

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.57125/FED.2025.03.25.02>

How to cite: Osiesi, M. P., & Blignaut, S. (2025). Humanising Assessment in South African Higher Education: Insights from the Literature and Authors' Reflections. *Futurity Education*, 5(1). 24-37.
<https://doi.org/10.57125/FED.2025.03.25.02>

Humanising Assessment in South African Higher Education: Insights from the Literature and Authors' Reflections

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Received: October 23, 2024 | **Accepted:** December 26, 2024 | **Available online:** January 19, 2025

Abstract: Humanised assessment is the process of aligning and implanting the elements of humans into gauging learners' academic and non-academic endeavours. Given the surge in curriculum and pedagogy decolonisation, Africanisation, and humanisation discourse, an inquiry needs to be focused on humanising the assessment process. Therefore, this study fills the literature gap by providing insights on humanised assessment in South African higher education. The study explored the authors' perceptions and literature evidence on assessment in South African Higher education, how humanising the South African higher education assessment is, the most adopted assessment practices in South African higher education, and how assessment can be further humanised in South African higher education institutions. The critical interpretive synthesis methodology was utilised for the study, which combines evidence from the literature and the researchers' views (involving bibliometric and documentary analysis methods) for synthesising evidence on the research subject). Findings indicate

that assessment in South African higher education is perceived to be linguistically biased, unfriendly, and harsh to students' personalities, learning desires, and choices; formative and interactive assessment are the most used approaches in South Africa; the COVID-19 pandemic has fostered the humanisation of the education process, including executing assessments that promote students' learning processes. Thus, putting a human face and voice into the assessment process and instruments enhances the "humanness" that qualifies as humanised assessment.

Keywords: Assessment, Higher education, Humanising, South Africa.

Introduction

Education is a potent mechanism for creating and sustaining a better and functional society. Without it, the world and (possibly) everything in it would be challenging or non-functional. This has been re-emphasised by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 and 10, which support quality education and reduction of inequality, achievable through education. The quest for "specialised" skills, knowledge, and capabilities necessitated higher education, where higher levels of learning, criticality, qualifications, certifications, and training can be assessed and eventually attained. As a result, educational assessment plays a crucial role in educational systems, impacting policy decisions, instructional methods, and student learning. It modifies and shapes the behaviours and outcomes of those under its purview, acting as a route for incentives, enlightenment, and information.

Important feedback is provided to parents, teachers, and students through the educational assessment process, which directs students' study efforts and academic decisions (Sievertsen, 2023). The outcomes of teaching and learning transactions within educational settings are subsumed in such settings' assessment processes and techniques. A way by which educational assessment, especially in higher education, can further be enlivened and strengthened is by humanising it. Several concerns regarding South African higher education being discriminatory and lacking equity abound (Adonis & Silinda, 2021; Hlatshwayo, 2020; Qwabe, 2020), we thus argue that these are also reflected in assessment processes.

Assessment is the process of checking the extent of attainment of a learning goal or the objectives of a programme. Usually, it is classified as formative or summative. Formative assessment aims to improve the teaching-learning process by providing ongoing feedback that can inform instructional adjustments while summative assessment measures student learning after an instructional period by comparing achievement to predetermined standards (Alaziby & Aldabbus, 2023). It involves a variety of tactics that have been demonstrated to support improved learning outcomes, more profound comprehension and knowledge retention, and identifying students' strengths and weaknesses in the learning process (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Dixon & Worrell, 2016; Weurlander et al., 2012; Widiastuti et al., 2020; Yan & Pastore, 2022; Yaroshenko et al., 2024). Formative assessment, according to Beesley et al. (2018), Black and Wiliam (2010), Guptan and Rasiah (2016), and Kültür and Kutlu (2021), is crucial for improving academic standards because it enables educators to modify their lesson plans in response to students' learning demands. For summative assessment, Cheng (2006) and Martynova et al. (2020) posit that effective summative assessment should be informed by formative insights to appropriately reflect student learning. Humanising the assessment procedures (whether formative or summative) is essential for students' inclusiveness within the learning phase.

