

## **Transformative quality assurance: Defining the new normal in higher education**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic increased the “virtual space” in higher education, particularly with respect to quality assessments, which had previously attracted much scepticism despite their potential to enhance quality. This article focuses on identifying “lived” and shared experiences regarding the applicability of virtual quality assessments and co-creating innovative and comprehensive (conceptual, strategic, and operational) ways of improving online assessments. The article draws on findings from a qualitative study that collected data from “in situ” virtual dialogues with higher education stakeholders in order to inform policy and practice. The findings revealed that strategically and operationally, contributors found virtual quality assessments to be desirable and practical provided that the attendant challenges and concerns are taken into account. Regarding the conceptual domain, the study proposed a transformative model for virtual quality assessments. Such an approach is strategic in that it involves co-creation of ideas and collaboration amongst internal and external quality assurance players to foster an environment conducive for effective and efficient quality assessments. Beyond virtual quality assessments, the study recommends wider application of the “transformative” model to all facets of quality assurance in higher education.

**Key words:** higher education, virtual quality assessments, dialogic methodology, COVID-19 pandemic, transformative quality assurance

## **Transformative quality assurance: Defining the new normal in higher education**

### **Introduction**

The impact of restrictions and constraints brought forth by the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education has intensified international interest in quality assurance. The pandemic resulted in radical and at times complete and sustained shifts from face-face to virtual approaches to teaching, learning and quality assurance (Cahapay, 2020; Mukute, et al, 2020). Quality assurance is anchored upon assessment, which refers to the systematic evaluative process of assigning value-judgments or decisions on educational activities, process, outcomes, institutions and systems, to validate quality against set standards (Braun and Singer, 2019).

It is widely acknowledged that rigorous, systematic, reliable, fair and effective assessments are pivotal in assuring quality in higher education at the level of the learner, tutor, institution and external quality assurance and regulatory bodies (Oldfield et al, 2012). Indeed, it is impossible to “escape the effects of poor assessment” (Boud 1995: 35). In responding to the inevitability of turning to virtual approaches due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, huge opportunities for increasing the “virtual space” in the higher education emerged. This article uses the term “virtual space” in reference to teaching, learning, research and assessment processes that relay and receive content and information electronically at the convenience and safety of users in time and space. The virtual space is made possible by technological affordances such as the web, multimedia, social media and specialised software (Dastjerdi, 2016).

Although online teaching and learning had already gained heft prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, virtual quality assessments had remained rudimentary, untapped and untrusted (Mogey, 2011). The rapid and ad hoc shift created a knowledge gap concerning its effect on quality, rigour and integrity of virtual vis-à-vis face-to-face quality assessment (Moore, 2011). In strategising and adapting to educational systems to suit the “new normal” and the post COVID-19 era, policy-makers, educationists, researchers and higher education stakeholders are seeking for empirical evidence on the feasibility, utility, desirability, challenges and best practices regarding virtual quality assessments. The expression “new normal” refers to the state of following the transition and transformation that occurs after a major crisis/disruption (Moura et.al, 2020; Zittoun 2007).

Bialik et al, (2016) identified four purposes of assessment: a) to evaluate progress and attainment/achievements for learning, accreditation or certification (see also Capsim, 2020; Guangul, et al, 2020); b) to support quality enhancement by providing feedback to learners,

academics, departments, institutions and external quality agencies; c) for accountability or compliance with standards to aid informed policy decision-making (see also Gamage et al, 2020); and d) for research purposes aimed at informing and improving quality.

Even in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, stakeholders still expect high quality of higher education provision. Whilst the onus is on the individual learner, tutor and the higher education institution (HEI) to ensure quality through self, peer and internal assessment, external evaluations by independent statutory, regulatory and professional quality bodies are critical for assuring quality. This is achieved through the provision of further credibility, accountability and confidence to stakeholders that graduates are still able to gain the knowledge and competencies under virtual instruction, learning and assessment. By acting synergistically to reinforce and enhance quality, internal and external quality assessments afford higher education systems the resilience necessary to weather the storm of complexities inherent in the change process (Coomaraswamy, et al. 2014).

