discusses the objectives of the test.*” To add to that, Nela said, “... *there is no explanation of what to do to get a certain mark, you just read all the material the lecturer give you, so to prepare yourself for the test.*”

This is confirmed by the views of Mcunu who stated that, “*In some subjects, the lecturer gives you your script and comes to the class and tells you what he expected when he gave you the task, the way in which you were supposed to have tackled the question.*”

Bitzer (1999:21) suggests that assessment criteria should be understandable, explicit and public. Students need to be able to tell what is expected of them in each form of assessment they encounter.

Ramsden (1992:182) concurs with this idea when he argues that assessment plays a key role in determining the quality of student learning. If students perceive that their learning will be measured in terms of reproducing facts or implementing memorised procedures and formulae, they will adopt approaches that prevent understanding from being reached.

The students themselves are not in a position to do self-assessment because they are not informed about assessment criteria. They are therefore missing out on a good opportunity to learn from assessment.

#### 4.2.3 STUDENTS' VIEWS ON FORMS OF ASSESSMENT

The question about forms of assessment was meant to elicit information about the methods of assessment used as well as who does assessment.

**Table 4.3 Summary of students' views on forms of assessment in the National Diploma in Education programme**

Forms of Assessment	Outcomes Statement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tests and assignments are the most common methods with students preferring assignments to tests.</li> <li>• Usually one assessment task a month is given in each subject</li> <li>• Assessment is done after finishing a section of the syllabus</li> </ul>	<p>The lecturer assesses students by means of traditional methods like tests and assignments and usually gives one assessment per month after finishing a section of the syllabus.</p>

Table 4.3 shows that students in the National Diploma in Education identify tests and assignments as the main methods of assessment used in the subjects they are studying. In this regard Homza stated, *"We write mainly tests and assignments and at the end of the year we write a final exam."* Ncane confirms this point by saying, *"We are given four tests and we write assignments and sometimes an assignment substitutes a test if we are not fit."* A general preference for one method of assessment over the other is also expressed by Mcunu when he states: *"The general perception of students is that it's not easy to fail assignments although I do not know where does that come from but that is general perception, because you find that students always prefer to write assignments than tests, but I heard some saying I rather have test throughout because sometimes you do not know what the lecturer expects from assignment, it's not clear."*

Bitzer (1999:21) is of the view that assessment should accommodate the individual differences of students. Therefore a diverse range of assessment instruments and processes should be employed, accommodating and encouraging student creativity and originality.

It is evident from the responses of the students that they are merely recipients of assessment and are at no stage involved in doing assessment. Furthermore, the traditional methods of assessment used in the programme do not promote deep learning, hence some students feel that sometimes you pass a test even if you have not understood the material. It is also a matter of concern that assessment here focuses on content mainly and disregards skills and attitudes.

The students' view is that assessment is done after a certain portion of the syllabus has been completed. Nela stated, "*After finishing the various parts of the syllabus the assessment is conducted.*" Vuyo confirmed this view by adding, "*Even for us students, we don't feel good when we finish a certain section and then we don't write a test and do another one, because it means more load, so we need to finish this one and write a test on that one.*"

The view expressed by the students is a clear indication of how assessment is not integrated into learning but is done after the teaching and learning has taken place. The students refer to assessment as a separate load from learning.

#### 4.2.4 STUDENTS' VIEWS ON THE NATURE OF FEEDBACK

The question on the nature of feedback was seen as relevant because feedback is viewed as being important for student learning. Data relating to how prompt and informative the feedback is would be generated.

**Table 4.4 Summary of students' views on the nature of feedback in the National Diploma in Education programme**

Feedback	Outcome Statement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comments on performance are general and verbal, and individual comments are given when a student asks for them.</li> <li>• Feedback is not prompt.</li> <li>• There is no understanding of how marks are allocated.</li> <li>• Re-assessment is done at the discretion of the lecturer.</li> </ul>	<p>The lecturer sometimes makes general verbal comments about student performance in an assessment task and these are neither informative nor prompt. The students get individual comments only when they ask for them-usually when they need reassessment.</p>

It appears from table 4.3 that students feel that the feedback they get is not meaningful and not always for individuals. Fezi stated that *“sometimes the lecturer just make the general comments and sometimes to individual students, and they ask those with problems to consult him or her”*. Ncoko expressed a similar view by stating that *“feedback is usually for the whole group, usually verbally but some lecturers do write on the individual assignments where there is re-enforcement of work done, there are maybe suggestions on how one could have presented the content better”*. Tozi commented, *“If you can go to him or her, she advises you and tells you where you failed.”*

Tozi added to this as she said, *“For other lecturers as I have said that they are not interested when they come back with our scripts. They give us our scripts but there are others who come and tell us our mistakes.”* Nela confirmed this when she stated, *“The lecturer just gives us the scripts back and doesn't give us any feedback.”* There appears to be consensus on the idea that assessment should provide feedback to students regarding their progress. Rowntree in Gravett (1996:80) considers feedback so vital that he calls it *“the life-blood of learning”*. In agreement with these ideas Brookefield (1990:35) maintains that constructive assessment is mainly consistent with the assessment criteria which were communicated to students and should thus reward what is valued in a course, should identify areas of strengths and weaknesses clearly, should be phrased as positively as possible so that it does not to damage student motivation, should indicate ways of improving future performance, and should be rapid.

