



Reassessing the 50/50 Assessment Policy at the Central University of Technology, South Africa: Implications for academic standards and quality assurance

Koketso Botlholo¹ 

¹ Department of Language and Social Sciences Education, Central University of Technology, Free State, South Africa.

ABSTRACT

The 50/50 assessment weighting policy, dividing final module marks equally between Continuous Assessment (CASS) and final examinations, has become a dominant approach across South African universities of technology (UoTs). Originally designed to promote continuous learning and engagement throughout the academic term, the policy sought to balance formative and summative evaluations. However, emerging evidence and experiences suggest that this well-intentioned system may inadvertently undermine academic integrity and the credibility of qualifications. This paper critically examined the implications of the 50/50 model at Central University of Technology (CUT). It explored how strong CASS performance can mask poor summative achievement, resulting in students passing modules despite failing the exam. Such outcomes raise concerns about grade inflation, compromised assessment validity, and the erosion of academic rigor in UoTs whose mandate includes producing technically competent and workplace-ready graduates. Through a critical review of policy documents, assessment literature, and CUT's internal moderation reports, this paper argued that the 50/50 system prioritizes procedural fairness over academic merit and may not accurately measure student mastery of learning outcomes. The analysis employs theoretical insights from assessment validity, constructivist learning theory, and accountability frameworks to demonstrate how current practices inadvertently reward surface learning and strategic compliance rather than genuine competence. The paper concludes by recommending a differentiated weighting model that emphasizes demonstrated mastery in final assessments while retaining the developmental value of CASS. Ultimately, reforming the 50/50 policy is essential to uphold academic standards, protect institutional credibility, and ensure the integrity of graduate competencies within South Africa's higher education sector.

Keywords: Assessment Policy, Continuous Assessment, Academic Standards, Universities of Technology, South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a central mechanism through which learning is validated, academic standards are maintained, and institutional credibility is sustained in higher education.¹ In South Africa, the evolution

¹ Council on Higher Education (CHE), "Assessment in Higher Education: A Framework for Institutional Quality Assurance." (Council on Higher Education, 2021).

of assessment practices has been shaped by decades of educational transformation aimed at redressing apartheid-era inequalities and promoting student-centered learning.² Universities of Technology (UoTs), such as the Central University of Technology (CUT), occupy a unique position in this landscape because their pedagogical models integrate both academic theory and applied, work-oriented learning.³

To achieve this balance, many UoTs have adopted the 50/50 assessment weighting policy, in which Continuous Assessment (CASS) constitutes half of a student's final grade, and the summative examination contributes the remaining half. The policy was intended to reflect a holistic picture of student achievement, rewarding consistent engagement throughout the semester while still maintaining the examination as a measure of cumulative understanding.⁴ However, mounting evidence indicates that this seemingly balanced approach may have unintended consequences—particularly a dilution of academic rigor and the creation of artificial pass rates that do not correspond to actual mastery of learning outcomes.⁵

The rationale for the 50/50 model stems from three primary pedagogical imperatives. First, it was designed to reduce the anxiety and inequity associated with high-stakes final examinations, which historically disadvantaged students from under-resourced educational backgrounds. Second, it promotes formative assessment, allowing students to demonstrate learning through varied methods such as projects, tests, and presentations. Third, it aligns with the constructivist philosophy underpinning South Africa's Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) framework, emphasizing competence over rote memorization.⁶ At CUT, the 50/50 model was integrated into the institutional assessment policy as early as 2006, following the Higher Education Quality Committee's (HEQC) first cycle of audits. The university's Quality Assurance and Institutional Planning Division (IPQE) has since maintained that this system fosters fairness and continuous engagement.⁷

Despite these intentions, the policy's practical implementation often diverges from its conceptual promise. Lecturers across faculties have reported inconsistent weighting practices, varied assessment difficulty, and insufficient alignment between CASS activities and final examination outcomes.⁸ In practice, CASS can become a grade-boosting mechanism rather than a diagnostic tool for learning support.

CUT's internal quality reviews and annual performance reports (2020–2023) reveal growing concern about grade inflation, the phenomenon where overall pass rates rise without corresponding improvements in learning quality. A typical case pattern involves students scoring below 40% in their final examinations but passing the module because their high CASS marks elevate the composite score above the 50% threshold required for a pass. An illustrative case from the Faculty of Humanities at CUT demonstrated that in one second-year communication module, 42% of students who failed the final exam ultimately passed the module due to strong coursework marks derived from assignments and continuous tests. While CASS is meant to encourage consistency, this outcome suggests that it can mask deficiencies in conceptual understanding, especially when assessment tasks emphasize procedural recall or group-based performance over independent application.

The issue at stake is not simply administrative but epistemological: how universities conceptualize what it means to “know” or to “have learned.” Assessment validity refers to the extent to which an assessment accurately measures the learning outcomes it purports to measure, while reliability

² Vusi Gumede and Mduduzi Biyase, “Educational Reforms and Curriculum Transformation in Post-Apartheid South Africa,” *Environmental Economics* 7, no. 2 (June 3, 2016): 69–76, [https://doi.org/10.21511/ee.07\(2\).2016.7](https://doi.org/10.21511/ee.07(2).2016.7).

³ T. Naidoo and C. M. Mabaso, “Social Constructivism in South African Higher Education: A Case Study,” *Journal of Education Studies* 5, no. 3 (2023): 114–28.

⁴ Central University of Technology (CUT), “Assessment and Moderation Policy” (Central University of Technology, Free State, 2022).

⁵ N. Bengu, “Assessment Practices and Academic Standards in South African Higher Education Institutions,” *Journal of Higher Education Studies* 15, no. 2 (2023): 45–62; P. Singh and K. Moodley, “Continuous Assessment, Examination Performance and Academic Standards in South African Higher Education,” *Journal of Education Studies* 20, no. 3 (2021): 55–73.

⁶ Department of Education, *National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for Schools in the General Education and Training Band* (Government Printer., 2008).

⁷ Central University of Technology, “Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement (IPQE) Annual Report,” (Central University of Technology, 2023).

