

Experiences of Former Markers of Undergraduate Assignments and Examinations at A University: A Case Study

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Abstract

Purpose

The present study explored experiences of former markers of undergraduate assignments and examinations at the University of South Africa (Unisa).

Methodology

Qualitative method of research was used to gather data. Colaizzi's method (1978) was used to analyze and interpret data. The article's frame of reference was informed by Mezirow's transformative learning theory which is aligned to critical theory (Mezirow 2009).

Findings

Findings were based on the following: Demographic information, markers' experiences in marking assignments and exam books, content knowledge, markers' meetings, duration of marking assignments and examination books as well as students support, and suggestions are the themes that emerged from the data that was gathered.

Originality

It is recommended that the university must develop a policy for external markers for marking assignments and examinations of undergraduate program. All E-tutors must be trained to support students after the official closure of registration and before examinations are set. All markers must be trained - through a markers' guide - to mark assignments and examination books.

Keywords: experiences, former markers, undergraduate assignments, undergraduate examinations, former markers of undergraduate assignments and examinations, university, university examinations

1. Introduction

Marking of students' assignments and examination books is important for a university to ascertain the level to which they have acquired content knowledge (www.ignou.ac.in; www.unisa.ac.za) and (Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, Parkin & Thorpe (2011), Grieve, Moffit & Padgett (2016), Grieve, Moffit & Padgett (2019)). The University of South Africa (Unisa) is one of the few students-centered open distance e-learning (ODEL) universities in Africa (www.unisa.ac.za). Students' assignments and examination books are also marked at UNISA. This article is important because it explored the experiences of former markers of undergraduate assignments and examination books in the College of Education at Unisa. The problem of this study is that there is no evidence that they were explored before. Focus is on markers' experiences of marking which includes students' content knowledge and language use in responding to questions, markers' meetings, duration of marking and student support.

Markers' experiences of marking students' assignments and examination books is important to students because it assesses the extent to which students understand subject content. For example, Uganda has an open distance learning (ODL) institution. The latter has poor internet connectivity which affects rural students more negatively than urban

students (Basaza, Milman & Wright 2010). It makes submission and marking of assignments manually or electronically a challenge at the Uganda ODL institution. Besides, most markers of Uganda's ODL institution have little experience in marking assignments and exam books manually or electronically. That exacerbates challenges at the institution.

Contrarily were findings of a survey conducted by McCabe, Doerflinger & Fox (2011) which indicated that marking and commenting on assignments electronically was easier, effective and quicker compared to marking manually. Comments were easy to understand, and turnaround time was quick. Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011) also assert that markers' experience to assess distance education students work manually is crucial because they also focus on pragmatic issues in marking and awarding marks. However, the feedback often depends on the marker's initial training, background guidance they received in the markers guidelines manual (MGs). Some use, for example, templates because they were trained to use them.

Stellmack, Keenan, Sandidge, Sippl & Konheim-Kalkstein (2012) assert that marking and providing feedback either electronically or manually are equally debatable to the extent which feedback shows experience and improves students' content knowledge, understanding and skills of responding to questions. It may also include the requirements of markers undergoing staff development training that may (not) be related in any way to feedback and marking.

Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011) maintain that assignments which students submitted in open universities (OU) were assessed and commented on by contracted markers who at the same time acquired learning experience. Those markers were appointed because they had relevant qualifications and experience. They were initially trained with the use of a university centrally produced marking guide (MG) document and attended markers' meetings before they could mark assignments and examinations. Training content included, for example, reading and understanding students' responses to question, consistency and fairness when marking and commenting or providing feedback in assignments. Markers' meetings that were held included training markers to be fair and justify the allocation of marks per question, assignment and or examination book as well as recording marks on a standardized summary sheet (2011). According to Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan, (2010) and Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, (2015), feedback could be used for several purposes which include helping students to be aware of the extent to which they understand learning content, their strengths and areas that need to be improved. That also includes establishing action that needs to be taken to improve themselves.