In response to the prompt: “How long does it take to get feedback after you have done an assessment task?” Fezi answered: *“Sometimes it takes a short time but sometimes it is long, sometimes the teacher does not tell you how you performed until you get the results in the progress report.”* Ncane added to this by stating, *“Sometimes you get your scripts back after four months or after a week it depends on the lecturer how committed he is.”* Ramsden (1992:181) agrees that the way in which assessment is done, as well as the results of the assessment, is more valuable to the learner to ascertain his / her own status as far as mastery of the specific content or skill is concerned. The assessment is also timeous in allowing for the learner to take corrective steps if the results of the assessment are found not to be satisfactory as yet.

The students expressed frustration with not knowing why they are given certain marks in assignments in particular. In the words of Ncoko: *“I must mention there are those where you just cannot gather where the problem was and even when you do consult with the lecturer concerned you do not get a satisfactory answer as to why you could not get maybe 80%, you spend time, and you write and re-write the assignment, consult widely books with literature work and other people who might have an interest and knowledge of the subject you present what you think is a good enough assignment you get maybe 70% and there is a big gap between 70% and 100%, and when you go to the lecturer, he tells no it’s the way I allocate marks.”*

To add to this Mcunu stated, *“What actually is most frustrating is that you don’t even know if you should make a complete reproduction of what is in the book or you should go out and present your own views, based on the learning content sometimes you get a subject where in one test you go all out and give your own views on the content and you get say 60% and you get another test and you feel that you were not happy with that 60% maybe its because you ventured more into your own opinions and you go into reproduction, complete reproduction of the book and you still get 60% the validity of those marks now become questionable.”*

Most of the students expressed the view that a second chance to do an assessment could be granted at the discretion of the lecturer concerned if requested. Tozi said, *“For a second chance you ask a lecturer, it is not the lecturer who comes to you and say I will give you, it is you the student who goes to the lecturer and ask for the second chance and the lecturer can give you or refuse. If he or she likes it depends. There is no policy that if you fail you can get a second chance”*. To add to that, Homza said, *“I think it is the fairness of the lecturer you are dealing with to give you another chance when you have not done well.”*

Most of the students believed that they were not benefiting from feedback given when they had been assessed. Most of them admitted that the first thing they looked at when they got their scripts back was the mark because to them the mark was more important than the lecturers' remarks. Moreover the manner in which assessment was conducted in the programme might have encouraged fragmented thinking because integration was lacking.

The students' view of assessment and how it affected them confirms the findings of the research that suggest that learners' perception of the assessment procedures in a course is the single most important influence on student learning (Gravett, 1996:76). Learners deem that which is required of them in assessment tasks (assignments, tests and examinations) as the “true curriculum”, and therefore they focus their learning on complying with the assessment requirements that they anticipate.

#### 4.3 FINDINGS FROM INTERVIEWS WITH LECTURERS

The views of the lecturers teaching in the National Diploma in Education programme were sought via semi-structured interviews as outlined in chapter 3. Four lecturers participated on a voluntary basis in these interviews. The overall impression I came to during these interviews was that assessment is mainly used to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching as well as the students' progress with the syllabus and these are reflected by the marks students get in an assessment task. The lecturers also feel that assessment is done in order to generate marks. It is the view of the lecturers that the deadlines for the submission of marks set by the examinations section have a profound effect on both the planning of assessment and the forms of assessment they use.

## 4.3.1 LECTURERS' VIEWS ON PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

The question about the main purposes of assessment was asked because what the lecturers regard as important for assessment influences how they assess their students. I hoped to find out whether lecturers use assessment to promote deep learning. Under “Purposes of Assessment” in table 4.5 the units of meaning from lecturers’ responses to the question about purposes of assessment are summarised. The outcome statement in the same table is the result of the refining of the rules for inclusion done during data analysis and reported in chapter 3. It is a summary of the meaning of the lecturers’ responses to this question.

**Table 4.5: Summary of lecturers’ views on purposes of assessment in the National Diploma in Education programme**

Purposes of Assessment	Outcome Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To judge progress with the syllabus</li> <li>• To monitor learning progress</li> <li>• To identify learning problems and solutions</li> <li>• To improve teaching</li> <li>• For promotion</li> <li>• For learners to earn marks</li> </ul>	<p>Lecturers use assessment to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching, to check the progress of the students with the syllabus and to generate marks as required by the examinations office. Assessment is also used to identify learning problems.</p>

Table 4.5 shows that lecturers in the National Diploma in Education programme identify one of the purposes of assessment in their subjects as helping the lecturers and students judge their progress. In this regard Mate stated, *“Its contribution to teaching and learning is that it helps teachers, learners and other stakeholders to make professional judgment about their progress.”* To add to this Nogi commented, *“We need to know whether we are making any progress in our teaching and for that now to take place we need to give students tests or examinations.”* Chalmers and Fuller (1996:41) suggest that this is one of the two major functions of assessment that enables the institution to grade students and to certify that they have met course requirements by using formal assessment tasks, for example, tests, examinations, assignments and projects. The emphasis is on finding out how much students have learned and making a summative judgement about the adequacy of their performance. Skolo stated, *“I see assessment as important in teaching and learning, because we need to know whether we are making any progress in our teaching and for that now to take place we need to give students tests or examinations, this test may be oral and then we see whether they are progressing that progress now will be determined by the marks that they get.”*

There is agreement among the lecturers about using assessment to improve teaching as evidenced in the statement by Mate: *“Assessment helps me to improve my teaching because it indicates on an on going basis or a long line time, the performance or progress of my learners.”* Nogi shared this opinion and put it thus: *“...sometimes it might prove that my methods of teaching are not right and it may also prove that students themselves were not active in the lesson I presented, by looking at the marks they get.”* Skolo added to this view by stating, *“I think actually in assessment we are not using it only to assess the students, it is much more relevant if also it is applied in our own teaching meaning now in assessing your students at the same time you will be assessing as to whether our teaching methods were relevant to the content that you were doing, meaning that we have different types of teaching methods and the subject also do differ, so we cannot use the same method in teaching particular subjects, so obviously I will use assessment as part of detecting as whether the method I used was effective.”*

The observations from the lecturers that have been quoted concur with the notion of Barr and Tagg (1995:13) who suggest a paradigm shift that entails the move from the college being an institution that exists to provide instruction towards a new paradigm of a college being an institution that exists to produce learning. Boggs (1995:25) concurs with this idea when he writes that there is a need for a new paradigm for institutions, one that defines them as learning rather than teaching institutions. The mission should be student learning, and the effectiveness of the institution should be measured based upon student learning outcomes.