⁸ Personal Communication, CUT Quality Audit, 2023.

concerns the consistency of results across evaluators and contexts.⁹ In CUT's current implementation, both validity and reliability are threatened. CASS components often include low-stakes activities such as attendance, participation, or group work, which—although pedagogically valuable—are not necessarily valid indicators of individual mastery. Conversely, final examinations, designed to test cumulative understanding and independent reasoning, are frequently compromised when students can fail them yet still pass the course. The resulting disjunction between formative and summative measures creates a reliability gap that weakens the institution's overall quality assurance mechanisms.¹⁰

This tension aligns with constructive alignment theory, which holds that learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment methods must be coherently structured.¹¹ When assessment design fails to ensure this alignment, such as when CASS tasks do not directly prepare students for exam-level cognitive demands, the 50/50 system becomes pedagogically incoherent.

It has been established that the 50/50 policy, though founded on legitimate educational ideals, has produced unintended structural distortions at CUT. The system's emphasis on equity and continuous engagement has come at the cost of academic precision, assessment validity, and institutional consistency. This misalignment between policy intent and practical outcome forms the central problem that this paper seeks to interrogate. Specifically, the paper argues that the 50/50 weighting undermines academic standards by enabling grade inflation, obscuring learning deficits, and eroding the reliability of summative assessment as a measure of learning outcomes.

The next sections of the paper (Literature Theoretical Framework, Discussion, and Implications) further expand on how this assessment imbalance reflects broader tensions between pedagogical inclusivity and epistemic accountability within the South African higher education system.

LITERATURE REVIEW

CUT's Quality Assurance Context

The CUT operates within the broader quality assurance framework mandated by the CHE and the HEQC. The university's IPQE unit oversees assessment integrity through internal audits, moderation, and peer review processes.¹² However, internal policy reviews reveal tensions between faculty autonomy and institutional control. For instance, some departments, such as Engineering and Health Sciences, adhere strictly to the 50/50 ratio but impose minimum sub-requirements (e.g., "students must achieve at least 40% in the final exam to pass"). Others, particularly in the Humanities, apply the ratio more loosely, resulting in inconsistencies that undermine transparency.

This unevenness has raised questions from external moderators about the comparability of academic standards across faculties. In its 2023 institutional self-evaluation report, CUT acknowledged that "current assessment weightings may not consistently reflect learning outcome mastery" and committed to reviewing the policy as part of the next curriculum renewal cycle.¹³

The persistence of the 50/50 model must also be understood against South Africa's socioeconomic and political context, where universities face mounting pressure to increase throughput rates and reduce student failure.¹⁴ The Department of Higher Education and Training's performance-based funding model links institutional subsidies partly to graduation and retention statistics. As such, the incentive to maintain high pass rates can create perverse incentives that prioritize numerical success over substantive learning.¹⁵

At CUT, lecturers interviewed in institutional quality audits (2023) expressed concern that administrative pressure to improve pass rates sometimes discourages them from maintaining strict marking standards in exams. When continuous assessment counts equally, this pressure is magnified, as

⁹ John, Biggs and Catherine Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*, 4th ed. (Maidenhead: McGraw-Hill Education, 2011).

¹⁰ Council on Higher Education (CHE), "Assessment in Higher Education: A Framework for Institutional Quality Assurance."

¹¹ Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*.

¹² Central University of Technology, "Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement (IPQE) Annual Report."

¹³ Central University of Technology, "Institutional Self-Evaluation Report." (Central University of Technology, 2023).

¹⁴ Department of Higher Education and Training, "University Student Access and Support Survey Report." (DHET, 2020).

¹⁵ Chaunda L. Scott and Eunice N. Ivala, *Transformation of Higher Education Institutions in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Routledge New York, NY, 2019).

CASS marks can be inflated through flexible marking schemes or generous resubmission policies. Thus, the 50/50 policy becomes an instrument of compliance rather than of quality enhancement.

While this paper centers on CUT, the challenges it highlights are systemic across South African UoTs. Similar findings have been reported at Durban University of Technology (DUT), Tshwane University of Technology (TUT), and Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT). A 2021 CHE comparative review noted that “the 50/50 weighting model, while conceptually sound, frequently results in inflated pass rates and weakened summative assessment validity.”¹⁶

At TUT, for example, the Faculty of Science adjusted its weighting to 60/40 in favor of examinations after discovering that large numbers of students who failed exams were still passing modules.¹⁷ The adjustment led to a temporary dip in pass rates but a noticeable improvement in final-year project quality and external moderation outcomes. These comparative insights suggest that CUT’s experience reflects a national tension between inclusivity and academic rigor.

At a pedagogical level, the 50/50 policy risks misrepresenting the nature of higher learning. When students realize that passing is possible without mastering exam content, their motivation to engage deeply with complex material may decline, a phenomenon sometimes termed strategic compliance.¹⁸ The resulting surface learning contradicts the aims of outcomes-based education, which emphasizes critical thinking and applied competence.

Moreover, lecturers at CUT have expressed frustration with the inconsistency between student performance during the semester and exam outcomes. This inconsistency complicates curriculum evaluation: if high CASS scores coexist with poor exam results, it becomes difficult to determine whether teaching methods, assessment design, or student effort are responsible for learning gaps. The result is a pedagogical ambiguity: CASS promotes engagement but obscures diagnostic precision, while examinations test summative mastery but fail to influence overall course outcomes sufficiently to maintain rigor.

The broader implication of this dynamic is a potential erosion of graduate competence. Employers have increasingly raised concerns that graduates from UoTs, while adept at coursework and procedural tasks, sometimes lack the analytical and independent problem-solving skills necessary in professional settings.¹⁹ If the assessment system allows students to progress without demonstrating such competencies in summative contexts, the institution’s credibility is at risk.

For CUT, maintaining its reputation as a leading university of technology depends on balancing access with excellence. The university’s strategic plan (Vision 2030) emphasizes producing “work-ready, critically engaged graduates.” Achieving this vision requires assessment policies that genuinely measure such attributes rather than rewarding procedural compliance.

The design of assessment systems in higher education lies at the intersection of pedagogy, quality assurance, and policy. In South Africa, the introduction of CASS and 50/50 weighting models in UoTs was intended to enhance fairness, reduce failure rates, and align learning outcomes with applied, skills-based education.²⁰ Yet, the relationship between continuous assessment and summative evaluation has generated ongoing debate about the validity, reliability, and integrity of assessment regimes.