In the context of educational assessment, "humanising assessment" could be termed as a method that strongly emphasises acknowledging students as distinct individuals with their own needs, experiences, and backgrounds. It is an assessment that considers the emotional, social, and

psychological aspects of learning and measures students' academic achievement (and other learning outcomes). The objective is to establish a more welcoming and encouraging assessment atmosphere that encourages students' participation, autonomy, and a feeling of community (Kültür & Kutlu, 2021; Oke, 2015). By giving students the freedom to decide how, what, when, and where they should be assessed as well as what (the format) and why they should be assessed, a student-centred approach to assessment can be used to humanise the process and encourage students to participate actively in the same process.

Effective assessment practices substantially positively impact learning experiences, student engagement, and the development of critical skills essential for success among students in South African higher education institutions (Melser et al., 2020; Nulty, 2011). Assessment encourages self-directed learning (including self-assessment), wherein students are encouraged to take ownership of their education, promoting metacognition and critical thinking (Melser et al., 2020). Through the process of self-assessment, learners can gain a more profound comprehension of the subject matter and an enhanced understanding of their areas of strength and weakness (Khursheed & Shahid, 2023; Siegesmund, 2016).

Scenario-based or contextual assessments encourage students to use what they have learned in real-world contexts, which improves their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Palwe et al., 2020). According to Gopalakrishnan and Ganesh Kumar (2015) and Palwe et al. (2020), these kinds of assessments not only increase the relevance and engagement of learning but also help students get ready for the challenges of the future labour force. Also, curriculum development and instructional techniques are informed by the assessment's role in promoting a feeling of community among learners (Gaffney, 2022; Rocconi, 2010). Teachers can make curricular modifications and apply focused interventions by analysing assessment data to find student learning patterns and gaps (Aghamolaei & Fazel, 2010; Almulla, 2022). The quality of education given to students is eventually improved by this evidence-based approach, which guarantees that educational programmes stay effective and relevant (Aghamolaei & Fazel, 2010; Almulla, 2022). Students are more likely to interact favourably with the learning process when assessments are made to be inclusive, clearly defined, encouraging and humane (Beauchamp & Monk, 2022; Gaffney, 2022).

An ideal strategy to achieve humanised assessment is for students to assess one another and themselves, enabling them to think critically about what they have learned and interact meaningfully with their peers (Jaiswal & Al-Hattami, 2020). Fostering learners' autonomy and responsibility and providing a flexible learning environment that caters to their various requirements are essential to humanising the assessment process (Agbene et al., 2023). To help students demonstrate their knowledge and abilities in a supportive environment and improve their performance, such assessments should be devoid of tensions and anxieties and full of "humanness" (Adiredja et al., 2023; Rahman, 2023).