Another significant purpose of assessment mentioned by the lecturers is that of generating marks required by the Examinations Office of the institution. Ndende remarked, *“Students have to work towards a certain year mark that qualifies them to write the final examinations.”* In concurrence with this Nogi added, *“I assess in order to allocate a mark...and also responding again to our examination section, that always needs the assessments, periodically.”* Ndende stated *“Assessment is basically an Exams Office-driven exercise, lacking direct input from the lecturers and the Department as a whole. Some lecturers give assessments tasks just to meet deadlines and submit required marks, rather than assess if genuine learning has taken place.”*

What the lecturers said about marks is in agreement with the view expressed by the students. Ramsden (1992:181) is of the opinion that teachers shall nearly always have to grade students in some way so that a summary of progress in an area of learning can be provided both for students and others who may wish to know something about the students' general level of performance.

Ramsden cautions, however, that it should be recognised that assessment is a way of teaching more effectively through understanding exactly what students know and do not know.

The other function of assessment is to support student learning by using less formal assessment tasks aimed at finding out about the quality of students' learning, providing students with feedback and suggesting ways in which they can improve their learning and understanding. Gray (1989:24) concurs with the accusation by Ramsden (1992) when he comments that it is not that institutions fail to engage in assessment; rather, institutions may lack systematic and reflective examinations of the purpose that assessment serves and the compatibility of practices with realising the selected purposes. It would appear that the large portion of assessment activities in institutions of higher learning is directed more at summary description and periodic judgements about quality than at specific diagnoses for the improvement of performance.

Excessive use of summative assessment can result in more and more time being used for preparation for tests as students become preoccupied with doing well in them, and in the process, effective learning might suffer. Moreover, if assessment focuses on recall preparation for it involves rote memorization of facts with little opportunity to practise higher-order thinking skills.

#### 4.3.2 LECTURERS' VIEWS ON THE PLANNING OF ASSESSMENT

The question on the manner of assessment planning was asked to obtain information about issues that are taken into account when planning assessment, for example students' workload and also if students were involved in the planning, especially in the discussion of assessment criteria. Responses to this question would reveal whether assessment was planned as part of teaching and learning or whether it was just an afterthought.

**Table 4.6: Summary of lecturers' views on the manner of planning of assessment in the National Diploma in Education programme**

Planning of Assessment	Outcome Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The programme of assessment is dictated to lecturers by the examinations section.</li> <li>• There is no collaboration with other lecturers when planning.</li> <li>• Student workload is not taken into account when planning assessment.</li> <li>• Performance standards are made known to students.</li> <li>• Assessment criteria are explained to students.</li> </ul>	<p>Deadlines set by Examinations Office prescribe the timing and frequency of assessment allowing lecturers limited scope for coordination of individual assessment plans. As a result student workload is not taken into account when planning assessment. Students are informed about assessment criteria but these are not necessarily discussed with them.</p>

The lecturers alluded to the lack of coordination of assessment plans for different subjects. The students also raised this point. Nogi felt that “...*there is no coordination in so much that you find that sometimes there are clashes that lecturer A is setting a test and I also set a test and the students always ask for permission not to write my test in favour of the other lecturer's test.*” He further noted that “... *there are times when they are really under pressure, when they are going to write perhaps five tests in a week, writing lecturer A's test and the other group's test, otherwise we normally make one test a week per group, the pressure not necessarily comes from my side but from the lecturers as a crew*”.

Assessment is apparently done after a portion of the syllabus has been taught. In this regard Nogi commented, “*I first of all teach as much as I can and then when I see that reasonable amount of readiness then I give them a test.*” The idea of assessing after finishing a section of the work clearly shows that assessment is not an integral part of teaching and learning. Ramsden (1992:183) comments on this by saying that in the past lecturers developed learning content then formulated learning objectives and only once assignments had to be compiled did they individually decide on which assessment methods to use.

Contrary to the view of the students the lecturers maintained that they explain assessment criteria to students. In the words of Nogi: “*Well I do explain to them what is required because for me to be able to assess them properly they must know first of all what is required like perhaps the effects that*

are required in a content paper and the calculations that are required in an Accounting paper and also the manner in which they should present themselves when they do Practice Teaching, how they should deliver their lessons, that they should be open to students and they should be well prepared for the unexpected questions.” The third principle of sound assessment suggested by Gravett (1996:77) is that of overt assessment criteria, since she argues that assessment criteria, which are negotiated with or clearly communicated to students, can be powerful in guiding students towards achieving aims of the course. Gravett recommends that assessment should promote and reward desired learning activities and outcomes.

