Innovative Assessment Practices in Tertiary Education: Balancing Formative and Summative Methods for Diverse Student Populations

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Abstract

Tertiary education now serves a more diverse student population, including individuals with disabilities and from non-traditional backgrounds. This evolution calls for fair and inclusive assessment practices, ensuring students are evaluated on relevant criteria alone. Assessments play two main roles: supporting student learning and certifying achievement. However, aligning assessments with diverse learning needs and local contexts remains an under-researched topic, despite its value in improving academic outcomes. Many educators struggle to design effective assessments, and a gap persists between assessment methods and meaningful student learning. Traditional exams are often criticised for being passive and not reflective of real-world skills. Assessment strategies typically include formative (ongoing feedback) and summative (final evaluation) approaches. Blending both enhances learning outcomes. "Assessment for learning" focuses on authentic tasks, self- and peer-assessment, and constructive feedback. These strategies deepen understanding and encourage active learning. In biokinetics, work-integrated learning is vital, offering students practical experience and immediate feedback. This hands-on approach reflects formative assessment principles and supports real-world application. Academics must also ensure alignment between assessment criteria and professional practice. This review highlights the need for learning-oriented and authentic assessments in higher education, particularly in biokinetics. These methods support student growth, enhance engagement, and better prepare learners for professional demands.

Keywords: assessment, education, institution, formative, summative

1. Introduction

Tertiary education has evolved from being primarily accessible to elite students to accommodating a more diverse student population. Efforts have been made to encourage individuals from under-represented groups, including those with disabilities and from non-traditional backgrounds, to pursue tertiary education (Marginson, 2016). Therefore, assessment practices within tertiary education should ensure that diverse students are not disadvantaged by attributes or abilities unrelated to the criteria being assessed, especially in relation to the field of biokinetics (a clinical exercise therapy profession focusing on the individualised prescription of physical activity and exercise for the purposes of rehabilitation, health promotion, and the enhancement of quality of life) (Ellapen et al., 2018). It is crucial that all students receive the necessary support to demonstrate their capabilities on an equal footing (Marginson, 2016).

Assessing students in tertiary education is complex and involves developing innovative and effective assessment techniques. However, often, insufficient attention is paid to how academics adapt these models to their specific local contexts. Recognising local variables' impact on assessment procedures can enhance both academics and tertiary institutions' effectiveness. Assessment plays a vital role in tertiary education by promoting student advancement and learning, while also supporting the attainment of predefined benchmarks. The design of assessments and the accompanying processes are among the most critical aspects of assessment practice (Carless, 2015). Assessment design encompasses a wide range of processes aimed at creating specific assessment tasks for a given course or module. Although it excludes individualised feedback, elements of task design, such as rubrics and scheduling, significantly influence grading and feedback. Despite its importance, assessment design remains a challenge for many academics (Carless, 2015; Gibbs & Simpson, 2005).

Within tertiary education, academics and academic leaders have engaged in ongoing and vigorous discussions regarding student assessment (Carless, 2015). Concerns have been raised about the gap between assessment methods

and actual student learning (Douglas et al., 2012). According to Sambell et al. (2013) and Torrance (2012), assessment is often viewed primarily as a tool for evaluating and grading students. Carless (2015) highlights several key inquiries in this ongoing discussion, including whether a student's success in exams correlates with a challenging academic year, which assessment tasks are most effective for developmental learning, whether current assessment practices encourage lifelong learning, and how feedback methods can be optimised to enhance student advancement. Researchers have noted that some academics do not link assessment with high-quality teaching delivery (Postareff et al. 2012). Many academics continue to rely heavily on written examinations as the main form of evaluating student knowledge. However, there is an ongoing debate about whether traditional testing methods, such as written exams, might negatively affect students' learning experiences by being overly passive (Ertmer & Newby, 2013).

One potential reason for this issue is the lack of knowledge about different assessment methods available in tertiary institutions (Gilles et al., 2011; Webber, 2012). Therefore, this review's primary objectives are to critically assess various assessment methods in tertiary institutions and to evaluate the alignment of the assessment methods of the author's field of study with those discussed in the literature.