Whilst several studies performed in various countries have focused on various aspects of virtual teaching and learning during COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020; Bao, 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021), very few studies have focused on virtual quality assessments (VQAs) at the level of the learner, institution and external quality assurance. The paper aims to cover the knowledge gap. It first presents the statement of the problem and the attendant research questions, a conceptual framework, followed by a synopsis of quality assessment in the case country prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Thereafter, the methodology and data collection procedures are described. The presentation and discussion of the findings and recommended model ensues before concluding.

### **Statement of the problem**

Scholars have since argued that VQAs are innovative, transformative, and culturally relevant (Timmis et al, 2015) offering opportunities for disruptive quality assessment enhancement (Blin and Munro, 2008). However, this radical change remained elusive due to the inhibitive policies and practices surrounding quality assessments (James, 2014; Shute et al., 2010). In advocating for VQAs, scholars (e.g. Timmis et al, 2015) were not oblivious of the attendant risks and challenges, notably social exclusion resulting for example, from the digital divide.

The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an abrupt shift from face-to-face modes of instruction to virtual teaching, learning and quality assessment (Adedoyi and Soykan, 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021). Albeit to varying extends, all countries across the globe have embraced VQAs at the learner, institution and external agency levels. At the core of this study,

was the need to investigate the applicability of VQAs from the points of view of academics, HEIs, external quality assurance bodies and governments to better understand the issues and how the assessments can be improved in order not to compromise quality.

The study used the case of Zimbabwe to explore and propose innovative approaches to virtual quality assessments as necessitated by the Covid-19 disruption and generalise therefrom. It is against this backdrop that three pivotal research questions were explored to get the views of higher education stakeholders regarding the following aspects of VQAs:

1. Are they desirable?
2. Are they practical?
3. How can they be improved?

These questions are significant in that they have implications on policy and practice regarding the future of virtual assessments and quality assurance post-COVID-19 at a national and international scale.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework (see Figure 1) provides a guide in executing this study according to the three research questions. The conceptual framework rallies data collection around the conceptual, strategic and operational domains of VQAs.