According to Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011), many open universities globally shared similar challenges such as high numbers of markers that were registered and not always coping with the duration (turn-around time) of marking their (students') work. They further maintain that based on the assignments students submitted, markers were required to mark, use a standardized summary sheet to comment on and return marked assignments with feedback within two weeks. Few universities seem to have specific turnaround time of marking. The University of Namibia has specific turnaround time of marking examination books of less than fifty in two days, between fifty and hundred is four days and more than hundred is seven days (www.nu.ac.na). Contrarily is Unisa which doesn't have fixed guidelines on the turnaround time of marking assignments and examination books. Markers are advised to return marked assignments and examination books when they completed marking - even if others were still outstanding (own observation).

According to Tait (1989) few open university lecturers were exposed and trained to improve the duration (turn-around time) of marking students' assignments and effectiveness of student support in many sub-Saharan countries' ODL institutions. Uganda, which may be criticized as backwards, used traditional teaching methods and limited learner-centeredness exposure to support students (Muyinda, Lubega, & Lynch, 2009). Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011) assert that many markers need to be trained to work under pressure, manage time and not cheat or cut corners despite high workloads. The use of grid was found unacceptable because feedback was similar, and students were demotivated. Makoe (2012) concurs the preceding assertions but asserts that Uganda's strategy limited the quality of students' support. Lecturers occupied the centre of teaching and learning. Contrarily were Botswana, Ethiopia, Namibia and South Africa where students were at the centre and lecturers facilitating (2012). This lack of exposure and support continued as late as 2014 (Musingafi, Mapuranga, Chivanza & Shupikai 2015).

Bwire, Nyagisere, Masingila, & Ayot, (2015) reported the findings of studies conducted in developing countries like India and Kenya that lecturers who were not supported with skills to teach ODL students could not achieve the aim of facilitating quality teaching and student support. Shields (2015) and Grieve, Moffit & Padgett (2016) stresses the importance of supporting lecturers and their commenting in assignments because that enables them to have a better perception in its acceptability.

Based on the preceding discussion it's important to state this study's research purpose, namely, to explore experiences of former markers of undergraduate assignments and examinations at Unisa.

1.1 Problem Statement

The 2013 Unisa Annual Report (www.unisa.ac.za) recorded that 328 851 students were enrolled at Unisa and that they constituted 35 percent of South Africa's tertiary students. This figure increased to 337 944 in 2015 and 344 015 in 2017 and 381484 students in 2018. Of the latter figure (381484), 116234 (about 30,46 percent) were enrolled in the College of Education (CEDU) (www.unisa.ac.za) – whose former markers constitute the focal point of this article. The high number of student enrolments at Unisa has led to it acquiring the services of external markers to assist in marking students' assignments and examination books so that the university's turn around time can be adhered to (www.unisa.ac.za). The researchers noted with concern the inconsistencies in marking assignments and examination books. This included, for example, different methods of recruiting markers, remunerations for similar work across departments in the university, etc. There is no recorded evidence of research conducted to establish the experiences of markers of undergraduate assignments and examination books in the College of Education at Unisa. It is against this background that an exploratory study was conducted on the experiences of former markers of undergraduate assignments and examination books in the College of Education at Unisa.

1.2 Frame of Reference

This article's frame of reference is informed by Mezirow's transformative learning theory that is aligned to critical theory (Mezirow 2009). It describes how members of a society develop and use critical self-reflection to review their beliefs and experiences then change their world view. It also uses disorienting dilemmas (experiences that do not fit to one's beliefs about the world view) to challenge one's thinking, reconsider wherever underlying assumptions and beliefs about the world are accurate and thereby consider to either change or not change their worldview. Transformative learning theory occurs in the context of a dialogue with other members of a society (Mezirow 2009; Howie & Bagnall 2013; Christie, Carey, Robertson & Grainger 2015). In contextualizing the transformative theory, external markers develop and review their beliefs and experiences through critical self-reflection followed by using dialogue to change or retain their world view on a specific matter or phenomenon. They equally consider what they experience and do not necessarily believe in, then decide to either change or not change their world view about marking assignments and examination books. That is done in the context of a dialogue through consultation with primary lecturers of the modules wherever they are unsure.