2. Literature Review

Assessment, as Gronlund (2006) argued, encompasses a variety of tasks within a module that academics use to gather information about student performance and achievements. According to Norton et al. (2013), assessments primarily serve two purposes: promoting student learning and certifying student achievement. Khalil and Elkhider (2016) categorised assessments into two main types: formative and summative. For assessments to be effective, these two categories should overlap, as Carless (2009) noted.

Khalil and Elkhider (2016) characterised formative assessments as activities that teachers and students undertake to provide feedback that informs and modifies teaching and learning activities. These assessments are integral to the learning process, offering diagnostic information that helps identify students' progress and areas needing intervention (Pillay & Pillay, 2019). They enable academics to tailor their teaching strategies to address specific learning needs and encourage active student engagement (Jacoby et al., 2014; Pillay & Pillay, 2019). Active engagement can lead to deeper analysis and long-term retention of material (McCoy, 2013). Formative assessment activities include self-assessment, peer assessment, reflection, and class discussions, which help students become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses and take responsibility for their learning. Research has indicated that supportive feedback from formative assessments can improve student performance (Sambell et al., 2013). Formative assessments are considered assessments for learning because of their contribution to student development (Hernández, 2012; McDowell et al., 2011).

Meanwhile, Taras (2005) defined summative assessments as judgments based on accumulated evidence up to a specific point that marks the final evaluation of student achievement. Gronlund (2006) similarly described summative assessments as tools for evaluating learners' achievements at the end of a module. Common methods include tests, exams, projects, and final presentations (Gibson & Shaw, 2011). Summative assessments are often used solely for grading purposes and are seen as assessments of learning (Hernández, 2012; McDowell et al., 2011). Because these assessments occur at the end of a module, they provide limited opportunities for intervening in the student's learning process (Rawlusyk, 2018).

However, Carless et al. (2010) suggested that summative assessments can also serve formative purposes if feedback is provided to aid student learning. In tertiary education, many assessment strategies, such as course assignments, perform both formative and summative functions (Hernández, 2012).

2.1 Assessment for Learning

According to Sambell et al. (2013), assessment for learning should adhere to several key principles to be effective. These principles include the implementation of authentic assessments, which McDowell et al. (2011) argued are crucial. Authentic assessments ensure that students engage with real-world tasks and focus on the learning process rather than merely on achieving high marks. They also provide opportunities for students to apply and practice skills and knowledge acquired from previous learnings (Sambell et al., 2013). Feedback is a vital component of assessment for learning and should encompass both written and verbal comments from all involved parties, including students, lecturers, and peers (McDowell et al., 2011). This feedback helps students understand their progress and areas for improvement. Additionally, assessments should be designed to foster the development of independent learners, helping them take responsibility for their own learning and progress (McDowell et al., 2011). Paily (2013) further suggested that assessment for learning aligns with constructivist cognitive theory's principles. From a constructivist

perspective, effective assessment practices involve students actively participating in their own learning experiences, supporting the development of deeper understanding and self-directed learning (Paily, 2013).

2.2 Learning-oriented Assessment

The concept of learning-oriented assessment aligns with the principles of assessment for learning and represents a multi-source approach that is applicable in both the present and the future (Carless, 2015). Carless et al. (2006) identified three interlocking criteria for learning-oriented assessment. The first criterion is tasks as learning tasks. Assessment tasks are designed to evaluate students' knowledge and actively engage them in the learning process, thus promoting knowledge and skills' acquisition and application. The second criterion is self- and peer assessment. Students assess their own work and that of their peers, enhancing their understanding through self-reflection and peer feedback. The third criterion is instructors' feedback. Timely and constructive feedback is crucial, providing students with information about their performance, highlighting strengths, and offering guidance for improvement. These criteria collectively create a comprehensive assessment approach that prioritises the learning process and student development over merely measuring final outcomes. According to Demirci (2017), learning-oriented assessment fosters greater student involvement in the assessment process, enabling students to generate new knowledge by analysing and solving problems related to their work.