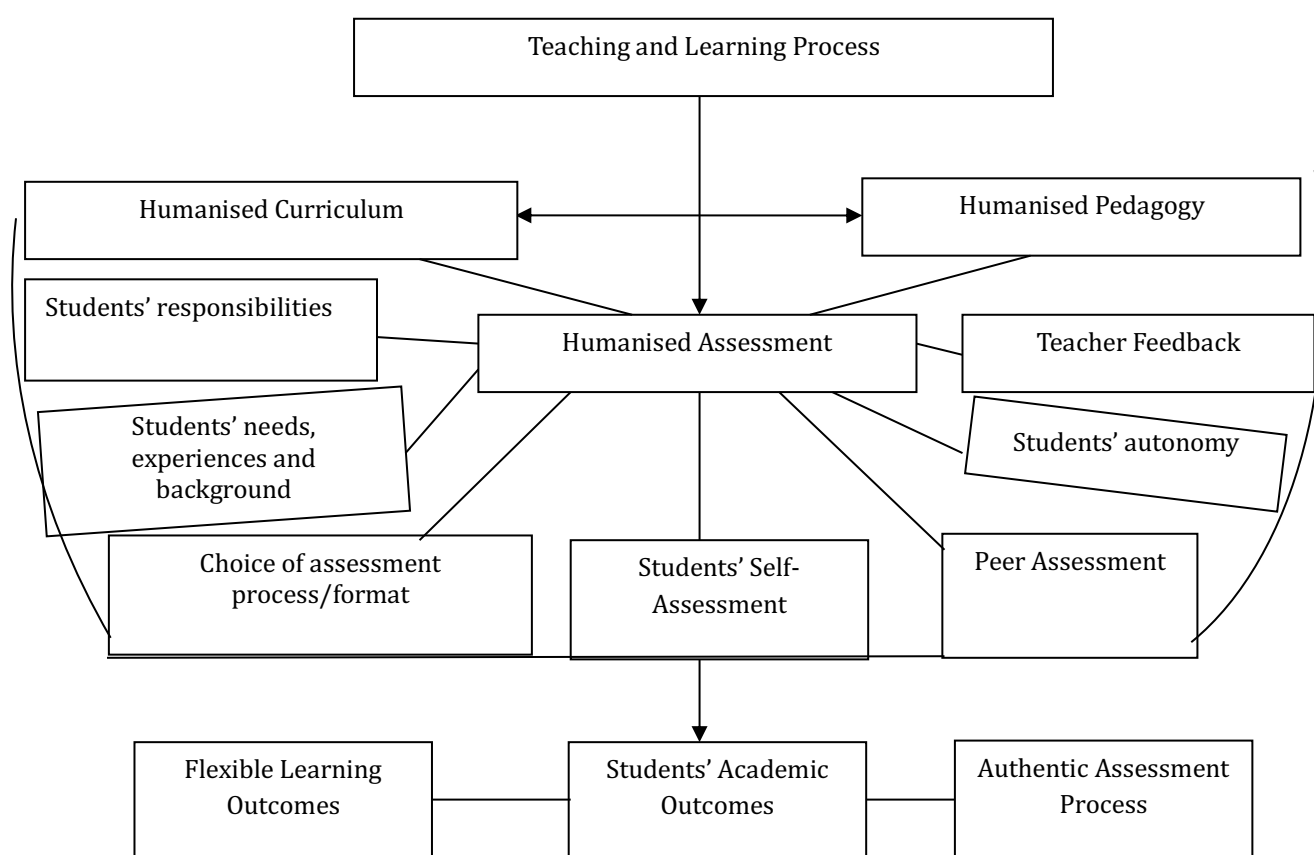
What defines 'humanness' could be subjective and contextual. On this basis, we decided to situate what defines (including the accompanying indicators) the humanisation of assessment and the assessment procedures denoted in a multicultural, multilingual, and diverse school climate and classroom context in South Africa. Since "humanisation", "humanness", and "humanising" curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment are relatively emerging items of discourse within the realm of education, further demystifying these terms to boost the knowledge gap and humanisation literature and discourse becomes necessary and timeous. Against this background, this study, through insights from the literature and the authors, explores some pertinent and burning concerns regarding humanised assessment in South African higher education. The study tends to provide answers to these questions:

1. What are the perceptions of assessment in South African higher education?
2. How humanising is the South African higher education assessment?
3. What are South African higher education's most adopted assessment practices?
4. How can assessment be humanised in South African higher education institutions?

Figure 1 denotes this study's framework. It indicates that a humanised curriculum and pedagogy facilitate the teaching and learning process, which gives rise to a humanised assessment process. Through a humanised assessment, students' responsibilities, needs, experiences and background, choice of assessment process/format, self and peer assessment, autonomy, and teacher feedback to students. Should this be attained, flexible learning outcomes, authentic assessment, and enhanced student learning outcomes can be ensured.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



Source: The authors (2024).

Methodology

For this study, the critical interpretive synthesis methodology was used. It highlights how crucial it is to comprehend the background and significance of the literature so that researchers can consider their positionality and prejudices (Dixon-Woods et al., 2006; Jones, 2015). Because it promotes discussion between the viewpoints of the researchers and the literature, this reflective element enhances the analysis and advances theory development (Furlong & Lester, 2022; Morris, 2023). Moreover, the bibliometric and documentary analysis methods were adopted to synthesise research evidence (Dalglish et al., 2022; Öztürk et al., 2024). Document analysis and bibliometrics are methods

for evaluating and interpreting textual resources that offer important insights into various academic areas. This approach is beneficial for synthesising results from articles and literature because it allows researchers to grasp the context of the documents and extract relevant data (Dalglish et al., 2022; Öztürk et al., 2024). Data was gathered and analysed by formulating research questions, choosing pertinent articles and literary works, organising them, performing a preliminary review and coding of these works, extracting the data, thoroughly analysing the extracted data, interpreting the analysis's findings in light of the research questions, and reporting the results.