The lecturers maintain that they communicate their assessment plans with students and in this regard Mate stated, “I supply my learners with a study guide amongst other things inclusive of aspects course like – the approach to be followed, syllabus broken down, assessment with criteria, and references.” The apparent lack of collaboration among the lecturers concerning assessment results in overload for the students, hence their view of assessment as an additional load to learning. The assessment plans that do not take the situation of the students into account can result in assessment that is neither fair nor effective. The lack of clarity about assessment criteria could have a detrimental effect on student development towards being able to assess their own performance.

#### 4.3.3 LECTURERS’ VIEWS ON FORMS OF ASSESSMENT

The question about forms of assessment was meant to elicit information about the methods of assessment used as well as about who does assessment.

**Table 4.7 Summary of lecturers’ views on forms of assessment in the National Diploma in Education programme**

Forms of Assessment	Outcome Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Main methods are written tests and assignments.</li> <li>• Written examinations are required even in practical subjects.</li> <li>• Overload affects the nature of assessment.</li> <li>• Projects, observations and case studies are also used with emphasis on performance to demonstrate skills.</li> </ul>	<p>Most lecturers assess students by means of traditional methods like tests and assignments as well as written examinations.</p>

The other three expressed a different view. In the words of Nogi: *“My common method is giving tests and I always assess in order to give a mark.”* In agreement with this view Ndende stated, *“Students write tests and assignments. In subjects like Practice Teaching students do practical teaching and are assessed by lecturers. At the end of the year final examinations are written.”*

According to Sutherland and Peckman (1998:99) research which focuses on teaching and learning with limited resources already suggests that teaching staff should move away from the traditional methodologies of assessment to alternative ones, in order to cope with increasing numbers of inadequately prepared students. The changing context of higher education in South Africa within the framework of SAQA has provided the opportunity to develop assessment criteria and to determine assessment methods in conjunction with the formulation of specific and generic learning outcomes.

Ndende had this to say about the methods of assessment in the department: *“Perhaps because of the way we teach, our students can only reproduce what they have been taught and there is no evidence of what they can or cannot do.”*

A view of teaching as a transmission of authoritative knowledge by a subject specialist has little space to accommodate the idea that different methods of assessment may be appropriate for the evaluation of different parts of the subject matter, or that assessment techniques themselves should be the subject of serious study and reflection. Brown and Hudson (1998:657) suggest portfolios, conferences, diaries, self-assessment and peer-assessment, not as alternative assessment but rather as alternatives in assessment. Gravett (1996:78) cites Brown and Knight as emphasising the importance of having lecturers informed on a variety of assessment methods and not adhering to a single traditional method.

Commenting about lecturers' overload, Nogi said, *“My workload affects how I assess, because we have got in the Education Department a number of subjects that we have to teach sometimes subjects go out to eleven and the number becomes very high though one would like to test often perhaps weekly to see the progress of the students but it becomes not very possible, at least one has to test after a month.”*

Angelo and Cross (1993:3) maintain that the fundamental goal shared by all educational institutions is to produce the highest possible quality of student learning, that is, to help students learn more effectively and efficiently than they could on their own. Lecturers and students need better ways to monitor learning throughout the semester so that the gaps in knowledge or understanding can be identified before it is too late to remedy problems.

These writers recommend the use of classroom assessment to check how well students are learning at the initial and intermediate points and to provide information for improvement when learning is less than satisfactory. Classroom assessment is an approach designed to help teachers find out what students are learning in the classroom and how well they are learning it (Angelo and Cross, 1993:4). This approach is learner-centred, teacher-directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context-specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice.

Only one out of the four lecturers interviewed maintained that she was using a variety of assessment methods in the subjects she was teaching. Mate stated, "*Methods that I use mainly relate to learner performances, that is learners have to perform for instance teaching practice. I have to observe the actual performance (teaching and learning) and in teaching aids or media and life skills I have to examine teaching or learning media or skills that they have produced or created. This ehhhh.... means that I have to create opportunities where learners are engaged in activities that require some kind of demonstration of the specific skills or development of specific products, media and aids.*"

Banta et al. (1996:10) recommend a variety of assessment methods, as they believe that assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of learning as multidimensional, integrated and revealed in performance over time. They maintain that learning entails not only what students know but what they do with what they know; it involves not only knowledge and abilities but values, attitudes and habits of mind that affect both academic success and performance beyond the classroom. It is their contention that assessment should reflect these understandings by the employment of a diverse array of methods.

The use of traditional methods of assessment is at odds with the aim of using assessment to promote deep learning as they encourage surface learning strategies. Students have alluded to employing a surface approach even when preparing the assignment essays for lack of proper guidelines on the task.

It is disadvantageous to some students if a limited range of assessment methods is used since this does not accommodate individual differences among the students. At the same time the use of the traditional methods only, does not take into consideration the fact that different aspects of the curriculum demand different methods of assessment.

#### 4.3.4 LECTURERS' VIEWS ON THE NATURE OF FEEDBACK

The question on the nature of feedback was seen as relevant because feedback is viewed as important for student learning. Data relating to how prompt and informative the feedback is would be generated.