2.3 Tasks as Learning Tasks

According to Carless (2015), an effective task designed to promote learning should possess authentic qualities. Gronlund (2006) posited authentic assessment as an extended performance assessment characterised by high realism and complexity, integrating students' ideas and skills and ultimately enhancing learning. Extended assessments, as Rawlusyk (2018) noted, require students to combine their knowledge in meaningful ways. Sambell et al. (2013) argued that authentic assessments motivate students to engage in deeper learning by applying their understanding to real-world tasks. This approach enhances immediate learning and prepares students for future application (Trevelyan & Wilson, 2012).

Authentic assessments foster the development of various skills and encourage critical thinking about real-life scenarios (Oladele, 2011). McGinnis (2018) emphasised the need for performance-based authentic methods in assessments. Gibson and Shaw (2011) highlighted that students relate well to authentic approaches, making them valuable tools for academics. Examples of authentic activities include real-life tasks, exhibitions, interviews, journals, observations, oral presentations, performances, portfolios, patchwork texts, and simulations (Boud & Falchikov, 2007). Additionally, other methods such as written and oral debriefing, peer- and self-assessment, and small group work offer valuable alternatives (Gibson & Shaw, 2011). Carter and Hogen (2013) recommended incorporating active learning techniques into the classroom, such as problem-solving exercises, case studies, and role-playing activities to actively engage students and strengthen their critical thinking and decision-making skills. These authentic assessment methods align with real-world situations, promoting deeper understanding and practical application of knowledge and skills.

2.4 Peer and Self-assessment

Self- and peer assessment play a crucial role in education by empowering students to evaluate both their own work and that of their peers. This process enhances students' abilities to critically assess assignments and projects while fostering essential lifelong learning skills (Carless, 2015). According to Sambell et al. (2013), these assessment methods equip students to make informed judgments and decisions in future challenges and situations. Self- and peer assessment are integral in promoting independence, personal responsibility, and critical thinking among students (Sambell et al., 2013). Additionally, Chetcuti and Cutajar (2014) highlighted that peer assessment helps students handle criticism constructively and develop evaluative skills for assessing others' work. Self-assessment further supports students by encouraging self-monitoring, which empowers them to take greater ownership of their learning and improvement (Sambell et al., 2013).

2.5 Feedback

Boud and Molloy (2013) observed that historically, feedback was primarily viewed as a process where teachers transferred information to students. However, this perspective has evolved, and feedback is now recognised as a dynamic form of communication involving teachers, peers, and students (Carless, 2015). Carless further emphasised that feedback does not involve merely one-way communication from teacher to student. According to Sambell et al. (2013), effective feedback requires active engagement from students with the input provided by teachers and peers, contributing to enhanced learning. Barker and Pinard (2014) noted that feedback's effectiveness can be compromised if both teachers and students are not fully committed to the process. A critical aspect of feedback, as Carless (2015) highlighted, is its potential to foster self-regulated learning. This involves students managing their own learning

behaviours and acting on feedback received, which supports their development as independent learners (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006).

3. Methodology

3.1 Search Strategy and Inclusion Criteria

For this literature review, an electronic search was conducted across multiple databases, including Google Scholar, Taylor and Francis Online, EBM Reviews, Science Direct, CISTI Source, and Current Contents. The search focused on articles published between 2000 and 2023 that examined assessment techniques used in tertiary or higher education. Keywords used in the search included "tertiary education assessments," "higher education assessments," "assessment methods," "assessment techniques," "peer assessments," "self-assessments," "formative assessments," and "summative assessments." A total of 132 articles were initially identified, of which 38 met the inclusion criteria and were selected for review. The inclusion criteria required articles to focus specifically on assessments within tertiary or higher education institutions, be original peer-reviewed studies, and be published in English.

3.2 Exclusion Criteria

This review excluded articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria. These included duplicates, non-full-text articles, publications outside the specified timeframe, studies that did not focus on assessments within tertiary or higher education institutions, articles not published in English, and studies that includes assessment methods not used in the field of biokinetics.

3.3 Data Extraction

Articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria were excluded from the review. Each of the included articles was thoroughly reviewed, and data were extracted and categorised according to specific sections of the review. This process helped in organising and structuring the review, ensuring the findings were systematically combined and presented.