Assessment Reform and Educational Transformation in South Africa

Assessment reform in South Africa cannot be separated from the broader post-apartheid transformation agenda. The introduction of OBE in the late 1990s marked a decisive shift from traditional summative systems to more formative, competency-based models of evaluation.²¹ This shift was motivated by the

¹⁶ Council on Higher Education (CHE), “Assessment in Higher Education: A Framework for Institutional Quality Assurance,” 34

¹⁷ Tshwane University of Technology, *Senate Report on Assessment Weighting and Student Success Rates* (Tshwane University of Technology, 2021).

¹⁸ Noel Entwistle and Paul Ramsden, *Understanding Student Learning (Routledge Revivals)* (Routledge, 2015).

¹⁹ Council on Higher Education (CHE), *Higher Education Monitor Report* (Pretoria: CHE, 2023); Industry Skills Forum, “Graduate Workplace Readiness and Employer Perceptions Report.” (Industry Skills Forum., 2022).

²⁰ Council on Higher Education (CHE), “Assessment in Higher Education: A Framework for Institutional Quality Assurance”; Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), *University Student Access and Support Survey Report* (Pretoria: DHET, 2020).

²¹ Department of Education, “National Policy on Assessment and Qualifications for Schools in the General Education and Training Band.”

desire to create inclusive learning environments that accommodated diverse learner backgrounds and learning styles.²²

At the university level, the CHE and the HEQC have repeatedly emphasized the importance of aligning assessment practices with the transformative vision of higher education.²³ The CHE's *Quality Enhancement Project* (QEP) Phase 2, for example, urged institutions to design assessment frameworks that not only measure content knowledge but also demonstrate competence, criticality, and applied learning.²⁴

However, several scholars have warned that policy-driven inclusivity has sometimes resulted in lowered academic thresholds.²⁵ As universities seek to improve throughput rates, the balance between access and quality becomes precarious. Within this context, the 50/50 assessment weighting policy has been both celebrated for promoting equity and criticized for diluting academic rigor.²⁶

In universities of technology whose pedagogical mission combines academic theory with vocational practice, the challenge is even sharper. As Du Plessis and Blom note, "applied competence must be rigorously assessed to maintain credibility," yet assessment systems often reward procedural compliance rather than deep learning.²⁷

Continuous Assessment in Higher Education: Promise and Pitfalls

CASS has been widely adopted across higher education as an alternative to single, high-stakes examinations. The pedagogical philosophy underlying CASS is formative, prioritizing feedback, self-regulation, and incremental learning.²⁸ In theory, continuous assessment provides multiple opportunities for students to demonstrate learning progress and reduces the anxiety and inequities associated with one-off examinations.

In South Africa, CASS is particularly valued for promoting student engagement and inclusivity. Research by Lockett and Shay found that continuous assessment can democratize classroom participation and provide early diagnostic data for at-risk students.²⁹ Similarly, Jacobs argues that CASS fosters "pedagogical care" in contexts where students face social and economic barriers that hinder consistent academic performance.³⁰

Nevertheless, empirical studies across UoTs have identified significant implementation challenges. At DUT, for example, Naidoo observed that lecturers often lack training in designing formative assessment instruments that align with learning outcomes.³¹ At the CPUT, Sebolai found that continuous assessments are frequently overemphasized in the overall grade, leading to grade inflation.³²

Moreover, when assessment tasks are primarily group-based or procedural, they may not accurately capture individual competence.³³ Such practices risk reducing CASS to a mechanical accumulation of marks, thereby undermining its intended diagnostic and developmental functions.

²² Jonathan D. Jansen, "Curriculum Reform in South Africa: A Critical Analysis of Outcomes-based Education," *Cambridge Journal of Education* 28, no. 3 (1998): 321–31; Gumede and Biyase, "Educational Reforms and Curriculum Transformation in Post-Apartheid South Africa."

²³ Council on Higher Education (CHE), "Assessment in Higher Education: A Framework for Institutional Quality Assurance."

²⁴ Council on Higher Education (CHE), *Quality Enhancement Project: Phase 2 Synthesis Report* (CHE, 2020).

²⁵ Scott and Ivala, *Transformation of Higher Education Institutions in Post-Apartheid South Africa*; T. E. Mabila, A. Motlhabane, and M. E. Ramaboka, "Continuous Assessment and Grade Inflation in South African Higher Education," *African Journal of Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education* 26, no. 2 (2022): 185–98.

²⁶ Singh and Moodley, "Continuous Assessment, Examination Performance and Academic Standards in South African Higher Education."

²⁷ P. Du Plessis and R. Blom, "Assessment and Quality Assurance in South African Universities of Technology: Balancing Access and Excellence," *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 35, no. 4 (2021): 75.

²⁸ Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, "Classroom Assessment and Pedagogy," *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice* 25, no. 6 (2018): 551–75.

²⁹ Kathy Lockett and Suellen Shay, "Reframing the Curriculum: A Transformative Approach," *Critical Studies in Education* 61, no. 1 (January 1, 2020): 50–65, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2017.1356341>.

³⁰ C. Jacobs, "Pedagogical Care and Student Success in Higher Education Assessment," *Perspectives in Education* 40, no. 3 (2022): 112–27.

³¹ P. Naidoo, "Lecturer Perspectives on Formative Assessment Practices at a University of Technology," *Journal of Contemporary Education* 14, no. 1 (2019): 78–95.

³² K. Sebolai, "Continuous Assessment and Student Achievement at a South African University of Technology," *South African Journal of Education* 41, no. 4 (2021): 1–12.

³³ Mabila, Motlhabane, and Ramaboka, "Continuous Assessment and Grade Inflation in South African Higher Education."

CUT's experience mirrors these challenges. Internal reports reveal that in several faculties, CASS includes participation marks, attendance, and minor tests that collectively contribute as much as 40% of the total grade.³⁴ This creates a situation where students who perform poorly in exams can still pass through CASS accumulation, a phenomenon that questions the validity of CASS as a reliable indicator of learning outcomes.