We strictly followed the PRISMA guidelines in selecting the literature, and reporting the findings from such literature. We discerned recurrent themes and patterns in the literature by scrutinising its contents, which eased the interpretation of the findings (Dalglish et al., 2022; Islam, 2017; Seuring & Müller, 2008; Öztürk et al., 2024). Through our reflections and a thorough examination of prior research, this strategy helped the researchers gain a deeper understanding of the issue. We conducted the literature survey from conference proceedings, published articles in journals, and book chapters found in the databases ERIC, SCOPUS, EBSCO, and Google Scholar (Dalglish et al., 2022; Öztürk et al., 2024).

Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education, the ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre) database is a comprehensive online resource that offers broad access to information and literature about education. ERIC was founded in 1966 and is an essential resource for researchers, educators, policymakers, and members of the public who are interested in educational research. It is an invaluable resource for accessing high-quality instructional materials because of its vast literature database, sophisticated search features, and regulated vocabulary tools. Developed by Elsevier, Scopus is a comprehensive abstract and citation database that was introduced in 2004 and is a vital resource for researchers looking to access a wide range of scientific literature and analysis tools. Its purpose is to index scientific articles from various disciplines, including education. It gives scholars the means to monitor, evaluate, and display research publications.

EBSCO, often known as EBSCOhost, is a robust online research tool that gives users access to many databases on various topics. It offers a wide range of academic articles, e-books, and other educational resources, making it a comprehensive resource for libraries and educational institutions. EBSCO is a vital research resource that facilitates scholarly investigation in several disciplines. Its vast database collection, intuitive layout, and sophisticated search features make it an invaluable resource for students, teachers, and researchers looking for trustworthy information. Lastly, Google Scholar is a free academic search engine created by Google to make scholarly material from various fields easier to find. It is a vital resource for scholars, researchers, and students seeking to locate articles, theses, books, conference papers, and patents from various sources. It is a preferred resource for locating academic material because of its broad indexing capabilities and intuitive features.

Because a “humanising” discourse is still in its infancy, published literature on the subject was sparse. Nevertheless, during the literature review, we established an inclusion criteria where only articles on assessment in higher education in Africa/South Africa we selected and reviewed, while the exclusion criteria were articles that fall outside the inclusion criteria. We used the following search key terms: “Humanising assessment,” “Assessment,” “Higher education,” “University,” “Humanising teaching and learning,” “South Africa,” and “Humanisation of assessment processes”, as these terms, in our opinion, fully situate the subject of this research. Our university librarian assisted us in streamlining the literature survey process. We thoroughly examined and considered the implications of the data concerning the research questions as we collected the data from this literature.

Results

RQ 1: What are the Perceptions on Assessment in South African Higher Education?

As consumers of higher education, students have expectations about the quality and applicability of assessments. Emphasis continues to mount on the necessity of assessments that are not only rigorous but also connected to students' professional goals and practical applications (Govender et al., 2022). Students' experiences and academic outcomes are greatly impacted by their opinions about assessment procedures. Several variables, such as the quality of instruction, the applicability of assessment tasks, and students' socioeconomic background, affect how assessments are perceived in South African higher education. The decolonisation movement, historical injustices, socioeconomic context imbalances, and the scars of apartheid may have caused multiple misalignments in assessment in South African schools, including higher education (Bozalek & Boughey, 2012; Heleta, 2016; Mahlaba, 2020).

As noted by Hurst and Mona (2017), assessment practices in South African higher education frequently fail to appropriately accommodate students for whom English is not their first language (linguistic diversity). Also, the quality of education is a significant factor that influences how assessments are perceived. According to Sikhwari et al. (2019), students perceive a humanised assessment as one that integrates relevant assessment tasks with teachers' feedback. This highlights the need for assessments to be rigorous and aligned with students' expectations and learning experiences. At the same time, Vally Essa et al. (2023) opine that assessments should be inclusive and representative of students' unique experiences. Harry and Chinyamurindi (2021) contend that assessments must consider the different backgrounds of learners to be assessed.

RQ 2: How Humanising is the South African Higher Education Assessment?