**Table 4.8: Summary of lecturers' views on the nature of feedback in the National Diploma in Education programme**

Feedback	Outcome Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marks are more important to students than the lecturers' comments.</li> <li>• Problems identified are discussed with students.</li> <li>• Feedback is not always prompt due to overload.</li> <li>• Opportunities for re-assessment exist although this is demanding in terms of time.</li> </ul>	<p>Feedback is mainly in the form of marks. The lecturer sometimes makes general verbal comments about student performance in an assessment task and these are neither informative nor prompt because of overload.</p>

Table 4.8 shows that lecturers seem to agree on the issue of marks being seen as central to assessment by students. In the words of Ndende: *"Students also see any assessment as a process of producing marks. They are so mark-oriented that any comments the lecturer makes on the script is ignored and not regarded as part of the teaching and learning exercise."* Nogi expressed a similar idea when he stated, *"The students value the mark more than the lecturer's remarks."*

With reference to feedback Nogi had this to say, *"More or less after every test we discuss the problems that were found in the test and then they find out now the mistakes they have made and the purpose is that the same mistake should not be repeated in the next test."* Skolo stated, *"Well, what I do, I revise the test and then either take that group who perform badly and set another test for them or else to encourage the others to work together reset the test for the whole group, that takes a lot of my time for marking and I find that even those that did well they also improve and the knowledge gets more entrenched to their minds"*. The students, however, expressed a different view from that of the lecturers concerning the issue of feedback.

Confirming the delays in feedback already mentioned by the students Mate stated *“I always try to mark my work overnight so that if possible the next day I bring back the scripts to the students, but sometimes this is not possible because of the overload I’ve already referred to.”*

Lecturers expressed the view that although they afforded students the opportunity for re-assessment this was difficult owing to the workload already alluded to. In the words of Nogi: *“Well, what I do, I revise the test and then either take that group who perform badly and set another test for them or else to encourage the others to work together reset the test for the whole group, that takes a lot of my time for marking.”*

According to Gray (1989:24) feedback resulting from both informal and formal means of student assessment can aid the learning process if that feedback is specific, timely and on target with clear performance expectations. A test score or grade without such diagnostic feedback and explanation lacks completeness for the learner. Gray (1989:24) further contends that the formative use of student assessment can help learners to become more proficient in their own self-assessment and in learning how to learn, as well as in acquiring substantive knowledge and skills.

Feedback in the Education Department does not appear to be taken seriously in the sense that general comments about student performance in a task are usually the only form in which it is given. It is apparent that the students do not benefit from this kind of feedback because it is not related to the individual work of the student. Furthermore it would be difficult to have meaningful feedback in the absence of clear assessment criteria. The usefulness of feedback is also determined by its promptness. In a situation where lecturers are so overloaded that they cannot give feedback promptly its usefulness is reduced.

#### 4.3 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

The findings from interviews with students and staff reveal that assessment in the Education Department at Eastern Cape Technikon is mainly summative (for grading). This situation is seemingly due to the pressure exerted by the examinations section of the institution on lecturers to meet its deadlines for submission of marks. It is also evident that assessment focuses on content as both students and lecturers regard the main purpose of assessment as checking the progress with the syllabus. They have indicated that assessment takes place after a certain portion of the syllabus has

been finished. The main methods of assessment appear to be tests and assignments. The manner in which assessment is organised clearly shows that it is isolated from the learning process.

It further appears that there is a discrepancy between what the students and the lecturers say about the explanation of criteria. Students, on the one hand, maintain that assessment criteria are not made explicit while lecturers, on the other hand, believe that they explain to students what is expected of them in assessment tasks. The students express the view that it is not explained to them what they need to do in an assessment task hence they never know why they get certain marks when assessed. Students have also indicated that some lecturers come to class after they have marked to explain what was expected of the students in the assessment task. Although the lecturers' view on this point is contrary to that of the students it appears that assessment criteria are not discussed with the students and may therefore not be understood by them.

Norm-referenced assessment is used excessively and students seem to use surface learning strategies in order to cope with the demands of this type of assessment. The students report that they sometimes read just to pass a test and do not worry about understanding. This approach to learning is encouraged by the fact that even lecturers believe that the marks students get are an indication of how well they have learnt whereas in most cases they are an indication of how much can be remembered. Assessment is mainly used for purposes other than to promote deep learning.

Students are of the view that feedback is not always given after assessment and when it is given it is usually not detailed enough for them to benefit from it. The lecturers, however, maintain that they do give feedback by discussing students' mistakes in class. The findings therefore reveal that feedback is usually given to the whole group in the form of general remarks and that most of the time it is not prompt.

In the next chapter conclusions drawn from the findings are presented and recommendations are made as suggestions to improve the quality of assessment in the Education Department at Eastern Cape Technikon.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

#### 5.1 INTRODUCTION

The focus and purpose of this study was to examine the nature of assessment practices in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon as well as to determine the extent to which they reflect sound principles of assessment.

In Chapter 1 the background and context of the study that relate to the current curriculum developments affecting institutions of higher education and Eastern Cape Technikon in particular were discussed. The rationale and problem statement of this study were also explained and key terms and concepts were described.

In Chapter 2 a literature study was done in order to further explore the concept “assessment”, to explore the purposes of assessment, to investigate the relationship between assessment and learning and to discuss the relevance of classroom assessment in monitoring learning. Furthermore the need for a shift in paradigm from the traditional assessment to alternative assessment as well the principles of sound assessment, were outlined.

In Chapter 3 the research methodology of this study was discussed. A qualitative case study was selected as research strategy because a particular case was examined to provide information about the nature of assessment practices in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon. The data was analysed and the findings reported and discussed in Chapter 4.

In this chapter a summary of the findings is presented and recommendations as suggestions for improvement of assessment practices are made.

#### 5.2 SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS

Findings from literature reveal that students tend to focus their learning on what they regard as important for assessment purposes. Consequently assessment plays a significant role in student learning. It also appears that classroom assessment is an appropriate means of monitoring learning.

Literature also revealed that there is a need for a shift in paradigm from the traditional assessment paradigm to the alternative assessment paradigm in order to align assessment practices to the Learning Paradigm and the outcomes-based approach. Furthermore the literature study yielded a number of principles of sound assessment that could promote student learning through assessment.