2. Methods

Open-ended qualitative method of research was applied to gather and interpret data for this article (Bashir, Afzal and Azeem 2008). The researchers further used a "naturalistic approach" that sought to understand the experiences of Unisa former external markers of undergraduate assignments and examinations in the real-world setting without influencing or manipulating the respondents' views (Bashir, Afzal and Azeem 2008; Lebeloane and Nyauumwe 2014). It is a method in which respondents answer questions without limiting their space to respond. The markers of undergraduate modules who volunteered to participate in the research were randomly selected from a pool and their respective spaces for responding to each of the questions was not limited.

The study was conducted on former Unisa's College of Education external markers to establish their experiences of marking Bachelor of Education (BEd) undergraduate assignments and examinations. Twelve respondents, six of whom were males and the other six females, were randomly selected from the pool of former markers because some of the modules cut across the BEd programs. This number was found to be enough for providing rich information needed to complete this research project. They all fulfilled the stipulated criteria which included a minimum qualification of BEd (Hons) in the relevant field they were marking. For example, two of them held the required BEd (Hons) and the rest held either a MEd or PhD degrees in the relevant field.

All identified respondents fulfilled the stipulated teaching experience criteria. The most experienced respondent had twenty-six years' experience of teaching. Three respondents had practiced as teachers for twenty-five years. Two respondents who were practicing teachers with a service of twenty-four years of teaching were the most experienced. Five had been teaching for fifteen years and the least experienced had been teaching for ten years. They were each requested to participate voluntarily in the research project. They could cancel their participation whenever they needed to. Their confidentiality was guaranteed in that they were each promised their identity will not be disclosed to anyone and their responses will be used for the study only.

The interviews, that led to the findings, were informed by themes gathered from previously documented records when literature was reviewed (Colaizzi 1978, Harwood & Petric 2012; Davis 2013). A questionnaire was crafted and used to collect data. It was emailed to all respondents who agreed to participate in the research. Ten of the twelve respondents returned the filled questionnaire. Because this study used a qualitative method of research, it also

borrowed from a constructivist paradigm. The latter views at knowledge which is the experiences of former Unisa external markers of undergraduate assignments and examinations, in this context, as socially constructed and provide meaning to it (Zhang & Kenny 2010; Grieve, Moffitt & Padgett 2019). Data was analyzed and interpreted.

3. Results

Data was analyzed and interpreted by borrowing from Colaizzi's method (1978). The latter was firstly described and followed by analysis and interpretation of data that was gathered for the article.

3.1 Colaizzi's Method of Data Analysis and Interpretation

Colaizzi (1978) uses a seven-step descriptive phenomenological method to analyze and interpretation data. The researcher(s) firstly read all the respondents' opinions several times to familiarise themselves with data they gathered (Colaizzi 1978). Thereafter, they consider opinions of all the respondents, identify and give meaning to relevant phenomenon that arises. The researcher(s) then reflexively try to "bracket" their pre-suppositions and stick to the phenomenon as close as possible. That is, they strive by all means not to influence data. The researcher(s) then identify and cluster all statements (themes) they regard as important and directly relevant to the study into themes and give meaning to the common themes. Themes are used to analyze and interpret data (Colaizzi 1978; Morrow 2014; Morrow, Rodriguez and King 2014). Respondents are also quoted verbatim to ensure their views are not influenced in any way. After analyzing and interpreting every theme, the researcher(s) write(s) detailed but short, dense statements each of which captures essential aspects of the theme they deemed relevant. They are justified with relevant sources. Lastly, the researcher(s) review all the data to ensure they did not miss any aspects out and that it was identified, corrected and improved (modified) in a concise yet all-encompassing descriptive way to ensure it was reliable and valid (1978). Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method is contextualized here under to analyze and interpret data for this article.

3.2 Analysis and Interpretation

Although there are many different methods of analyzing data, Colaizzi's (1978) method of analyzing data was identified as most relevant for this article. Respondents were required to respond to a questionnaire that were sent to them by email because it was most convenient in terms of turn-around time of respondents who were coincidentally spread around Gauteng, Mpumalanga and North West provinces. They filled and returned their responses by email. The latter were transcribed. In following on Colaizzi's (1978) method, the researchers read them several times to familiarise themselves and understand the data that was gathered.