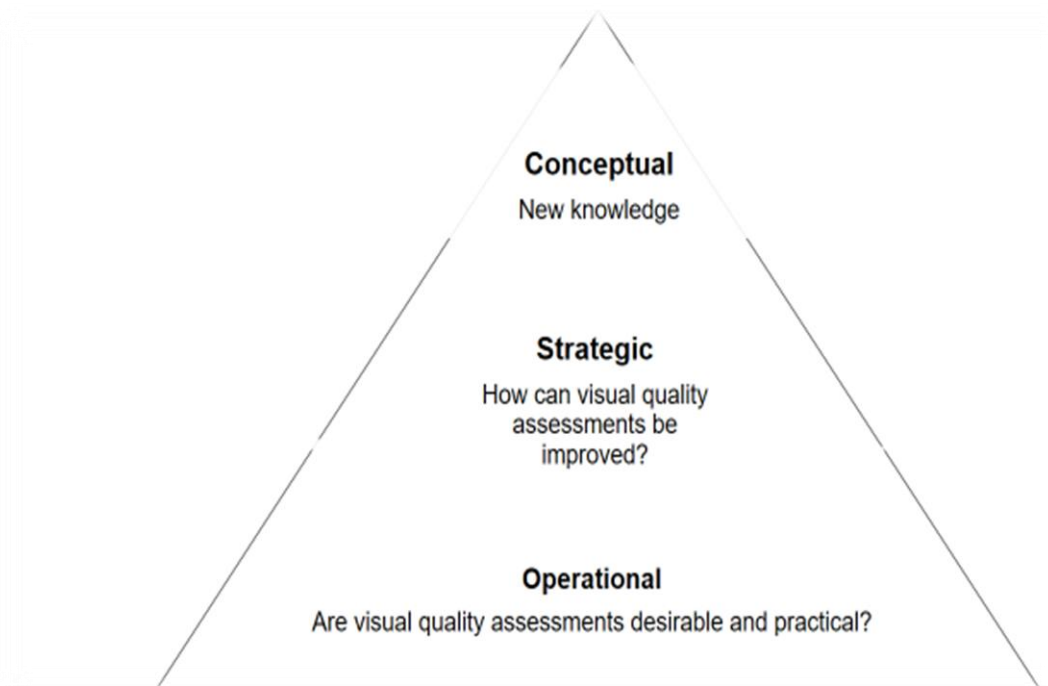


Figure 1: Conceptual framework for the study

## **Situational analysis: Quality Assessment in Zimbabwe prior to the COVID-19 pandemic**

Up until 2006, the primary approach to quality assurance was resident in HEIs through development and implementation of quantitative and qualitative internal assessment mechanisms to “ensure” that the resultant certified graduates are competent and employable. Internal assessment methods included: formative and summative assessment of student work; peer assessments; internal moderations; as well as institutional reviews. External assessment methods included: involvement of external examiners; alumni, employers and professional bodies to provide a secondary line of quality assessment. However, these external assessors whilst critical, tended to focus on disciplinary and professional issues leaving out other areas of institutional quality (Filippakou, 2007). Cognisant of the need for robust external quality assessment to “assure” stakeholders that the HEIs are adhering to the set quality standards in line with best practices (Warnasuriya et al, 2015), the Zimbabwe Council for higher Education (ZIMCHE) was established in 2006. ZIMCHE was mandated to: regulate (registration, accreditation and audits), advise and promote quality through the development and administer a quality assurance framework. Among other quality engagements, ZIMCHE undertakes external quality assessments and encourages institutional quality assessments at the level of the HEI, faculty, department, programme, course and individual.

### ***Dimensions of quality assessment***

Quality assessment in Zimbabwe can be categorised at the conceptual, strategic, and operational levels. At the conceptual level, quality assessment is centred on developing concepts, competencies, and tools required to guide external quality assurance professionals, HEIs, internal quality assurance practitioners, faculties, departments, programs, and academics to execute their work diligently. In conceptualising the assessment framework, six basic components emerge:

- Setting and communicating clear assessment aims and aligning assessment activities undertaken by both the assesse(s) and the assessor(s) in accordance to the assessment aims (e.g. to measure learning, compliance or preparedness) and standards. - Assessment can either be formative (feeding information into a programme or activity) or summative (reporting conclusions or recommendations) both serving a monitoring and improvement purpose;
- Co-developing assessment instruments and tools used by the assessor with key stakeholders and communicating them to those under assessment;
- Description of how evaluation would be carried out (process), by whom (the assessor(s) that would competently undertake the assessment), when and how often;

- Carrying out a variety of assessment activities to measure quality at designated intervals based on a portfolio of evidence and guiding standards;
- Giving feedback on assessment in the form of a report detailing areas of commendation (strengths or good practices) and gaps identified (weaknesses or shortcomings) and recommendations for improvement; and
- Utilising the information to make informed decisions in the form of an improvement plan on how the assessment outcomes can inform assessment practice.

At the strategic level, quality assessments depend on the goals and requirements of external quality assurance professionals, HEIs, internal quality assurance practitioners, faculties, departments, programs, academics. In addition, notable convergences exist as guided by:

- The contextual challenges and opportunities regarding quality assessments in higher education;
- Justifying and deciding on the processes and methodologies (qualitative and quantitative) used in quality assessment in relation to available resources and expected quality enhancement outcomes;
- Capacity building in quality assessment through training, practice, exposure, mentorship and collaboration.

The operational level consists of quality assessment activities, programmes, and outcomes targeted at external quality assurance professionals, HEIs, internal quality assurance practitioners, faculties, departments and academics.