The findings from interviews with students and staff reveal that assessment in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon is mainly summative (for grading). Assessment tends to be done at the end of learning something, rather than as a means to facilitate the learning process. It also appears as if learners do not know the details of the assessment criteria. The assessment processes in common use seemingly foster learner competition rather than collaboration. The assessment methods used in the department encourage surface learning strategies at the expense of deeper learning. Assessment is often done in a rush to meet examinations section deadlines. It is also evident that assessment focuses on content, as both students and lecturers regard the main purpose of assessment as checking the progress with the syllabus, and have indicated that assessment takes place after a certain portion of the syllabus has been finished. The main methods of assessment appear to be tests and assignments. The use of such a limited number of methods does not accommodate individual differences among the students.

Norm-referenced assessment is used excessively and students seem to use surface learning strategies in order to cope with the demands of this type of assessment. The students report that they sometimes read just to pass a test and do not worry about understanding. This approach to learning is encouraged by the fact that even lecturers believe that the marks students get are an indication of how well they have learnt, whereas in most cases they are an indication of how much can be remembered. Assessment is mainly used for purposes other than to promote deep learning.

Students are of the view that feedback is not always given after assessment and when it is given it is usually not detailed enough for them to benefit from it. The lecturers, however, maintain that they do give feedback by discussing students' mistakes in class. The findings reveal that feedback is usually given to the whole group in the form of general remarks and is most of the time not prompt. Such feedback is not useful to the students.

## 5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings outlined in paragraph 5.2, I would like to make the following recommendations as suggestions for improvement of assessment practices in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon.

### 5.3.1 VARIATION OF ASSESSMENT STRATEGIES

It is apparent from the findings that assessment in the department is mainly summative and therefore does not promote deep learning. In this respect it is recommended that lecturers should be exposed to other ways of doing assessment that promote learning, e.g. self-and peer-assessment, through workshops on assessment. In order to develop different aspects of learning namely skills, content and attitudes a variety of assessment techniques is required, not only tests and exams.

The best way to be just to the students is to use as wide a mixture of assessment methods as possible, allowing students a range of processes through which to demonstrate their respective strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, no single technique is suitable for all assessment purposes or does justice to the diversity of learners who must be accommodated.

### 5.3.2 TIMING AND PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT

Both students and lecturers have alluded to the fact that assessment is often done in a rush, to meet examination section deadlines. Since this situation affects both the purposes of assessment and the manner of conducting it, it is recommended that deadlines should be negotiated between the examinations section and the lecturers so that the needs of the students can be taken into account. The potential benefits of assessment can be lost if students are assessed too often. Frequent assessment makes it difficult for students to prepare properly for a test or to study a topic in such a manner that a good understanding of it is developed. This difficulty is compounded when students study a number of courses that are over-assessed. Students can only cope with frequent assessment by adopting the surface approach to learning.

In addition students should be educated about the purposes of assessment so that they can change from being mark-oriented and viewing any assessment process as a process of producing marks, to learning from feedback on assessment. Students would have to be exposed to classroom assessment techniques through which assessment is done for formative purposes.

Formative assessment is also not confined to the end of the course or programme as is the case with summative assessment. Frequent opportunities for students to monitor their progress and receive feedback on the quality of their learning in informal and non-threatening situations should be provided.

### 5.3.3 PARTICIPATION IN ASSESSMENT

The unilateral control and assessment of students by staff is obviously a weakness of the assessment practices in the department. Students are clearly not being helped to develop towards becoming self-determined individuals who can set their own learning objectives. Thus it is recommended that assessment should be done in partnership with students for the purpose of enhancing learning and developing independent and reflective learners.

Although the lecturers maintain that they explain the requirements for assessment tasks to students, it is the feeling of the students that they are never sure of what is expected of them in assessment. This discrepancy could be due to the fact that students do not understand imposed assessment criteria. Assessment criteria should be discussed and negotiated with the students to develop the capacity for self-assessment that will help them develop into lifelong learners. I further recommend that students be given the opportunity not only to see the intimate details of assessment criteria, but also to use the criteria. As a class exercise, the students can apply a past assessment framework to specimen past answers, then to compare scores or grades, and discuss the reasons for differences. Students can also be made to design an assessment framework for a given task and be given feedback about the objectivity and practicality of the assessment criteria they have devised.

### 5.3.4 ASSESSMENT TO FOSTER LEARNER CO-OPERATION

The assessment processes that are commonly used appear to foster learner competition rather than collaboration. It is therefore recommended that criterion-referenced assessment should be used instead of norm-referenced assessment. Group assessment techniques conducted by peers or groups promote collaborative learning. Group tasks should therefore be built into the overall assessment plan. One way of assessing a group task is to give all the students the same mark for the product, but in addition to let them get another set of marks (possibly out 10) awarded by the peers within the group for the individual contribution in terms of teamwork, initiation of ideas and contribution to the general running of the project.

As a means of formative assessment, peer assessment can take the form of students reviewing each other's writing prior to work being submitted. This will help learners to feel that they can help each other prepare to demonstrate their competence, without disadvantaging one another.

### 5.3.5 USE OF FEEDBACK

The students have expressed a different view from that of the lecturers concerning the issue of feedback. The students' view of feedback is that it is either lacking or not detailed enough, whereas the lecturers maintain that they discuss mistakes made by students in assessment. While it is ideal to give explicit personal feedback to each student, it is not easy to provide feedback to large groups. Detailed feedback can, nevertheless, still be provided to a large group by using an assessment information sheet.