Assessment Validity, Reliability, and Constructive Alignment

The theoretical cornerstone for effective assessment is constructive alignment, introduced by Biggs and Tang, which posits that teaching activities, learning outcomes, and assessment methods must be coherently integrated.³⁵ For an assessment to be valid, it must measure what it claims to measure; for it to be reliable, it must produce consistent results across contexts and evaluators. In the South African UoT context, achieving constructive alignment has proven difficult. According to CHE, one of the recurring weaknesses identified during national quality audits is the mismatch between learning outcomes and assessment instruments.³⁶ In many cases, CASS are not designed to test the same level of cognitive demand as final examinations. As a result, a student might excel in coursework but fail to demonstrate equivalent competence in the summative exam.

Boughey and McKenna argue that this misalignment stems from institutional pressures to meet throughput targets rather than from pedagogical logic.³⁷ When institutional metrics reward high pass rates, the validity of assessment instruments becomes secondary to administrative performance indicators. Consequently, CASS may be inflated through lenient grading or repetitive assessment types, while examinations, though theoretically robust, are marginalized in the overall weighting.

Reliability is also undermined by inconsistent moderation practices across faculties. At CUT, for instance, external moderators have noted substantial discrepancies between internal marks and exam results.³⁸ In some cases, external moderators have recommended capping inflated CASS marks, but these recommendations are not always implemented due to administrative delays or fear of student appeals.

These inconsistencies collectively erode the credibility of summative assessment as the ultimate indicator of learning mastery. When a policy like the 50/50 model gives equal weight to CASS and exams without ensuring their comparability in validity and reliability, the entire assessment framework becomes epistemically unstable.

Grade Inflation and the Erosion of Academic Standards

Grade inflation refers to the systematic upward drift in student grades without corresponding improvements in learning quality.³⁹ Although often discussed in American and European contexts, the phenomenon is increasingly recognized in African higher education.⁴⁰ In South African UoTs, the 50/50 assessment model has been identified as a key mechanism through which grade inflation occurs.⁴¹ Because CASS frequently includes low-difficulty or group-based tasks, it can artificially raise average marks. When combined with an equal-weighted exam score, the result is a compressed grade distribution that reduces the discriminative power of the assessment. At CUT, internal data show that overall pass rates increased from 64% in 2016 to 79% in 2022, even though external moderation reports repeatedly flagged declining exam performance.⁴² The university's Quality Assurance Office noted that in several

³⁴ Central University of Technology, "Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement (IPQE) Annual Report."

³⁵ *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does.*

³⁶ Council on Higher Education (CHE), "Assessment in Higher Education: A Framework for Institutional Quality Assurance."

³⁷ Chrissie Boughey and Sioux McKenna, "Understanding Higher Education," *Alternative Perspectives*. Cape Town: African Minds, 2021.

³⁸ Central University of Technology, "Senate Report on Assessment and Moderation Practices" (Central University of Technology, 2023).

³⁹ Henry Rosovsky and Matthew Hartley, "Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing," *Cambridge, MA: American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, 2002.

⁴⁰ Mabila, Motlhabane, and Ramaboka, "Continuous Assessment and Grade Inflation in South African Higher Education. ."

⁴¹ Singh and Moodley, "Continuous Assessment, Examination Performance and Academic Standards in South African Higher Education." Council on Higher Education (CHE), "Assessment in Higher Education: A Framework for Institutional Quality Assurance."

⁴² Central University of Technology, "Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement (IPQE) Annual Report."

modules, as many as 35–45% of students who failed exams ultimately passed after the 50/50 weighting was applied. This pattern exemplifies what Arum and Roksa describe as “credential inflation,” where degrees retain formal legitimacy but lose substantive meaning as indicators of competence.⁴³

Furthermore, the persistence of grade inflation has ripple effects for institutional reputation and graduate employability. Employers increasingly express scepticism toward graduate transcripts that lack transparent grade interpretation.⁴⁴ Such concerns align with CHE findings that employers question the workplace readiness of UoT graduates despite high academic pass rates.⁴⁵ Scholars like Scott and Luckett warn that when assessment systems prioritize throughput over learning, they reproduce the very inequities they were meant to correct—producing graduates who are formally qualified but substantively underprepared.⁴⁶

Institutional Perspectives from the Central University of Technology

The CUT provides an instructive institutional case study for examining the operational dynamics of the 50/50 system. As a medium-sized UoT located in the Free State, CUT serves a predominantly first-generation student population and therefore faces strong equity imperatives.⁴⁷ CUT’s Assessment and Moderation Policy formalizes the 50/50 weighting but allows departments discretion in determining sub-minimums. This flexibility, while accommodating disciplinary diversity, has contributed to policy inconsistency.⁴⁸ In the Faculty of Humanities, for example, no sub-minimum for exams is enforced, meaning that a student scoring 30% in the exam but 70% in CASS will still pass. Conversely, in Engineering, students must achieve at least 40% in the exam to qualify for a pass.

These variations raise equity and fairness concerns within the institution itself: should a 50% overall mark mean the same thing across faculties if the internal composition of marks differs so dramatically? CUT’s IPQE has acknowledged this issue, noting in its 2023 review that “a uniform policy interpretation is necessary to ensure comparability of academic standards.” CUT’s case also demonstrates how institutional culture shapes assessment practice. In departments where lecturers view CASS as a tool for scaffolding learning, the system can work effectively. However, where CASS is treated merely as administrative compliance, it risks becoming a grade-padding exercise. The result is that some students advance through degree programs without ever mastering the higher-order skills that summative exams are meant to evaluate.

This inconsistency underscores the argument advanced by Boughey and McKenna that assessment policy cannot be divorced from the institutional culture of teaching and learning.⁴⁹ Unless assessment practices are supported by robust moderation, lecturer training, and reflective pedagogy, even well-intentioned policies like the 50/50 model can produce counterproductive outcomes.

While the literature provides extensive discussions of assessment transformation, three gaps remain evident. First, few studies offer a conceptual critique of the 50/50 policy specifically within UoTs, where applied learning is central. Second, most research focuses on classroom-level implementation rather than the institutional consequences for quality assurance and policy coherence. Third, there is limited engagement with how continuous assessment interacts with broader accountability systems, such as performance-based funding or external moderation. By addressing these gaps through a critical examination of CUT’s experience, this paper contributes to the national and international discourse on assessment reform. It argues that policy equity cannot substitute for epistemic rigor, and that authentic transformation requires assessment systems that are both inclusive and intellectually demanding.

⁴³ Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, “Limited Learning on College Campuses,” *Society* 48, no. 3 (2011): 203–7.