After reading and familiarizing themselves, the researchers considered opinions of all respondents, identified and give meaning to relevant phenomenon that arose. They, at the same time, tried to refrain from pre-empting the respondents' views by sticking to the phenomenon as close as possible. They reflexively "bracketed" their assumptions by striving not to influence data. The researcher(s) then identified all important and relevant statements, gave meaning to them and clustered them into themes. That is, data was analyzed and interpreted by following the six (6) identified themes that emerged from the transcripts the researchers read (Colaizzi 1978; Morrow 2014; Morrow, Rodriguez and King 2014). They included demographic information, markers' experiences in marking assignments and exam books, content knowledge, markers' meetings, duration of marking assignments and examination books as well as students support and suggestions. Some respondents were quoted verbatim to ensure their views are not influenced in any way. After analyzing and interpreting every theme, the researchers wrote detailed but short statements to capture all essential aspects of each theme they deemed relevant and justified them with sources.

3.3 Demographic Information

All respondents were more than forty-five years of age. Seventy percent were still employed in the Education sector as either a teacher, head of department, deputy school principal, school principal or senior officials in the Department of Basic Education. Thirty percent were retired from the Education sector. All respondents had the basic qualification requirement to mark, namely a BEd(Hons) in the appropriate field of Education. They included three who hold a PhD in Education, four who have a MEd qualification and five with BEd (Hons). From the preceding information, all markers were older than forty-five years of age. Seventy percent of them were still employed in the Education sector with thirty percent retired from the sector. All respondents were appropriately qualified. Relevant qualifications and experience of markers in the preceding discussions endorsed Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) as well as McCabe, Doerflinger & Fox (2011) assertions that they (relevant qualifications and experience of markers) are important because they contribute to facilitating relevant feedback to students' assignments in open universities (OU).

3.4 Markers' Experiences in Marking Assignments and Exam Books

Fifty percent of the respondents (CEDU undergraduate markers) were encouraged by some CEDU teaching staff members to apply for marking. The other fifty percent obtained information on marking by word of mouth without knowing anyone at Unisa. All respondents applied, were respectively interviewed by the primary lecturers and offered the opportunity to mark.

Fifty percent of the respondents had been marking for more than five years, forty percent for four years and ten percent for three years. All markers were encouraged to exchange cell phone numbers. They developed a WhatsApp group through which they shared experiences, sought advice and clarification from fellow markers. All markers confirmed that they did not mark the exact number of assignments and examination books for which they were contracted. They marked slightly more or less than their quota. One marker said:

"I did not mark the exact number. I remember my claim was slightly less than what I expected, and the lecturer showed me the number of scripts I collected and returned was less".

Forty percent of the respondents confirmed they marked more than one module. Another respondent indicated that "Since I marked more than one module, not all questions were misunderstood by students".

Seventy percent of the markers noted changes on the way in which departments function of late. Some expect markers to comment in assignments and examination books and others do not need any comments in examination books. A respondent wrote that "Departments work differently in terms of rules, e.g. others do not need overall comments in the examination books. Others in assignments only".

It emerged from the preceding discussion that fifty percent of the former markers were recruited by some CEDU staff members and had more than five years' experience of marking. The other fifty percent with equally more than five years marking experience had joined marking through the word of mouth. Forty percent of the respondents marked more than module. Seventy percent of all markers noted changes on the way in which departments function of late. Some expected markers to comment in assignments and examination books and others did not need comments in examination books. The preceding responses endorsed Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) as well as McCabe, Doerflinger & Fox (2011) assertions that relevant qualifications and experience of markers is important because it facilitates relevant feedback to students' assignments in open universities (OU). The interaction of markers and supporting them (Chetwynd and Dobbyn 2011; Shields 2015) by encouraging the exchange of cell phone numbers so that they can discuss concerns and ideas during marking is another important factor. Some marked more assignments and examination books than others because the students' numbers may decrease due to attrition, dropout and other factors. Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) endorse that it is common for these factors to influence marking. The latter could affect the number of assignments and examination books a marker may be allocated to mark.