ZIMCHE encouraged all HEIs to establish institutional quality assurance units (IQAUs) responsible for undertaking institutional quality assessments for the purpose of ensuring quality (Garwe, 2014). IQAUs constitute the bridge between ZIMCHE and an HEI assisting in ensuring compliance to the ZIMCHE standards. Institutionally, they assist in the preparation of self-evaluation reports, internal quality policies and standard operating procedures on such matters as students and staff assessments and support; adequacy of teaching and learning resources, ICTs and others.

The ZIMCHE external quality assessment involves six phases: institutional self-evaluation; review of the self-evaluation documents by experts; site visit; institutional authentication; discussion and approval by Council; and dissemination of the results. During the first stage of institutional self-evaluation, the HEI submits the required dossier prepared in accordance to the ZIMCHE guidelines, depending on whether it is programme/institutional

accreditation/audit. To this end ZIMCHE, together with HEIs came up with 15 standards that guide HEIs in evaluating their own performance (ZIMCHE, 2015). Upon receipt of the dossier, the external quality assurance agent sends the documentation to a select team of expert peer reviewers who then scrutinises the document and compile a list of red-flag areas requiring explanations and also areas requiring expert advice. The peer reviewers include content experts, practitioners from industry and commerce, members from relevant professional bodies and in some cases students. This is followed by a site visit to the institution by the peer reviewers coordinated by ZIMCHE to verify the claims made in the institutional self-evaluation and to further explore the issues identified during the review of the dossier (Garwe, 2015). The peer reviewers then prepare a report which ZIMCHE sends to the HEI for their response, following which a final report is then written and submitted to the ZIMCHE Council for final discussion.

### ***Status of virtual quality assessments prior to COVID-19 pandemic***

VQAs have been part of the quality assurance infrastructure and framework even before the COVID-pandemic in Zimbabwe in the areas discussed below.

#### **Assessment of learners and staff**

Assessments of students' work (assignments, projects and dissertations/thesis), academic promotion dossiers and staff performance were already being carried out using electronic affordances. In assessing complex problem-solving competencies, STEM academics were also making use of immersive environments, simulations and games. Literature evidences the utility and effectiveness of electronic portfolios in developing and showcasing progress and achievements through the use of videos, audios, text, images, animations, touch and motion simulations (Baillie et al., 2010; Garrett, 2011; Stone, 2012; Timmis et al, 2015). HEIs were using local and international assessors to virtually evaluate academics for promotion to associate and full professor levels. This way HEIs can cost-effectively utilise the best talent available at their convenience regardless of their geographical location.

#### **Institutional quality assessments**

ZIMCHE had already been assessing academic quality at national level using a system of monitoring and auditing through the use of electronic data analytics. In order to attain strategic, administrative and reporting efficiencies, ZIMCHE also made use of virtual methods in its registration, accreditation, and harmonisation endeavours. Collective assessment was coordinated through teams of local and international peer reviewers. These experts communicated and shared information through for example texts, social media, application sharing, emails, file transfer, and tele-conferencing.

This section has revealed that the quality assessment process in Zimbabwe was predominantly a physical/paper-based process but had a significant virtual component. Virtual learner, staff and institutional assessments activities included electronic portfolios, peer reviewer collaborative team engagements, conveyance and sharing of documents. Whilst the shift to the reliance mainly on VQAs made it critical for the study to ascertain their applicability of as necessitated by the Covid-19 disruption, it also underlined the fact that virtual methods of assessment and communication were already in existence.