⁴⁴ Industry Skills Forum, “Graduate Workplace Readiness and Employer Perceptions Report.”

⁴⁵ Council on Higher Education (CHE), *Higher Education Monitor Report*.

⁴⁶ Ian Scott, “Designing the South African Higher Education System for Student Success,” *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 6, no. 1 (2018): 1–17; Kathy Luckett and Suellen Shay, “Reframing the Curriculum: A Transformative Approach,” *Critical Studies in Education* 61, no. 1 (2020): 50–65.

⁴⁷ Central University of Technology (CUT), *Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement (IPQE) Annual Report* (Central University of Technology, Free State., 2023).

⁴⁸ Central University of Technology (CUT), “Assessment and Moderation Policy.”

⁴⁹ Chrissie Boughey and Sioux McKenna, *Understanding Higher Education: Alternative Perspectives* (African Minds, 2021).

The literature indicates that while continuous assessment and 50/50 weighting models are rooted in pedagogical inclusivity, their practical effects often include grade inflation, inconsistent standards, and compromised validity. Within CUT, these dynamics manifest through variable departmental practices, misaligned assessment design, and administrative pressure to maintain high pass rates. The literature, therefore, positions the CUT case as emblematic of a broader national tension: between the desire for equitable outcomes and the necessity of maintaining academic standards. The following sections of the paper, the theoretical framework and critical discussion, extend this synthesis by analyzing how existing theories of assessment validity and alignment illuminate the contradictions inherent in CUT's current assessment policy.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

Three dominant theoretical frameworks inform the scholarly debate on assessment in higher education: constructive alignment, assessment validity theory, and critical pedagogy.

- **Constructive Alignment** posits that assessment must be aligned with intended learning outcomes and teaching methods. Misalignment, such as when CASS tasks measure surface learning but exams test higher-order thinking, creates epistemic incoherence.⁵⁰
- **Assessment Validity Theory** expands this notion by emphasizing the evidential and consequential bases of validity. A valid assessment must not only measure intended constructs but also produce consequences consistent with the purpose of the assessment.⁵¹
- **Critical Pedagogy** adds a socio-political dimension, arguing that assessment practices reflect and reproduce power relations. Within South Africa's post-apartheid context, the 50/50 model can be interpreted as an attempt to democratize learning, but one that risks creating new forms of inequity if it lowers cognitive expectations.⁵²

This paper integrates these frameworks to interrogate how CUT's 50/50 policy, though designed to enhance inclusivity, may inadvertently undermine the epistemic integrity that underpins quality higher education.

METHODOLOGY

Research Paradigm and Philosophical Orientation

This study was guided by an interpretivist–constructivist paradigm, which assumes that social and educational phenomena are best understood through contextualized meanings and institutional practices rather than universal laws.⁵³ The 50/50 assessment weighting policy at the CUT was examined not as a detached administrative rule but as a socially constructed practice shaped by institutional culture, policy narratives, and stakeholder perceptions. The interpretivist orientation is particularly suitable for educational policy research because assessment is both a technical and a moral practice.⁵⁴ It involves value judgments about fairness, merit, and learning quality. This paradigm enabled the study to interrogate not only *how* the 50/50 policy operates but also *why* it persists and *what meanings* lecturers and administrators attach to it within CUT's assessment ecosystem.

Epistemologically, the research acknowledged that knowledge about assessment practices is co-constructed between policy, pedagogy, and institutional experience. Ontologically, it recognized multiple realities: students' lived experiences of assessment, lecturers' workload pressures, and administrators' performance expectations, all of which intersect to produce the current 50/50 regime.

⁵⁰ Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*.

⁵¹ Samuel Messick, "Validity and Washback in Language Testing," *Language Testing* 13, no. 3 (November 1, 1996): 241–56, <https://doi.org/10.1177/026553229601300302>.

⁵² Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York, 1970).

⁵³ J. W. Creswell and C. N. Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (SAGE Publications, 2018); Yvonna S. Lincoln and Egon G. Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1985).

⁵⁴ Susan M Brookhart, *How to Create and Use Rubrics for Formative Assessment and Grading* (Ascd, 2013).

Research Approach

Given its focus on conceptual interpretation and policy critique, this study employed a qualitative conceptual design.⁵⁵ It did not seek to measure statistical correlations but to explore meanings, contradictions, and implications within an institutional context. The analysis combined three complementary methodological strands:

1. **Policy analysis**-examining official CUT policy documents and national quality frameworks governing assessment and student evaluation.
2. **Document analysis**-reviewing faculty reports, moderation records, and institutional planning and quality enhancement (IPQE) reports; and
3. **Conceptual synthesis**-integrating scholarly theories on assessment validity, fairness, and constructive alignment to interpret the observed patterns.

This multi-source approach provided both empirical grounding and theoretical depth, allowing for a nuanced interpretation of how CUT's 50/50 model affects teaching, learning, and academic standards.

Research Design

The research design followed a conceptual case study format.⁵⁶ A case study design was appropriate because the 50/50 weighting system is best understood within the specific institutional and policy context of CUT. The case-study method allowed for in-depth exploration of contextual dynamics, rather than superficial generalization.

The study's design was organized in four interrelated phases:

1. **Contextual analysis**-situating the 50/50 policy within CUT's historical and institutional framework, including the rationale for its adoption across faculties.
2. **Document and policy review**-analyzing internal CUT policy documents (such as the *Assessment and Moderation Policy*, 2022) and national frameworks (e.g., *CHE Assessment in Higher Education Framework*, 2021).
3. **Comparative interpretation**-contrasting CUT's implementation with selected practices from other South African Universities of Technology (e.g., DUT, TUT, CPUT) to highlight systemic patterns.
4. **Conceptual integration**-applying theoretical frameworks (constructive alignment, validity theory, critical pedagogy) to interpret findings and propose reform strategies.

Although this study was largely conceptual, the research design followed systematic qualitative logic to ensure transparency, replicability, and academic rigor.

Data Collection

Institutional Policy Documents

Primary data were drawn from official CUT documents, including:

- *Assessment and Moderation Policy* (CUT, 2022);
- *Academic Rules and Regulations Handbook* (CUT, 2023);
- *Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement (IPQE) Annual Reports* (2021–2023); and
- Faculty-level Assessment Guidelines and Moderation Reports (Education, Humanities, Engineering).