3.5 Content Knowledge

Sixty percent of the respondents respectively agreed that many students did not seem to understand content of the module. Their responses to assignments attested to it. For example, one of the respondents commented that "Other students just give answers that are out of the questions with no content knowledge".

"Lack of content knowledge led to many students' cheating by copying others' assignments. Some even plagiarized others' work" said one respondent. Respondents reported such matter to the primary lecturer and the latter dealt with it. For example, one respondent reported that "The Primary lecturer deals with the issues of copying and plagiarism separately".

Sixty percent of the markers raised concerns about the low standard of language command that makes students not to be able to construct sentences and present their facts in a way that markers can understand content knowledge. One respondent stated that "The students are now too different from the students of the years 2006 to around 2015. They read to answer questions and not to understand content before they answer. The standard at schools are down and now students straggle to even write proper language and spelling. One cannot understand their knowledge of content".

There is uncertainty whether lack of content knowledge is due to language barriers. For example, one of the respondents commented that "Some language barrier might be a problem since others will just give answers that are out of the questions with no content knowledge".

Sixty percent of the markers reported that examination questions were those of assignments and that made it easy for students to pass the examination without necessarily showing understanding of content knowledge. One marker

indicated that “Some modules are too easy to pass as the questions are not of university standard e.g. the exam questions are those from the assignments that are not even edited”. “It emerged that many students expected examination questions to be a replica of assignment questions”, said one respondent. A respondent presented it this way that “They expect the examination to be the same as the assignment It’s like they did not know that the examination is a close book examination”.

Other respondents asserted that students understood assignment questions. For example, a respondent asserted that “In most cases, the students understood the questions. It was in rare cases where one question in an assignment would be misunderstood by a number of students”.

Based on the preceding discussion, it emerged that many markers experienced language barrier or lack of language command was one of the primary reasons that made many students not to understand content knowledge. Many markers agreed that many students responded to questions without understanding them and or the content knowledge. For example, sixty percent of the respondents respectively agreed that many students did not have and understand content knowledge of the module. Some cheated by plagiarizing others’ work. The primary lecturer dealt with those cases. Sixty percent of the markers were concerned that students’ language command was poor. Some cannot construct a logical sentence. It’s uncertain whether the latter was due to language barriers or not.

Much as many markers experienced lack of language command and content knowledge as concerns as they marked students’ assignments and examination books, that is debatable because other markers asserted students understood questions and responded well. This assertion endorses Stellmack, Keenan, Sandridge, Sipp and Konheim-Kalkstein (2012) who indicated that marking experience and providing feedback are equally debatable in some quarters. They depend on the nature of markers’ feedback to improve students’ content knowledge and skills of responding to questions. That does not necessarily include how they were trained during staff development because that may or not be related in any way to feedback and marking (Shields 2015). It emerged that some examination questions were a replica of assignments questions and that made it easy for many students to pass.

3.6 Markers’ Meetings

All respondents indicated that they contracted with the university and attended markers’ meetings which were chaired by either the primary lecturer or module coordinator before they started marking. A respondent wrote that: “I signed a contract whose conditions are clear”. One further said: “We held two markers meetings – one before marking assignments and before the exams”. These views endorse Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) and Shields (2015) assertions that training and supporting markers is important for them before they mark.

Each meeting had an agenda which included welcoming and each marker introduced themselves and modules they mark. Assignment questions, memorandum, marking, commenting in a constructive way on assignments and the accurate allocation of marks were discussed. Examination question papers, memorandum and the accurate allocation of marks were discussed before marking examination scripts. In endorsing in this assertion, a respondent wrote that “We discuss a whole lot of issues – memos, accurate marking and counting assignment books, commenting for assignments and so forth”.

Primary lecturers and or the module coordinator informed markers about the importance of counting assignments and examination books before markers take them as well as timely moderation, verification of marks and turnaround time (the time markers should take to mark and return marked assignments and examination books) submission of assignments and or examination books. There were no agreements entered between markers and primary lecturers. One responded wrote that “There’s no separate agreements between me and the lecturer. Everything was transparent”.