4. Results

An electronic search yielded 38 electronic articles. Figure 1 illustrates the article selection criteria.

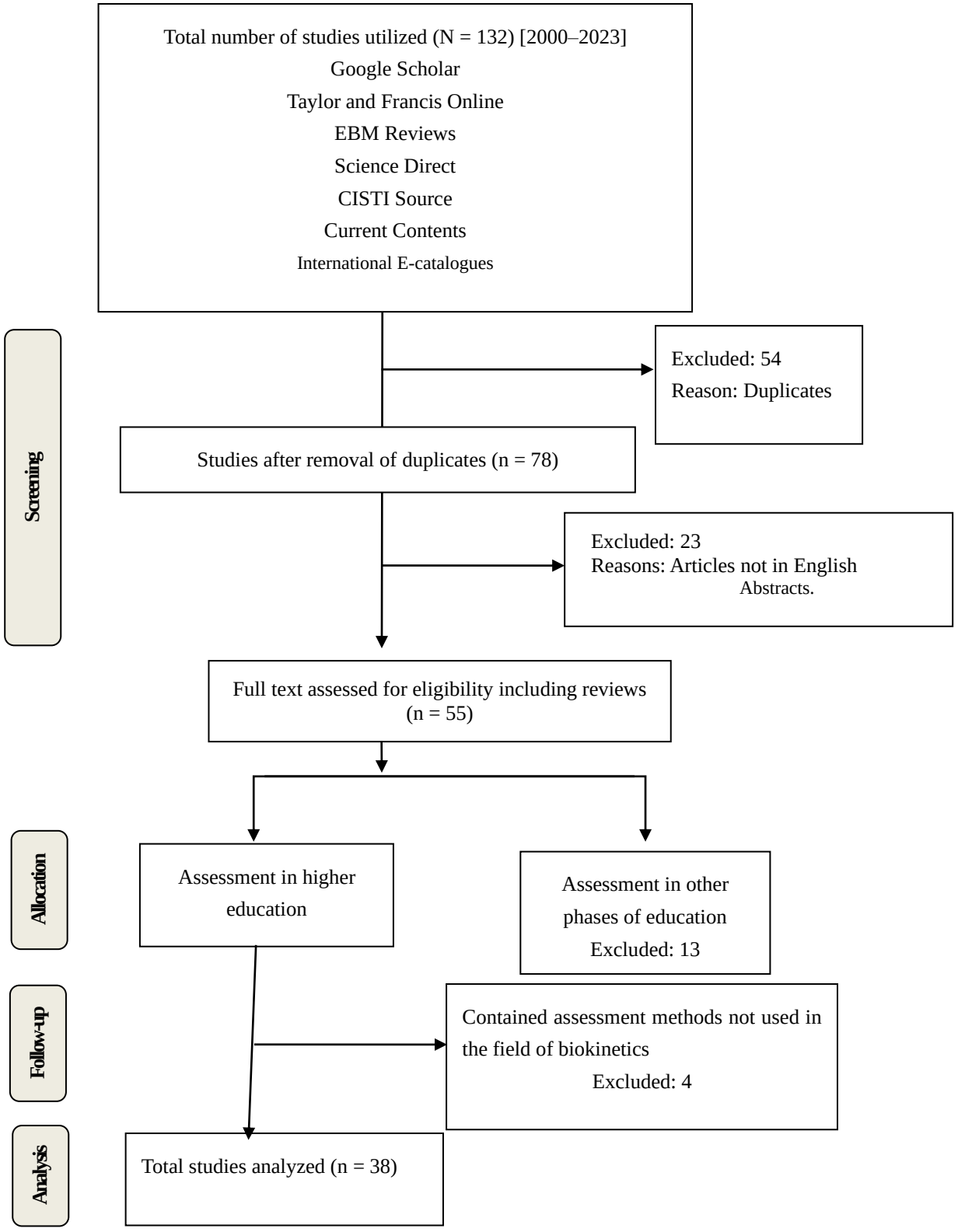

Figure 1. PRISMA flow chart of the study selection process

5. Discussion

The primary objective of this study is to explore and evaluate various assessment methods used in tertiary education, with particular emphasis on their application within the biokinetics discipline. This review critically examines these assessment strategies' effectiveness and relevance when contextualised within the author's academic field. In biokinetics, the integration of practical experience and work-integrated learning (WIL) is fundamental. Ajjawi et al. (2020) highlighted experiential learning's importance, noting that it enables students to apply theoretical concepts in real-world settings, particularly within clinical and community environments. WIL affords students the opportunity to interact directly with patients; this is a vital component of their professional training. Smith et al. (2014) further asserted that WIL immerses students in authentic workplace scenarios, helping them to understand and navigate the roles, responsibilities, and expectations they are likely to encounter in professional practice. Consequently, experiential learning is not supplementary but a core element of the biokinetics curriculum, fostering the development of practical competencies under accredited biokineticists' supervision.

Assessing students during WIL typically involves direct observation by academic staff, who assess performance using predefined criteria established by the Professional Board and adapted to suit various WIL contexts. According to McDowell et al. (2011) and Sambell et al. (2013), these evaluations align with formative assessment's principles, which emphasise ongoing, real-time feedback and the promotion of continuous improvement. These assessments are authentic in nature, mirroring actual clinical or community-based scenarios rather than abstract academic tasks. This authenticity enhances their educational value, offering students timely feedback that is essential for professional and personal development.

Nonetheless, the integration of traditional assessment methods, such as written examinations and essays, into WIL's practical demands introduces several challenges. The disconnect between theoretical evaluation and hands-on practice may negatively affect student performance and engagement. Ajjawi et al. (2020) contended that academic staff must possess a deep understanding of the expectations and learning outcomes associated with each WIL placement to ensure meaningful and fair assessment. Experience and familiarity with WIL processes are crucial for aligning traditional and practical assessments in a manner that allows them to complement rather than conflict with one another.