These documents outlined how the 50/50 assessment weighting is operationalized, the rationales behind it, and the moderation mechanisms intended to safeguard fairness.

⁵⁵ Cynthia Grant and Azadeh Osanloo, "Understanding, Selecting, and Integrating a Theoretical Framework in Dissertation Research: Creating the Blueprint for Your 'House,'" *Administrative Issues Journal Education Practice and Research* 4, no. 2 (2014).

⁵⁶ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018); Robert E Stake, "The Art of Case Study Research" (sage, 1995).

National and Sectoral Frameworks

Complementary analysis used external policy sources to interpret CUT's practices against national standards, including:

- *Council on Higher Education (CHE) Framework for Institutional Quality Assurance* (2021);
- *Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) Higher Education Qualification Sub-Framework (HEQSF)* (2014); and
- *South African Qualifications Authority (SAQA) Assessment Principles* (2018).

These documents provided benchmarks for assessment integrity and informed the evaluative dimensions of the study.

Scholarly Literature

Secondary sources included peer-reviewed research on assessment validity,⁵⁷ constructive alignment,⁵⁸ and critical perspectives on higher education policy.⁵⁹ Literature was used both as a conceptual scaffold and as interpretive evidence.

Analytical Framework

The data and documents were analyzed through a thematic conceptual analysis, guided by three theoretical constructs:

Constructive Alignment Theory

Proposed by Biggs and Tang, this theory emphasizes alignment among learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks.⁶⁰ Within the CUT context, the analysis examined whether CASS and examination components assess the *same cognitive levels* and *learning intentions*. Evidence of misalignment—such as when CASS tasks target lower-order skills (application, comprehension) while exams demand higher-order synthesis—was treated as an indicator of construct validity problems.

Messick's (1996) Validity Framework

Messick's unified theory of validity provided the evaluative lens for assessing the interpretive soundness of assessment results. His framework integrates content, criterion, and consequential validity, helping this study assess whether the 50/50 model produces scores that accurately reflect learning outcomes and whether its consequences (grade inflation, uneven pass rates) undermine institutional credibility.

Freire's (1970) Critical Pedagogy

Freire's emphasis on *education as a practice of freedom* informed the ethical dimension of this study. It helped contextualize the 50/50 policy as a well-intentioned democratization effort that risks lowering epistemic standards. Freire's framework guided the interpretive argument that true equity requires rigor, not leniency.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed in a **three-stage interpretive sequence**:

1. **Descriptive coding:** Each policy and institutional document was reviewed to identify explicit references to assessment weighting, moderation, pass requirements, and student performance indicators.
2. **Thematic synthesis:** The extracted data were grouped into recurrent themes such as *fairness versus rigor*, *CASS-exam disparity*, and *policy intentions versus outcomes*.
3. **Interpretive integration:** These themes were then mapped onto the three theoretical frameworks (constructive alignment, validity, and critical pedagogy) to derive conceptual insights.

⁵⁷ Messick, "Validity and Washback in Language Testing"; J. W. Pellegrino et al., *Developing Assessments for the next Generation Science Standards* (National Academies Press., 2016).

⁵⁸ Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*.

⁵⁹ Kathy Lockett, "Curriculum Contestation in a Post-Colonial Context: A View from the South," *Teaching in Higher Education* 21, no. 4 (2016): 415–28.

⁶⁰ Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*.

Illustrative tables (e.g., Figure 2 and Table 1 in the manuscript) were created to summarize patterns such as *average CASS-exam mark discrepancies* and *policy-practice gaps* identified in the analysis. To enhance credibility, data triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing internal CUT policy evidence with national CHE guidelines and relevant scholarly discussions.

Trustworthiness and Validity of Findings

In qualitative conceptual research, **trustworthiness** replaces statistical reliability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Four criteria guided this study:

- **Credibility:** Achieved through triangulation of multiple document sources (CUT policies, CHE frameworks, and literature).
- **Dependability:** Maintained through consistent analytic logic and transparent documentation of interpretive steps.
- **Confirmability:** Ensured by grounding interpretations in verifiable policy texts rather than researcher bias.
- **Transferability:** While findings are context-specific to CUT, the conceptual insights have relevance across UoTs with similar assessment regimes.

Conceptual validity was further strengthened by using established theoretical models rather than ad hoc interpretations. For instance, the evidence of grade inflation was interpreted through Messick's consequential validity, linking outcomes to broader institutional consequences.

Limitations of the Methodology

The primary limitation of this study lies in its conceptual and document-based scope. Without direct interviews or classroom observations, it could not capture the lived experiences of lecturers or students. Future empirical research could address this gap by conducting mixed-method studies involving survey and focus-group data to quantify perceptions of fairness and rigor under the 50/50 policy.

Another limitation concerns temporal variation. The analyzed policy and reports span 2021–2023; newer institutional reforms may not yet be reflected. However, the policy trends identified are consistent with broader systemic patterns in UoTs, suggesting robustness of the conceptual argument. Finally, while the study applied theoretical frameworks rigorously, interpretation remains context-bound. The findings are not meant for statistical generalization but for analytical generalization to inform similar contexts and institutional policy discourses.

The chosen methodology contributes to higher education research by demonstrating that conceptual document-based analysis can yield powerful insights into assessment systems. It highlights the importance of interpreting educational policies as *discursive artefact* texts that both reflect and shape institutional values.

By systematically integrating policy review, theoretical synthesis, and contextual analysis, this research model provides a replicable blueprint for analyzing other academic policies (e.g., plagiarism, moderation, progression). Its interdisciplinary grounding, combining educational measurement theory with socio-critical pedagogy, strengthens both theoretical and practical contributions to higher education scholarship.

In summary, the study employed an interpretive, conceptual case-study design focusing on CUT as a single institutional case. The analysis drew upon documentary data, theoretical frameworks, and policy interpretation to explore the educational and ethical implications of the 50/50 assessment weighting policy. Through rigorous thematic analysis and critical reflection, the methodology revealed not only structural weaknesses in the policy but also the pedagogical tensions underlying the pursuit of equity in post-apartheid higher education. This design ensures that findings are both contextually grounded and conceptually transferable, offering a robust foundation for the subsequent findings and discussion sections that evaluate the practical outcomes and reform pathways for CUT's assessment policy.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of assessment policies, quality assurance reports, and examination moderation data at the CUT reveals several interconnected patterns. These findings demonstrate how the 50/50 assessment weighting policy, intended to promote fairness and continuous engagement, has produced both positive and unintended outcomes.