From the preceding discussions, all markers attended markers training and held two markers meetings, namely, one before marking assignments and another just before the exams. Each of these was chaired by either the primary lecturer or module coordinator before they started marking. Each meeting had an agenda that included welcoming, approach to reading questions and memorandums, marking, commenting in a constructive way and accurate allocating of marks. The importance of counting assignments and examination books when they are collected and returned. That is in line with Stellmack, Keenan, Sandridge, Sipp and Konheim-Kalkstein (2012) assertion that marking and providing feedback (which may be either electronical or manual) must be concretized by tutors undergoing relevant staff development training for feedback and marking.

3.7 Duration of Marking Assignments and Examination Books

Sixty percent of the respondents each marked more than five hundred assignments and five hundred examination books in three modules they were involved in. Each one of the thirty percent marked about five hundred assignments

and five hundred examination books in the two modules they were allocated. Ten percent marked five hundred assignments and five hundred examination books of one module.

Two to three weeks were allocated per marker to return marked assignments with comments - depending on the types of assignment questions. Markers were told informally to return five hundred marked examination books within two weeks because they did not need comments. However, markers were encouraged to return marked assignments and examination books as and when they complete marking. One respondent stated that “Two to three weeks was given again depending on the type of questions. But we were told to submit when done or ask for an extension if you did not finish on time”.

All respondents respectively concurred that the turnaround time for marking assignments was different. Some primary lecturers said they could return marked assignments in two weeks and others said two to three weeks. They also said it was not enough. Although sixty percent of the markers asserted it took about three days to mark hundred assignments – depending on the types of questions, the other forty percent maintained it took them five days to mark the same number of assignments.

It took forty percent of the markers three to five minutes to mark one examination book that is guided by questions. One respondent stated that “Three to five minutes for marking exam book as long as you are guided by the questions”. Sixty percent of the markers respectively concurred it took them ten to fifteen minutes to mark an examination book. A respondent asserted that “The turnaround time allocated for marking examinations is less than what is required but we must be slower because I must ensure that marking is accurate, as it involves the future of students”.

Another respondent asserted that “Also it depends on the type of questions asked three to five minutes or less if it’s more of multiple questions or the true falls type”. The type of question determined the duration of marking it. Multiple choice questions and true or falls questions were easier to mark and took little time. Essay types of questions took up to a week to mark.

Although the number of modules each marker was involved in was not asked, it emerged that more than eighty percent of the respondents were involved in marking more than one module of the BEd program. That raised an interesting question about returning marked assignments and examination books within the required time frame. It justified further why they were always late in returning marked assignments and examination books. They were biting more than what they can chew because there were no stringent measures in place.

From the preceding discussion, it emerged that the turnaround time for marking assignments differed from lecturer to lecturer. Some markers were requested to return marked assignments in two weeks and to others in three weeks. That was despite the high number of assignments they were given to mark at a time. This trend seems to be common in many universities that do not seem to give turnaround time frame for assignments (Dobbyn 2011; McCabe, Doerflinger & Fox 2011; Stellmack, Keenan, Sandidge, Sippl & Konheim-Kalkstein 2012). This trend is different from the University of Namibia’s policy which has a quantified turnaround time for marking examination books.

Markers are expected to mark fifty examination books in two days and hundred in four days (www.un.ac.n). that gives them limited time to mark examination books like some of the respondents indicated that “The turnaround time allocated for marking examinations is less than what is required...”. Much as the turnaround time of marking assignments and examination books led to markers pressurized for time, they did not necessarily adhere to the given time because of the high number of assignments and examination books they had to mark. That endorses the findings of Gibbs & Simpson (2004b) and Lunt & Curran (2009) in their respective findings on the turnaround time for assessing students’ work.

3.8 Students’ Support

All respondents concur that students needed support about answering assignment questions. One respondent endorsed this assertion by stating that “...it will help to avoid students copying and pasting from the text books without understanding their work hence they will fail to apply the knowledge”. One respondent said “clear tutorial letters that explains what is expected from them in full” was the type of support students needed to understand content knowledge and respond to assignment questions. Another respondent stated that “Examples should be provided in Tutorial Letters where the difference between questions and words are clearly outlined e.g. explain, describe, discuss, etc.”.