## **Methodology**

The study adopted a qualitative approach wherein participants were encouraged to make their contributions “in situ” through virtual dialogues. Scholars (e.g. Bain and Golmohammadi, 2016) have been critical of the lack of dialogue in assessment practice, a situation that Bain (2010) refers to as “dialogic vacuum.” According to Bain and Golmohammadi (2016) narratives and conversations encourage a community of assessment practice and gives rise to good practices for quality improvement. As a methodology the “dialogic turn,” is acknowledged as a transformative way of sharing and co-creating knowledge through explaining perceptions, making interpretations and suggestions to inform decisions and lead change (Carless, 2013; Padrós and Flecha, 2014). Accordingly, the study used a dialogic and reflexive methodology to interrogate and propose innovative approaches to virtual internal and external quality assessments in line with the three research questions. In doing so, it applied the systems theoretical approach (Meadows, 2008) to collectively and comprehensively address the disruption caused by Covid-19 to assessment in higher education.

Ethical clearance procedures were adhered to and participants’ personal and institutional identities were anonymised. Data was collected from contributors using dialogues and a metalogue to jointly discuss issues from varied personal perspectives, professional experiences and vantage points. The contributors included the ministry of higher and Tertiary Education, Innovation Science and Technology Development (MoHTEISTD), external quality assurance agency the ZIMCHE, professional bodies/associations, institutional quality assurance unit (IQUA), university leadership, academics, support staff and students.

The study procedure involved five distinct but inter-related steps as outlined below:

- i) Electronic requests and questions were send to each of the identified contributors via email and WhatsApp at least two weeks prior to the first dialogue session. This afforded each contributor enough time to discuss the issues and gain consensus and a mandate to effectively represent his/her constituency



- ii) The first dialogue sessions were held with each participant and audio-recorded in accordance to the approved ethical guidelines.
- iii) The audios were transcribed and the data was cleaned to remove information that could point to the contributors or institutions.
- iv) The consolidated transcripts were shared with all the contributors prior to the second dialogue session to allow them enough time to review their contributions and those of other contributors.
- v) The second dialogue session (metalogue) constituted a virtual focus group that collectively analysed and built on own and each other's ideas.
- vi) The researcher used the information from the focus group to formulate the study findings and recommendations.

After each dialogic session with each of the stakeholders, data was analysed to identify and flag issues that would be pursued in other dialogues. All thematic categories and issues identified from the dialogues were then used as a basis for discussion during the metalogue session involving all contributors. Descriptive analysis was used to capture important quotes for presentation and discussion. Although the study was qualitative in nature, it was possible to synthesise qualitative data from the themes derived from the different contributors.

## **Findings**

The study aimed to investigate the desirability and practicality of VQAs and how they can be improved in order to uphold the rigor, validity, reliability and information-generation tenets associated with quality assessment practice (Gardner, 2012). The major findings of this study are presented according to the three research questions guided by the conceptual framework for the study.

### ***Are virtual quality assessments desirable?***

The findings relating to the desirability of VQAs are presented according to the following themes: understanding of the term "quality" of higher education; purpose of assessment; type of assessment; and areas of focus for VQAs.

The discussion around the desirability of VQAs generated debate on their interpretation of the meaning of quality in higher education. Contributors were generally agreed that the quality of educational outcomes is dependent on the quality of instruction and learning and is evidenced by student grades and throughput. That in turn determines the quality of an institution, its leadership and the higher education system. The 2020 second semester results from most

institutions were reported to be higher than the ones recorded prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. The contributor representing university leadership averred that “the excellent results obtained for the last semester clearly evidenced the effectiveness of virtual teaching and learning and the virtual formative and summative assessments too.”

Although the purposes and types of VQAs were different for the different contributors as shown in Tables 1 and 2 respectively, there was consistent and total convergence regarding their desirability. They were in total agreement that VQAs afford excellent opportunities for learner evaluation, institutional evaluation and external evaluation. The student contributor averred: “...it is the only way as we are all online.” The external quality assurance contributor stated that “... the online format is faster, easier and perhaps cost-effective.” This finding corroborate those by Jagger (2013) who found the virtual environment to be less disruptive of the usual workflow, provide opportunities for flexible schedules, and generally to have lower costs than the face to face approaches.