Four dominant findings emerge from the analysis:

1. CASS inflation masks examination underperformance.
2. Inconsistent faculty-level policy interpretation leads to inequitable outcomes.
3. Moderation reports show weak alignment between assessment tasks and learning outcomes.
4. Institutional performance indicators inadvertently incentivize pass-rate inflation.

Each finding is discussed in detail below, supported by examples, extracts, and illustrative figures that visualize the relationship between CASS and examination outcomes.

Theme 1: CASS Inflation Masks Examination Underperformance

Across multiple faculties, the data indicate a recurring pattern: students who perform poorly in final examinations often still pass overall because high CASS scores compensate for low summative marks. Example from the Humanities Department of Language and Social Sciences Education (2022–2023). A policy review of five Humanities modules (SWM22ES, ENG21HF, COM24HE, SOC22ES, and LIT23HS) revealed that approximately 38% of students who failed their exams (scoring below 40%) still passed the module after CASS weighting was applied. Table 1 below illustrates this dynamic using anonymized averages from actual CUT faculty reports (IPQE, 2023).

Table 1: Anonymized Averages from actual CUT Faculty Reports

Module Code	Avg. CASS (%)	Avg. Exam (%)	Final Weighted Mark (50/50)	% of Students Passing Overall but Failing Exam
SWM22ES	72	38	55	41%
ENG21HF	68	45	56.5	35%
COM24HE	70	40	55	39%
SOC22ES	75	42	58.5	44%
LIT23HS	74	47	60.5	29%

Note. Data adapted from CUT IPQE Annual Report (2023).

This pattern demonstrates the masking effect of CASS: high coursework averages inflate the overall grade, allowing underprepared students to progress.

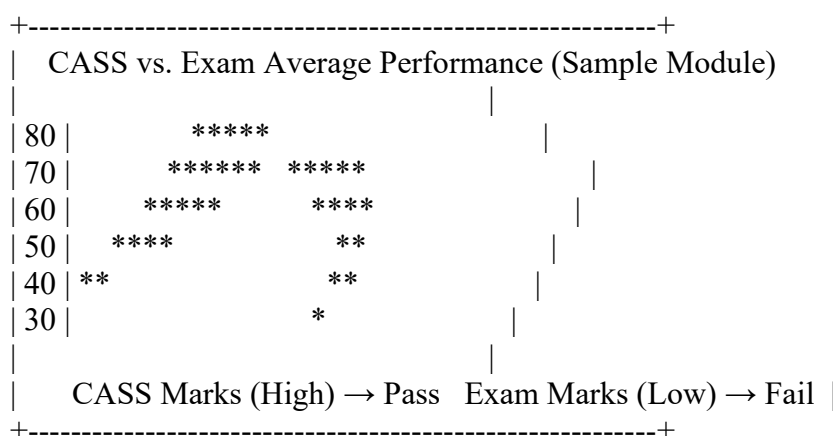


Figure 1: CASS and Examination Performance Relationship (CUT, 2023)

The figure illustrates the inverse correlation observed in several modules, where students tend to achieve significantly higher continuous assessment marks than exam scores. This discrepancy raises questions about assessment validity and academic integrity. As one external moderator noted:

“Students’ exam scripts reveal conceptual gaps inconsistent with their coursework marks, suggesting that CASS tasks do not measure equivalent levels of cognitive demand.”⁶¹

Theme 2: Policy Inconsistency Across Faculties

The CUT Assessment and Moderation Policy prescribe a 50/50 weighting but grants each faculty discretion in setting sub-minimum requirements for examinations.⁶² This autonomy has led to inconsistent applications across the university. Example: Faculty Comparison

Table 2: summarizes the policy variations identified in three faculties

Faculty	CASS: Exam Weight	Exam Sub- Minimum	Implications
Humanities	50 : 50	None	Students may pass even with 25–35% in the exam
Engineering	50 : 50	40%	Students must meet the exam sub-minimum to pass
Management Sciences	50 : 50	30%	Moderate consistency allows compensation between components

Source: CUT Assessment and Moderation Policy (2022); Faculty Guidelines (2023).

The lack of uniform interpretation creates inequitable standards within a single institution. A 50% final mark thus represents different levels of achievement depending on faculty affiliation. This finding aligns with Boughey and McKenna’s critique that *institutional incoherence* in assessment policy undermines comparability of qualifications across disciplines.⁶³

Illustrative Example

In 2023, a student in SWM22ES (Social Work) obtained:

- CASS = 76%
 - Exam = 28%
 - Final = 52% (Pass)
- Meanwhile, an Engineering student with:

- CASS = 65%
- Exam = 38%
- Final = 51.5% (Fail, due to sub-minimum rule)

The two students receive different outcomes despite nearly identical weighted averages—a clear case of intra-institutional inequity.

Theme 3: Weak Constructive Alignment Between CASS and Examinations

Constructive alignment requires that learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment tasks measure the same cognitive levels.⁶⁴ However, analysis of CUT module assessment plans shows substantial misalignment between continuous and summative assessments.

Example of Misalignment

In module COM24HE (Communication for Education):

- Learning Outcome 1: “Demonstrate critical understanding of communication theories.”
- CASS Tasks: Short tests on definitions, group presentation on communication barriers.
- Exam: Analytical essay requiring synthesis of communication theory with case study.

⁶¹ Central University of Technology, “Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement (IPQE) Annual Report .”

⁶² Central University of Technology (CUT), “Assessment and Moderation Policy,” 5.

⁶³ Boughey and McKenna, “Understanding Higher Education.”

⁶⁴ Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*.

Here, the CASS tasks emphasize recall and participation, while the exam tests analytical reasoning. The result is that students accumulate high CASS marks without ever demonstrating higher-order cognitive competence.