As in many academic programs, the biokinetics curriculum comprises both theoretical and practical elements, assessed through a combination of formative and summative strategies. Formative assessments, such as assignments, class tests, and structured practical exercises, offer students regular feedback and multiple learning improvement opportunities. Summative assessments, including final exams, evaluate comprehensive knowledge and skills acquired over time. The practical component, often contributing significantly to the "duly performed" mark, includes tasks such as case study analyses, oral presentations, the development of rehabilitation exercise programs, and the design of research-based proposals addressing specific clinical conditions. This multifaceted approach is consistent with Carless's (2015) pedagogical framework, which positions assessment as a core element of the learning process. Gronlund (2006) supported this view, describing authentic assessments as complex tasks requiring the meaningful integration and application of knowledge and skills, thereby fostering deep learning and real-world relevance.

In addition to conventional assessment forms, the biokinetics curriculum incorporates peer and self-assessment practices to further student development. These approaches encourage critical self-reflection and the ability to constructively critique peer performance, both of which are key to lifelong learning (Carless, 2015; Sambell et al., 2013). Peer assessment enables students to gain alternative perspectives and enhance their understanding through collaborative feedback. During the COVID-19 pandemic, health regulations necessitated a shift away from face-to-face peer assessments, prompting academic staff to assume online roles temporarily. Students engaged in self-assessments during this period to reflect on their performance, and peer assessments were reinstated once restrictions were lifted. This temporary adjustment demonstrated the adaptability of the program's assessment methods while maintaining educational integrity and learning outcomes. Collectively, integrating diverse assessment types supports the development of practical competencies, critical thinking, and professional preparedness.

Although this review focuses on biokinetics, the principles discussed are applicable across a range of academic disciplines. The emphasis on authentic, formative assessment, as outlined by McDowell et al. (2011) and Sambell et al. (2013), is equally relevant in fields such as engineering, where translating theoretical knowledge into practice is critical. In the social sciences and humanities, the use of peer and self-assessment (Carless, 2015; Sambell et al., 2013) promotes reflective engagement and collaborative learning. By extending this analysis to a broader interdisciplinary context, we can assess various assessment methods' universal applicability and contextual limitations. Gronlund's (2006) notion of authentic assessment as integrative and performance-based further highlights such approaches' value across multiple domains, emphasising their potential to foster meaningful learning beyond disciplinary boundaries.