Table 1: Desirability of virtual quality assessments: Responses by purpose of assessment

<b>Contributor</b>	<b>Category of QA</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>Response</b>
MoHTEISTD	External	Accountability, progress evaluation and funding	Desirable
ZIMCHE	External	Institutional/programme accreditation, registration and institutional/academic audit	Desirable
Professional Bodies/ Associations	External	Programme accreditation, monitoring and evaluation for quality control	Desirable
IQAU	Internal	Research, monitoring and evaluation for quality enhancement	Desirable
University leadership	Internal	Certification (students) performance evaluation (staff)	Desirable
Academic staff	Internal	Evaluate learning progress and achievements for individuals and groups	Desirable
Support staff	Internal	Support learners, academics and departments, by providing feedback	Desirable
Students	Internal	Evaluate learning progress	Desirable

Table 1 shows that the purposes of VQAs rallied around the need to evaluate the performance of individual and groups of learners, staff, institutions, systems, policies, processes and procedures for purposes of quality enhancement. The purposes of assessment found in this study with those in literature (Bialik et al, (2016); Capsim, 2020; Guangul, et al, 2020 Gamage et al, 2020.

Table 2: Desirability of virtual quality assessments: Responses by type of assessment

Type	Contributor	Response
Self-assessment	Students Academics Support staff IQUA HEI ZIMCHE	Desirable
Peer assessment	Students Academics Support staff IQUA HEI ZIMCHE Professional bodies	Desirable
Institutional assessment	IQUA Professional bodies ZIMCHE MoHTEISTD	Desirable
External evaluation	Professional bodies ZIMCHE MoHTEISTD	Desirable

Table 2 revealed that different actors in the higher education system largely use similar types of assessment depending on whether it is internal or external quality assurance. Because of the use of similar assessment type by contributors, the metalogue stimulated debate on the quality of the various types of assessment in the virtual environment. This helped to develop shared understandings illuminative for practice in the new normal. Contributors were in agreement that the same standards that are used in face-to-face assessments are applicable in virtual assessments but drew distinctions regarding the focus of assessment. These peculiarities are critical in ensuring that VQAs adhere to minimum quality standards in terms of their design and administration in order for them to elicit reliable information. The areas of virtual assessment focus revealed from the current study are outlined in Table 3.

Future research and dialogue is critical to develop suitable quality assessment standards for the virtual environment.

Table 3: Areas of focus for virtual quality assessments

Assessment Area	Issues to focus on
Assessor and assessee needs	What, why, who, how, when?
	Facilities
	Policies and systems
	Infrastructure and facilities
	Equipment

Capacity and operational constraints	Staff technical and material capacitation
	Student technical and material capacitation
Assessment methods, tools & modalities	Learning management system
	Schedules
	Synchronous and asynchronous
	e-assessment platforms
Continuous review & improvement	Progress monitoring/tracking
	Data analytics

These findings reveal that a significant change in modalities of assessment attract changes in assessment practice thereby warranting the development of evidence-based models of assessment. Collaborative efforts in identifying good practices and developing standards, guidelines, models of assessment, and building capacities of assessors.

### ***Are virtual quality assessments practical?***

The findings indicated that virtual quality assessments have practical advantages as long as the attendant challenges/concerns are taken into consideration. Tables 4 and 5 show the perceptions of the contributors regarding the practical advantages and challenges/concerns of VQAs respectively. It can be seen from Table 4 although reasons might differ from the standpoint of contributors, VQAs are practical, offering the flexibility, speed, cost-effectiveness and ease of measuring assessment trends. Literature stating similar advantages of VQAs to students, academics, institutions and policy-makers has been extensively reviewed by Alruwais, Wills and Wald (2018).

The contributor representing professional bodies revealed that, “the traditional thinking that personal contact is key to effective interaction and assessment was ‘locked down’ to give way to virtual certification assessments. Support and guidance assessment experts in now fully online-based.” The external quality assurance agent official averred that “my colleagues were sceptical about carrying out programme accreditation and audits online. The successful completion of the minimum bodies of knowledge programme online has given them confidence and elicited the support and trust of HEIs.” The university leadership’s perception was that “serve for connectivity issue, the online quality assessment meetings through Google Meet, Teams and Zoom were extremely efficient and cost-effective. In addition, with prior participant consent, reporting and record keeping were further enhanced by the recording function.”