To deal with the problem of overload that reduces the quality of feedback it is recommended that lecturers should consider alternatives to traditional marking patterns, depending on the purpose of the assessment task. A few group presentations, displays, reports or projects are generally shorter and easier to mark than individual ones.

### 5.3.6 ASSESSMENT POLICY AND GUIDELINES

Assessment occupies a key place in determining quality learning outcomes, but assessment practices are part of a wider picture that includes the responsibility of any individual teacher, but extends beyond it. A department, like an institution, is a holistic, interactive system, that for its own management has many procedures in place, which have their own functional use but which determine teaching and assessment procedures, and which in turn impinge on students' perceptions of what and how they will learn. It is not sufficient to leave it to individual teachers to juggle as best they may the conflicting demands of bureaucracy and of learning quality. The changes should be introduced at more than one level. Moreover, there is likely to be resistance to the introduction of alternative assessment strategies on the part of the students and so it would be more effective if all the lecturers in the department introduced the changes. The lecturers also need to be active and to cooperate in researching students' perceptions of assessment strategies.

In the light of the argument outlined above it is recommended that the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon should have a policy and guidelines on assessment, providing a coherent set of principles and procedural knowledge about assessment.

## 5.4 CONCLUSION

From this study it was possible to draw some important conclusions. Firstly, a paradigm shift in assessment from traditional to alternative is imperative if assessment is to serve the needs of the students. Secondly, various authors concur on the profound impact of assessment on learning and on how assessment can promote deep learning. Thirdly, there is consensus about the principles of sound assessment with which assessment should correspond in order to promote learning.

From the findings of the study it was also concluded that the assessment practices in the Education Department at the Eastern Cape Technikon are to a great extent not aligned to the learning paradigm and do not reflect the principles of sound assessment identified by literature. The recommendations made by the study will hopefully facilitate an improvement of the situation in the longer term.

At present it is assumed that anyone appointed to a post involving lecturing has all the skills needed to design assessment schemes and implement fair assessment. People are appointed to teaching and assessing posts not on the basis of how well they can do either task, but often on the record of their own academic performance.

For institutions of higher learning to improve the quality of assessment practices there is a need for assessors to be assessed by having a system of “licenses” to assess. Moves in this direction are already under way in the world of training. Guidelines from this study could assist and strengthen such a process.

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## ANNEXURE A

## THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

## 1. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS:

- **Do you see assessment as part of teaching and learning in the department?**

The prompts to this question were:

- What are the main purposes of assessment in the subjects that you are doing (Why are you assessed)?
- To what extent are you as a student involved in the planning of assessment in these subjects?
- Do you always know what is expected of you in an assessment task?

- **How is assessment conducted in the courses that you are doing?**

The prompts were:

- What are the methods of assessment used in the subjects that you are doing?
- How often are you assessed in your subjects?
- What is the nature of feedback that you get to your assessment?

## 2. OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS FOR LECTURERS:

- **Do you see assessment as part of teaching and learning in the subjects that you are teaching?**

The prompts were:

- What are the main purposes of assessment for the subjects you are teaching?  
(Why do you assess students?)
- How do you plan for assessment?
- Do you consider students' workload when you plan for assessment?
- How do you communicate your plan to the students?
- Do the students always know what is expected of them in assessment tasks?

- **How do you conduct assessment in the subjects that you are teaching?**

The prompts were:

- What are your main methods of assessment in the subjects you are teaching?
- How do you give feedback to the students? How soon after assessing? In what form? Do you think they benefit from the feedback?

## TRANSCRIPT OF AN WITH A STUDENT

## T / HOM - 1

- R** My first question is, “Do you see assessment as part of teaching and learning in the department?”
- P** Thank you, I see it in a very positive manner in such a way that we students are being reinforced by the assessment like for instance when we are assessed its where we know our weak points and strong points so its helping us and our lecturers as well because by seeing that some of your students are not doing well they will know what to do for instance they will do a remedial teaching in the class.
- R** What do you therefore see to be the main purpose of assessment in the courses that you are doing?
- P** The main purpose of assessment is to see whether the objectives of the lecturer are achieved.
- R** Can you say what the main purpose for you as a student is? Is it the same as that of the lecturer?
- P** To me as a student it is there to evaluate the extent of my understanding in the subject matter, and I see that in the marks that I get in a test or assignment. I get motivated and know how to improve. It is not the same as that of the lecturer because the objective of the students is to pass and the objective of the lecturer is to let the students know the subject.
- R** Is there any other way in which you are made aware of your weaknesses and your strong points besides the mark?
- P** No, there is no other way. I look at the marks and I know what my performance is.
- R** Now, these marks that you get from the assessment task besides letting you know much you understand of the subject, what other purpose are they used for?
- P** These marks are used for my promotion.
- R** Do you always know what is expected of you in an assessment task?
- P** Yes, sometimes they do, but others do not explain what students should do in assessment.

**T/HOM-2**

**R How is assessment conducted in the courses that you are doing?**

P It is conducted by tests and assignments, and kind of research.

**R Are those the only methods that are used in the courses you are doing?**

P Yes, we write mainly tests and assignments and at the end of the year we write a final exam.

**R How often are you given assessment tasks in the subjects you are doing?**

P We are used to having one assessment per month in each subject.

**R Do you normally get a plan for assessment for the year?**

P No, not exactly, what we are given is just the number of tests and assignment we are going to get but not the way or whatsoever and in some cases the dates on which they will be written although they often change as time goes on.

**R What happens when a student has missed a test?**

P When a student missed a test he used to negotiate it with the lecturer so it's up to that lecturer to give another chance to the student.