To overcome the challenges associated with assessing practical learning, particularly in WIL contexts, several targeted solutions can be implemented. First, developing robust and contextually relevant evaluation criteria, aligned with real-world professional standards, can enhance assessments' fairness and accuracy. Ajjawi et al. (2020) emphasised the need for academic staff to be thoroughly familiar with each WIL context to ensure effective evaluation. Standardised yet adaptable rubrics, anchored in guidelines from the Professional Board, can support this objective. Technological advancements also offer promising avenues for assessment enhancement. For example, digital platforms can facilitate real-time feedback, host video-based evaluations, or support the creation of e-portfolios that track student progress in practical settings (Sambell et al., 2013). These tools serve to bridge theoretical and experiential learning. Moreover, as McDowell et al. (2011) noted, successful formative assessment relies on assessors' pedagogical expertise. Thus, continuous professional development, through workshops, mentoring, and reflective practice, can empower educators to implement these strategies effectively, ultimately strengthening assessment validity and student outcomes.

Given the growing importance of digital tools in education, the integration of technology into assessment practices is increasingly critical. In biokinetics and similar disciplines, online platforms provide opportunities for delivering formative assessments such as quizzes, discussion boards, and instant feedback mechanisms (McDowell et al., 2011; Sambell et al., 2013). These tools help track student engagement and identify areas for targeted support. Additionally, artificial intelligence (AI) technologies offer potential for generating personalised feedback tailored to individual learning needs. AI systems can process student data to highlight learning gaps and recommend specific strategies for improvement, aligning with Carless's (2015) conceptualisation of assessment as a continuous learning process. In practical training settings like WIL, AI-assisted video analysis could support student-patient interactions' objective evaluation. Such technological interventions enhance assessment practices' scalability, consistency, and pedagogical soundness.

An equally important component of effective assessment design is student feedback. Understanding students' perceptions of different assessment methods can yield critical insights into their learning experiences, engagement, and motivation. Carless (2015) maintained that assessment should serve as a measurement tool and as a catalyst for learning. Actively soliciting student feedback, particularly on formative components such as peer review, practical tasks, and digital assessments, can help identify practices that most effectively support student learning. Sambell et al. (2013) argued that authentic assessments are most impactful when students perceive them as meaningful and applicable. Providing formal mechanisms for students to evaluate and reflect on the assessment processes they engage with fosters a learner-centred approach, enhances transparency, and ensures ongoing alignment between educational objectives and student needs. This feedback loop is crucial for developing responsive, evidence-based assessment strategies that contribute meaningfully to both academic and professional success.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, tertiary education's evolution has significantly broadened its accessibility, allowing a more diverse student population to participate. This shift necessitates developing assessment practices that accommodate diversity, ensuring that all students are evaluated fairly and equitably. Effective assessment in tertiary education is complex, requiring innovative techniques that are often adapted to local contexts to address specific challenges and enhance their efficacy. Assessment practices must balance both formative and summative approaches to foster student learning and measure achievement. Formative assessments, such as self-assessment, peer assessment, and feedback, play a crucial role in promoting ongoing learning and improvement. They provide valuable insights into students' progress and help tailor teaching strategies to meet individual needs. Conversely, summative assessments offer a final evaluation of student performance but can be limited in their ability to influence ongoing learning.

The integration of practical experience through WIL in fields like biokinetics underscores the importance of aligning assessment methods with real-world applications. Authentic assessments that reflect real-life scenarios enhance learning and better prepare students for professional practice. However, challenges arise when blending traditional assessment methods with practical components, requiring careful management to ensure coherence and fairness in evaluation. This review highlights that a comprehensive assessment framework should incorporate both formative and summative methods, alongside peer and self-assessments, to support diverse learning needs and contexts. This approach improves the assessment process and promotes deeper learning, critical thinking, and professional readiness. As tertiary education continues to evolve, ongoing reflection and adaptation of assessment practices will be essential to meet the needs of a diverse student body and ensure equitable educational outcomes.

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