Higher education in South Africa has changed its assessment policies to adopt a more transformative stance. According to Sims (2023), current assessment policies at several learning institutions show a move towards procedures that put justice and equity first. Fostering social justice and inclusivity within assessment frameworks also requires the integration of transformational pedagogies, such as those based on Ubuntu ideals (Ngubane & Makua, 2021). This viewpoint is consistent with the larger transformation goal in South African higher education, which aims to foster a more inclusive academic atmosphere and address systemic injustices.

It can be assumed that these initiatives are humanising. Higher education's procedures for assessment have been reevaluated in response to the COVID-19 epidemic, embellishing such procedures with elements of "humanness". According to Dison and Padayachee (2022), the move to remote learning brought to light the necessity of a well-rounded approach to evaluation that considers both "assessment of learning" and "assessment for learning". Finding this balance is essential to developing assessments that promote students' learning processes and assess their performance, and these contribute to humanising the education process.

RQ 3: What are South African Higher Education's Most Adopted Assessment Practices?

The decolonisation context in South African higher education has had a major impact on assessment practices, as more people realise that diverse epistemologies and pedagogical strategies that consider the nation's distinct socio-cultural landscape must be included (Angu, 2018; Angu et al., 2020; Pineteh, 2013). Promoting equity in educational assessment has created more inclusive assessment methodologies (Angu et al., 2020). Higher education in South Africa is moving towards more inclusive, tech-enhanced, and interactive assessment techniques. To improve learning outcomes and student

involvement, more formative and interactive approaches have replaced traditional paradigms in the assessment practices that are most often used in South Africa.

The shift to participatory assessment frameworks (formative and interactive approaches) in South African higher education evaluation is in line with international trends in educational assessment (Sims, 2023). As it aims to empower students and give them a voice in their learning processes, the emphasis on participatory assessment is symptomatic of a larger commitment to justice and fairness in academic assessments (Sims, 2023). Additionally, the use of technology in assessment has grown in popularity, especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Verhoef & Coetser, 2021). This has facilitated online assessments and the adoption of digital tools that support both formative and summative assessments resulting in the alignment of assessment methods to a 'humanised' framework (Dison & Padayachee, 2022; Verhoef & Coetser, 2021).

RQ4: How can Assessment be Humanised in South African Higher Education Institutions?

Humanising assessment at South African higher education institutions aims to provide students with a more welcoming, encouraging, and stimulating learning environment. This method strongly emphasises the value of viewing learners as unique individuals with a range of needs, experiences, and backgrounds. Establishing early identification mechanisms for at-risk students is a crucial tactic in the process of humanising assessment (Cassells, 2017). Furthermore, the assessment process must be made more humane by implementing interactive assessment techniques that support a move away from top-down, conventional systems of evaluation and towards more collaborative ones (Ramhurry, 2020).

Humanising assessment procedures also heavily depends on the decolonisation of the curriculum, a topic of constant debate in Southern Africa. Students' interest and engagement can be increased when decolonised content is incorporated into assessments because it allows them to see themselves reflected in the course materials. Furthermore, improving feedback systems is essential to humanising assessment. By assisting students in recognising their strengths and weaknesses, these feedback and constructive comments can greatly enhance their learning outcomes (Stegmann & Malan, 2016).

We maintain that for assessment to be humanised, it must be genuinely learner-centred, be enmeshed in the ethics of care (Blignaut, 2024), inform or teach learners the reason why they are learning a subject or a module, learners should be taught what is expected of them assessment-wise, schools must create an enabling environment that exposes learners to what is expected of them, and that allows their full critical engagements. The assessment process should understand learners' needs and be designed to exhume all the potential in such learners (including all that they know and can do), and students' voices and choices regarding what they want to be assessed on, how and when they should be assessed, as well as the reason for their being assessed must be clearly defined within the curriculum and pedagogy frameworks.

Discussion

This study provides an overview of assessment, the humanised state of assessment, and how to further humanise the assessment processes in South African higher education. The findings indicate that assessment in South African higher education is perceived to be linguistically biased, as it does not cater to students' linguistic diversity. The quality of instruction drives it, the applicability of assessment tasks, and students' socioeconomic background. Most times, the assessment processes are not in tandem with students' expectations and learning experiences. This denotes that the assessment of learning is unfriendly and harsh to students' personalities, learning desires, and choices (Sikhwari et al., 2019). In line with the submissions of Vally Essa et al. (2023) and Harry and Chinyamurindi (2021), assessments

and their processes must be inclusive and representative of students' unique experiences and backgrounds.