**R What happens when a students performs very poorly in a test?**

P The student is can be given another chance. But that depends on the fairness of the lecturer you are dealing with, it does not always happen like that.

**R Do you think lecturers talk to each other about the assessment that they give to students?**

R Because of the way, I think the lecturers talk to each other but they talk only about the number of tests they are going to give the students during the course of the year as far as my understanding is concerned but they don't talk about how to assess the students.

**R Do you think each lecturer is aware of the workload of students in the department?**

P A lecturer may be aware of the load in his/her subject but I don't think they are aware of the load in other subjects because some lecturers are telling us that they have not finished their syllabus but others have finished their syllabuses, so I don't think there is one who is suppose to get involve someone's lecture. Sometimes there are clashes in the times for tests.

**R Okay, thank you very much.**

## TRANSCRIPT OF AN INTERVIEW WITH A LECTURER

## T / NOG - 1

**R** How do you see assessment as part of teaching and learning in the department, that is in relation to the courses you are handling?

P I see assessment as important in teaching and learning, because we need to know whether we are making any progress in our teaching and for that now to take place we need to give students tests or examinations, this test may be oral and then we see whether they are progressing that progress now will be determined by the marks that they get

**R** Do you think they value their feedback that you give them after you have done your assessment?

P I think so because more or less after every test we discuss the problems that were found in the test and then they find out now the mistakes they have made and the purpose is that the same mistake should not be repeated in the next test.

**R** Do you explain what is required of the students for a particular assessment task?

P Well I do explain to them what is required because for me to be able to assess them properly they must know first of all what is required like perhaps the effects that are required in a content paper and the calculations that are required in an Accounting paper and also the manner in which they should present themselves when they do Practice Teaching, how they should deliver their lessons, that they should be open to students and they should be well prepared for the unexpected questions

**R** Do you normally use assessment to evaluate your own teaching?

R Yes, I do because sometimes it might prove that my methods of teaching are not right methods and some other it may prove that students themselves were not active in the lesson I presented, by showing that now by the marks that they get, I always try to evaluate myself from how good a teacher I am

**T/NOGI-2**

**R Do you normally share the results of your assessment with your colleagues?**

P No, I do not share the results of my assessment with colleagues.

**R Who else uses these results?**

P It is the examination section because they need the to determine whether students qualify to sit for end of the year exams. So the students depend on these in order to proceed to eh next level in their studies.

**R How is assessment conducted in the courses that you are teaching?**

P After every section of the work that I have done then I normally assess the students so that they know their mistakes even before the mistakes build up and the mistakes amount of readiness then I give them a test, and also responding again to our examination section, who always need the assessments, periodically.

**R How do you communicate your plan for assessment to the students?**

P I give them the dates at the beginning of the year and they approve them.

**R OK, do you normally sit and like doing some kind of coordination with lecturers who teach the same group concerning how you assess?**

P No, there is no coordination in so much that you find that sometimes there are clashes that lecturer A is setting a test and I also set a test and the students always ask for permission not to write my test in favour of the other lecture's test.

**R Do you think that lecturers generally are aware of or take into consideration the workload of students for all the courses they are doing when they give assessment?**

P I'm not sure but I would assume when the lecturers are reasonable they should always take care of the note of the students.

**R Are there times when your students are working under pressure because of assessment?**

P Yes, there are times when they are really under pressure, when they are going to write perhaps five tests in a week, writing lecture's A's test and the other group's test, otherwise we normally make one test a week per group, the pressure not necessarily comes from my side but from the lecturers as a crew.

**R Now, what are your most common methods of assessment?**

P Well, my common method is giving tests.

**T/NOGI-3**

**R Do you always assess in order to allocate a mark?**

P Yes, I always assess in order to give a mark.

**R How do you deal with a situation where a student performs very poorly in an assessment task?**

P Well, what I do, I revise the test and then either take that group who perform badly and set another test for them or else to encourage the others to work together reset the test for the whole group, that takes a lot of my time for marking and I find that even those that did well they also improve and the knowledge gets more entrenched to their minds.

**R How often do you give assessment in your subjects?**

P My workload affects how I assess, because we have got in the Education Department a number of subjects that we have to dish sometimes subjects go out to eleven and the number becomes very high though one would like to test often perhaps weekly to see the progress of the students but it becomes not very possible, at least one has to test after a month.

**Q On the average how long would you say you take to give feedback after you have given an assessment task?**

P I always try to mark my work overnight so that if possible the next day I bring back the scripts to the students, but sometimes this is not possible because of the overload I've already referred to.

**R From your observation which do you think the students value more, the mark or your re-marks?**

R They value the mark more than the lecturer's remarks. It think this is the case because the marks are important for them to get to the next level and to finally get the qualification.

**R Thank you very much!!!**

**ANNEXURE D**

**LETTER REQUESTING FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT INTERVIEWS WITH STUDENTS AND LECTURERS IN THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AT THE EASTERN CAPE TECHNIKON**

10<sup>th</sup> October 2001

Ms L G Matolengwe  
Head: Department of Education  
Faculty of Applied Technology and Education  
Eastern Cape Technikon  
P/B X 3182  
Butterworth

Madam

I am conducting a study with a title “Learning Assessment Practices in the Department of Education at the Eastern Cape Technikon: An Evaluative Case Study” as partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Philosophy in Education (Higher Education) at the University of Stellenbosch.

I write to request for your permission to conduct interviews with some students and lecturers in your department. It is hoped that the study would be of benefit to the department in that it seeks to evaluate the assessment practices currently in use and make suggestions for improvements thereof.

D N Njamela  
Lecturer: Department of Education