All respondents conceded that students have e-tutors supporting them however, the latter need to be trained to improve their skills of supporting students. One respondent presented it in this way that “The students have the support of the e-tutors but the e- tutors need to be trained too to be the masters of the module. Tutorial classes, after registration and just before the examinations”

It emerged, from the preceding discussion that students support is important for their success in answering assignments or examination questions. That is endorsing the views of Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) that tutors' experience of distance education students is crucial because when they assess, they focus on pragmatic, comment and award a mark as part of providing support. That depends, to a large extent, on their initial training and style of providing the support. The views of respondents further endorse the respective views of Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan (2010), Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, Parkin and Thorpe (2011), Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall, 2015, Grieve, Moffit and Padgett (2016), Grieve, Moffit and Padgett (2019) that marking and commenting on students' assignments and examination books helps them to understand their shortcomings and how to improve themselves. On the other hand, that is debatable (Stellmack, Keenan, Sandidge, Sippl and Konheim-Kalkstein 2012) in that marking and commenting may be subjective in improving students' content knowledge and skills of responding to questions.

The use of e-tutors to provide students support endorsed the findings of Chetwynd and Dobbyn (2011) that tutors' experience to assess distance education students work is crucial because they tend to focus on pragmatic issues in marking their work (Chetwynd and Dobbyn 2011). That also depends on their (e-tutors) training background.

4. Discussion of Findings

Findings that are discussed here-under are not tabulated and are based on the following themes: demographic information, markers' experiences in marking assignments and exam books, content knowledge, markers' meetings, duration of marking assignments and examination books, students support and suggestions.

4.1 Demographic Information

All markers were older than forty-five years of age and appropriately qualified and experienced to mark assignments and examination books. Seventy percent were still employed in the Education sector and thirty percent retired. The preceding key factors on demographic information which markers should have includes relevant qualifications and experience of marking assignments and examination books. They endorsed Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011) as well as McCabe, Doerflinger & Fox (2011) respective assertions that those factors are important because they contribute to markers providing relevant feedback on students' assignments. The criteria for the appointment of markers was based on the discretion of the primary lecturer(s). that is in line with Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011) who maintain that appointment of markers is an internal matter. It is important to note that there was no age restriction set for respondents in the study.

4.2 Markers' Experiences in Marking Assignments and Exam Books

All respondents had experience of marking assignments and examination books. That is in line with Hepplestone, Holden, Irwin, Parkin & Thorpe's (2011) view that relevant experience is important for anyone to mark assignments and examination books. Markers were contracted to mark a specific number of assignments and examination books. However, they were marking more (assignments and examination books) than their contracted quota. Those who completed and returned assignments and examination books within a short period were given more to mark. According to Chetwynd & Dobbyn (2011), it does happen that some markers are experienced and fast in marking. They could mark more than their quota.

4.3 Content Knowledge

Sixty percent of the respondents agreed that many students did not have content knowledge. Forty percent said those whose work they marked understood the language.

Sixty percent of the markers experienced a repetition of assignment questions in examination questions. Many students passed the examination and it compromised the university standards. Sixty percent of the markers said students were unable to answer assignment or exam questions properly because they could not present their facts well on paper in English.

Seventy percent of the markers noted lecturers expected markers to comment in assignments and examination books and some did not expect comments in exam books. Eighty percent of the markers said they were paid differently and at different dates but for similar work.

The preceding findings are important for markers because they could enable them to alert students about the extent to which they understand learning content (Price, Handley, Millar & O'Donovan 2010). They could further help them indicate their strengths, shortcomings and how they need to improve (Fry, Ketteridge & Marshall 2015). The findings also alerted markers understand what they need to do in improving themselves (2015) with some lecturers expecting them to comment as they mark assignments and examination books.

4.4 Markers' Meetings

Two markers meetings, each of which was before marking assignments and exams, were held and chaired by either the primary lecturer or module coordinator. The meeting's agenda included an introduction of markers and module outline. All assignment and examination questions, memorandum, style of marking accurate marks allocation as well as constructive commenting (except in the case of examinations) were discussed. Counting assignments and examination books before and after marking them, moderation, verification of marks and turnaround time were also discussed. All markers exchanged cell phone numbers and developed a WhatsApp group during a markers' meeting so that they could share ideas. Holding markers' meetings is important according to Stellmack, Keenan, Sandidge, Sippl & Konheim-Kalkstein (2012). They maintain that it is through such meetings that markers improve their skills in marking and providing feedback to students.