With the advent of COVID-19, humanising the education process, including executing assessments that promote students' learning processes and assessing their performance is essential. Current assessment policies at several learning institutions now show a move toward procedures that put justice and equity first (Sims, 2023). However, as Xulu-Gama and Hadebe (2022) and Hurst and Mona (2017), point out, South African assessment practices still ignore students' linguistic backgrounds, which hampers its humanising status. This could be the rationale for scholars advocating for translanguaging (Kajee, 2019). Findings indicate that more formative and interactive approaches have replaced traditional paradigms in the assessment practices that are most often used in South Africa, aimed at improving learning outcomes and student involvement.

This assessment practice aims to empower students and give them a voice in their learning processes (what they learn or unlearn), as it fosters justice and fairness in such assessment processes (Sims, 2023). Also, there has been a surge in the use of technology in assessment (commonly known as online assessment), especially during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (Verhoef & Coetser, 2021). In recent times, online assessments have supported both formative and summative assessments (Dison & Padayachee, 2022; Verhoef & Coetser, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic's effects, the ongoing conversation about decolonisation in education, and the necessity for fair assessment all influence these developments. These approaches have the potential to greatly improve the educational experiences and outcomes for students in South Africa as they evolve further.

Conclusion

Assessment is expected to make all learners learn meaningfully and enhance their enthusiasm for further learning, discovering, discussing, applying, positive imagination and intellectual growth. Regrettably, more needs to be done, as the assessment process in most South African schools (including higher education) tends to be dehumanising, as it is always about the grades, the scores, or marks obtained by the learner, and not what such a learner can really "do" (thus 'de-cultivating' learning). This paper provides a foundation for a humanising assessment discourse. Learners, especially at higher education levels, are expected to be reflective and critical thinkers, who can provide solutions to their problems, those of their families, and the society. However, this seems to be far from reality. The African (including South African) curriculum and pedagogy are disjointed, resulting in disjointed learning, which creates difficulty for a humanising assessment endeavour. Also, the African assessment procedures have no defined articulation route, which further dehumanises its processes.

Institutions can give students a more relevant and relatable educational experience, including a humanised assessment, by emphasising African epistemologies and integrating African knowledge systems into the curriculum (Heleta, 2018). Instead of only emphasising grades, educational institutions should prioritise prompt and individualised feedback that promotes self-reflection and personal development. By supporting students in their learning journeys and fostering a culture of continuous learning and improvement, this strategy elevates assessment to a more meaningful and human-centred process. Fostering a humanised assessment environment requires attending to teachers' and students' mental health and well-being (Mutinta, 2022). Since assessment is both for learning and for learning, authentic learning opportunities must be provided for students. We argue that "practicalised" assessment forms should be promoted in South African higher education, as this makes it possible to rate learners on what they can do (not what they know only).

Limitations of the Study

This study employed the critical interpretive synthesis methodology to explore the subject. Only five search terms, "Humanising assessment," "Assessment," "Higher education," "University," "Humanising teaching and learning," "South Africa," and "Humanisation of assessment processes", were used for the review. The sampled literature was limited, and the review was strictly limited to journal articles, scholarly books, doctoral theses, and conference proceedings published in English and indexed in ERIC, SCOPUS, EBSCO, and Google Scholar only. Also, the authors' self-bias might affect the generalisability of findings from this study.

Suggestions for Future Research

During the review of scientific publications, we identified unresolved aspects of challenges that extend beyond the scope of our research, especially regarding strategies by which assessment can be humanised for disabled learners, how assessment can be humanised at the early childhood and primary education level, How assessment can be humanised the emergence (and disruption) brought about by artificial intelligence in the field of education, as well as assessment tools for this group of learners in the Africa education space. Therefore, we recommend that future research look into this when conducting their research investigations. Moreover, research into a workable assessment framework/model that is inclusive and humanised is encouraged.

Acknowledgement

The corresponding author thanks Nelson Mandela University, through the Office of Research Development, for providing the support that birthed this research.

Conflict of interest

No conflict of interest is declared by the authors.

Funding

No funding was given or received for this paper.

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