Table 4: Perceptions of the contributors regarding the practical advantages of VQAs

<b>Contributor</b>	<b>Practical advantages of VQAs</b>
MoHTEISTD	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speed of data collection necessary for evidence-based decision making</li> <li>• Creates instant assessment lines of communication (dialogue and metalogue) using various fora, blogs, webinars, surveys and polls</li> <li>• Innovative and improvement-oriented</li> </ul>
ZIMCHE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easier and faster thus saving time</li> <li>• Enables longitudinal performance tracking and analysis</li> <li>• Lowers costs since no accommodation, travelling and subsistence is required</li> </ul>
Professional Bodies/ Associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility: VQAs are adaptive and convenient to the assessor and assessee since they can take place simultaneously in multiple locations, are not site-dependent and time-critical.</li> </ul>
IQAU	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapid assessments can be done</li> </ul>
University leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lowers costs since no accommodation, travelling and subsistence is required</li> </ul>
Academic staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Easier and faster thus saving time</li> <li>• Enables longitudinal performance tracking and analysis</li> <li>• Increases accuracy of assessment</li> </ul>
Support staff	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Enables timely feedback</li> </ul>
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Flexibility in time and space</li> <li>• Enables timely feedback</li> </ul>

Table 5: Perceptions of the contributors on the practical challenges and concerns of VQAs

<b>Practical challenges and concerns of VQAs</b>	<b>Contributor</b>
Availability, adequacy and cost of relevant technological affordances e.g. infrastructures, platforms, hardware, software, tools, Internet	All categories of contributors
Digital literacy (technological competency support and capacitation)	All categories of contributors
Power and connectivity inconsistencies	All categories of contributors
Integrity (of the assessor and/or the assessee)	All categories of contributors
Confidentiality	All categories of contributors
Managing uncertainty	All categories of contributors
Digital fatigue	All categories of contributors
Meeting recording shyness – some people were not comfortable with being recorded	All categories of contributors

The challenges and concerns of digital divide, power outages, connectivity, integrity, confidentiality, uncertainty and digital literacy that should be taken into consideration when embracing VQAs were shared by all stakeholders. The Ministry of Higher Education contributor explained that “it is clear that every participant of the VQA process needs access to a computer and functional internet as well as an initial (and continuous) training to be familiar and competent with e-assessment”.

### ***How can virtual quality assessments be improved?***

The findings revealed that for VQAs to be effective and sustainable, attention should be given to addressing the challenges identified above particularly with reference to divergent levels of digital literacy amongst the assessors and the assessed. Of equal importance is the integration of a dialogic approach to assessments to stimulate open discussions on issues regarding VQAs at the micro, meso and macro level as suggested by Mahdiun, Masoumi, and Farasatkah (2017). Scholars have argued that in the absence of stakeholder-driven quality-oriented reform programmes, either complete outsiders will determine the models and practices adopted (Kumar, 2020) or public opinion of higher education will be eroded (Kumar, 2020; Lederman, 2019).

The contributors gave the following recommendations on improving VQAs:

- Need for adequate planning, preparation by both the assessor and the assessed;
- Regular and effective communication using formal and informal platforms e.g., WhatsApp
- The assessor should communicate clear protocols and guidelines to those under assessment. The same recommendation was given by another Zimbabwean-based study that focused on evaluation of the quality of education in the primary education context (Garira, Howie and Plomp, 2019).
- Rigorous self-evaluation
- Culture of integrity is key

### **Transformative approach to quality assurance**

Through the dialogic and metalogic interactions, the contributors used their knowledge and 'lived' COVID-19 experiences to conceptualise a transformative approach to VQAs and quality assurance in general. Such an approach was considered strategic in that it was inclusive, involving co-creation of ideas and collaborative efforts all higher education stakeholders to foster a conducive environment VQAs. Transformative approaches may vary according to disciplines but they have a common thread notably the respect for collective expertise based on context and roles. When each stakeholder feels respected, they put their trust in the process and leveraging upon their needs and challenges and experiences, they bring out their best in co-developing appropriate interventions, policies and operational frameworks (Zvavahera, 2021).