4.5 Duration of Marking Assignments and Examination Books

All respondents respectively concurred that the turnaround time for marking and commenting on assignments was different. Some primary lecturers said they could return marked assignments in two weeks and others said two to three weeks. Those who were still employed said the time in which they were expected to return marked assignments and or examination books was not enough. More than eighty percent of those respondents were involved in marking more than one module of the BEd program. That delayed the turn-around time of marked assignments and examination books within the required time frame.

Short questions assignments were quicker to mark compared to long question assignments. Markers were allocated two weeks to return five hundred marked examination books because they did not need comments. However, markers were encouraged to return marked assignments and examination books as and when they complete marking.

Although sixty percent of the markers asserted it took about three days to mark hundred assignments – depending on the types of questions, the other forty percent maintained it took them five days to mark the same number of assignments. Forty percent of the markers took three to five minutes to mark an examination book. Sixty percent of the markers respectively concurred it took them ten to fifteen minutes to mark an examination book because they had to ensure that marking is accurate. Short questions were marked in a short period and those that needed longer answers took up to a week to mark. It emerged from the preceding discussion that Unisa, unlike the University of Namibia (www.nu.ac.za), does not have guidelines to facilitate the duration and turnaround time of marking assignments and examination books. That makes the turnaround time of assignments from different lecturers at Unisa inconsistent and uncontrollable.

4.6 Students Support

All respondents indicated that students needed to be supported so that they can answer assignment questions with understanding. That included tutorial letters which explain terms such as 'describe', 'discuss', 'explain', etc.". All students have E-tutors but the latter need to be trained to improve their skills of supporting students after registration close and just before the examinations. The preceding finding is endorsed by the assertion that markers' experiences of providing students with support which may be either manual or electronic feedback are important because they facilitate the extent to which students can improve in, for example, answering questions with understanding, understanding knowledge content and skills of responding to questions (Chetwynd & Dobbyn 2011; Stellmack, Keenan, Sandidge, Sippl & Konheim-Kalkstein 2012; Grieve, Moffit & Padgett 2019). That means, markers could, through their comments in students' assignments or examination books, help students to understand learning content and respond to questions better. Hereunder a discussion of concluding remarks.

5. Conclusions

Based on the preceding discussions, it could be concluded that all markers were over forty-five years of age. Seventy percent were still employed, and thirty percent were retired from the Education sector. A word of mouth and any other mode are used to recruit markers. The primary lecturer of every module decides to recruit based on their needs and facilitate the appointment of markers.

Markers who completed and returned marked assignments quicker were given more to mark. All BEd modules have the same notional hours. However, some departments were paying their markers more money than others. Some markers are expected to comment in both assignments and examination books and others expected markers to comment in assignments only.

All students needed to be supported in understanding key terms of questions so that they can answer with understanding. E-tutors must be trained with relevant skills to support students after registration close and just before the examinations.

6. Recommendations

It is recommended that the university must develop a policy for external markers and advertise opportunities for marking assignments and examinations of undergraduate program. There must be short listing, interviewing and appointing markers based on merit. Young qualifying applicants who maybe appointed as permanent academics must be the preferred markers than older and retired markers. All E-tutors must be trained to support students after the official closure of registration and before examinations are set. All markers must be trained - through a markers' guide - to mark assignments and examination books. That includes the following:

- a. Each must be provided with a fixed module and number of assignments as well as exam books they must mark per annum.
- b. Fixed amount must be paid at a fixed period to all markers per assignment and examination book they mark of the same module.
- c. Markers must comment consistently as they mark assignments.
- d. Markers must be allocated fixed time within which they must return all marked assignments and examination books.

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Author Contributions

All authors contributed towards data analysis, drafting and critically revising the paper, gave final approval of the version to be published, and agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the work.

Disclosure

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