Figure 1 illustrates how the proactive dialogic process of inclusion of all stakeholders responsible for quality assessments led to convergence around a "transformative" quality

assurance model. This model is consistent with the systems theory as articulated by Meadows (2008) who recommended the need to use the members of the system to critically reflect upon their system and suggest sustainable solutions.

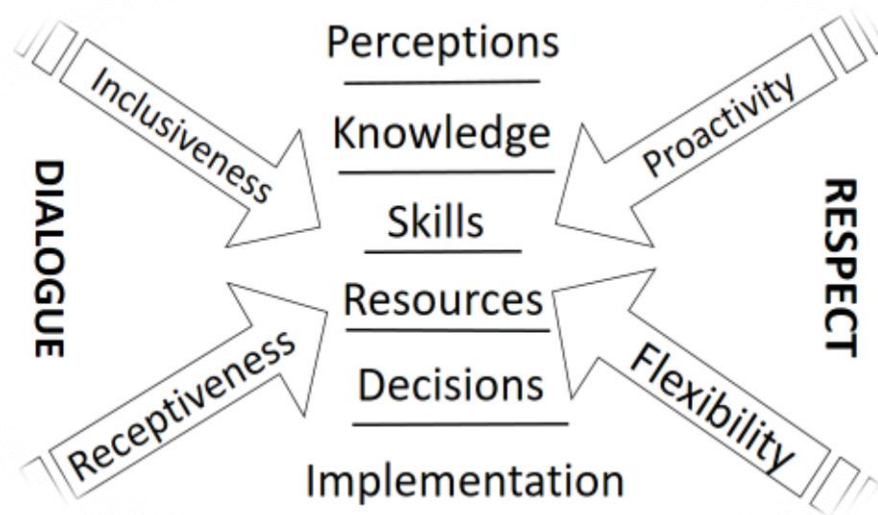


Figure 2: Transformative quality assurance

Based on lessons learnt from this study, it is recommended that the transformative quality assurance process would commence by establishing stakeholder perceptions on how they could best be involved, supported or evaluated. This would be followed by an assessment of the available knowledge, skills and resources available at their disposal to see how these can be employed in designing and implementing of tailored quality assurance programmes and processes.

Figure 3 shows a succinct illustration of the findings as guided by the conceptual framework for the study.



Figure 3: Illustration of the findings as guided by the conceptual framework for the study.

### **Study limitations**

The study took a bird's eye view of the wide range of quality assessments in higher education from learner assessments, internal quality assessments through to external quality assessments. Whilst this holistic or global approach was able to address critical conceptual and strategic issues regarding VQAs, detailed and deeper operational context or type specific issues were not possible to determine.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the way quality assessment was being conducted thus paving way for increasing the virtual space through VQAs. Collectively, higher education stakeholders were able to co-construct a conceptual model for transformative quality assurance. This agrees with literature wherein a crisis situation of a global magnitude characterising the COVID-19 pandemic is "not only destructive, so that relief and repair are required on a scale so large that collective action is necessary, but it also disrupts, jostles or challenges views and attitudes, and affords to the inner self as well as to others a respectable and face-saving reason for changing one's views as to policy" (Gaus, 1947 pp. 16).

The transformative quality assurance model can be replicated in other contexts and can be refined through further research to improve VQAs in higher education. The need for collaboration and sharing comprehensive best practices at the conceptual, strategic, and



operational level was emphasised. It is critical to continue enriching knowledge to improve VQA practice at the level of the tutor, institution and external quality assurance and regulatory bodies.

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