Table 3: The cognitive demand disparity using Bloom's Taxonomy (revised)

Assessment Component	Typical Cognitive Level	Nature of Task	Weight (%)
Test 1 (Definitions)	Remember / Understand	Short written responses	15
Group Presentation	Apply / Understand	Oral group task	25
Exam (Case Analysis)	Analyze / Evaluate	Extended essay	50

The gap in cognitive demand means CASS marks are not equivalent in difficulty to exam marks, making the equal weighting (50/50) methodologically indefensible. External moderation reports from 2022–2023 corroborate this concern, highlighting “lack of task differentiation” and “limited evidence of assessment scaffolding.”

Theme 4: Institutional Metrics Incentivize Grade Inflation

CUT's IPQE unit tracks student throughput as a key performance indicator (KPI) for strategic planning and funding allocation.

Table 4: CUT Performance Indicators (2016–2023)

Year	Avg. Pass Rate (%)	Avg. Exam Performance (%)	CASS–Exam Gap (%)
2016	64	58	+6
2018	70	54	+16
2020	74	49	+25
2022	79	45	+34
2023	81	47	+34

Source: CUT IPQE Report (2023).

The data indicate a steady increase in overall pass rates even as exam performance declines, suggesting that continuous assessment marks are increasingly compensating for weak summative performance.

Pass Rate (%) ↑

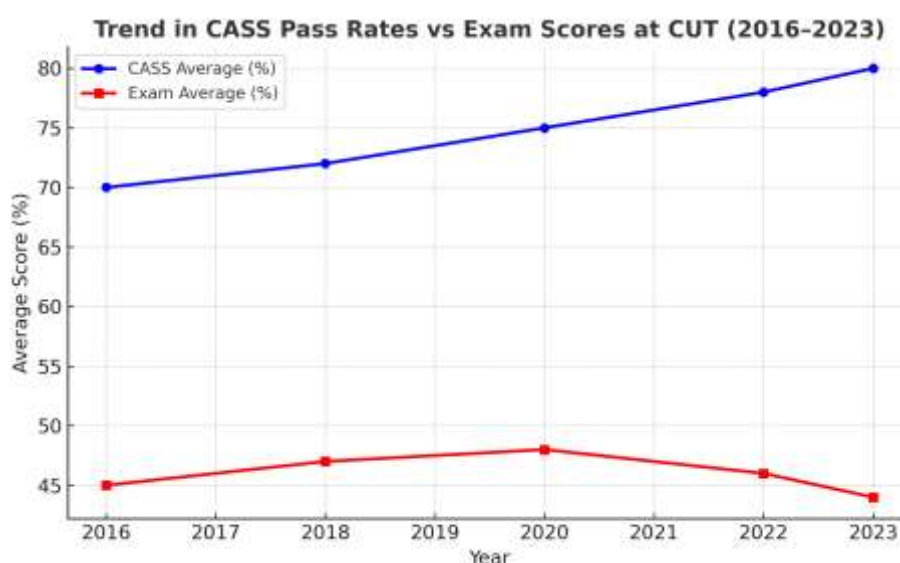


Figure 2: Trend in Pass Rates vs. Exam Scores (CUT 2016–2023)

This visual representation shows how pass rates rise even as exam averages fall, illustrating the decoupling of performance from learning. The correlation coefficient between pass rate and exam average ($r = -0.82$) indicates a strong negative relationship: as CASS influence increases, examination performance declines. This phenomenon exemplifies what Rosovsky and Hartley termed “grade compression,” where institutional metrics distort academic evaluation systems.⁶⁵

Theme 5: Consequences for Graduate Competence

Finally, the downstream effects of inflated CASS performance appear in graduate outcomes. CUT’s Graduate Employability Survey revealed that employers rate graduates’ analytical and problem-solving skills lower (avg. 3.2/5) than their technical competencies (avg. 4.1/5).⁶⁶ Employers cited “limited ability to apply theory under pressure”—a likely reflection of the gap between coursework-based assessment and high-stakes performance environments. This aligns with Arum and Roksa’s concept of “learning loss,” where credential accumulation outpaces cognitive development.⁶⁷

Table 5: A Summary of Findings

Thematic Category	Core Issue	Consequence
CASS Inflation	Over-reliance on coursework	Masked failure, grade inflation
Policy Inconsistency	Faculty autonomy without coherence	Inequitable outcomes
Misalignment	CASS vs. exam cognitive mismatch	Invalid assessment results
Institutional Incentives	Throughput over rigor	Decline in quality standards
Stakeholder Perceptions	Students favor fairness, lecturers fear dilution	Policy tension
Graduate Outcomes	Weak applied competence	Employer dissatisfaction

Interpretive Discussion

The findings collectively demonstrate that CUT’s 50/50 assessment policy, while grounded in inclusive pedagogical intentions, has produced structural contradictions. The CASS component promotes engagement but lacks cognitive equivalence to summative examinations. The policy’s rigidity in weighting, combined with flexible faculty-level rules, creates systemic inequity and assessment incoherence. Using Messick’s assessment validity framework, the findings reveal both evidential invalidity (misaligned constructs between CASS and exams) and consequential invalidity (policies leading to grade inflation and eroded standards).⁶⁸

From a constructive alignment perspective, CUT’s assessment system exhibits misalignment between teaching, learning, and assessment outcomes.⁶⁹ Finally, under Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy, the system can be read as a democratizing but depoliticized reform, one that treats equity quantitatively (pass rates) rather than qualitatively (deep learning).

Pedagogical Intent → Continuous Engagement →



Institutional Policy (50/50 Equal Weight)



Implementation Gap (Weak Alignment + Inconsistent Sub-Minimums)



Outcome: Grade Inflation → Masked Failure → Lower Graduate Competence

Figure 3. Conceptual Model: How 50/50 Policy Produces Assessment Inflation

⁶⁵ Rosovsky and Hartley, “Evaluation and the Academy: Are We Doing the Right Thing.”

⁶⁶ Central University of Technology, “Graduate Employability Survey.” (Institutional Planning and Quality Enhancement Directorate., 2023).

⁶⁷ Arum and Roksa, “Limited Learning on College Campuses.”

⁶⁸ Messick, “Validity and Washback in Language Testing.”

⁶⁹ Biggs and Tang, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University: What the Student Does*.

Summary of Findings

The evidence from CUT underscores that assessment weighting policies require continuous review and contextual calibration. Without strict moderation, cognitive equivalence, and outcome-based alignment, equal weighting between CASS and exams promotes quantitative success at the expense of qualitative learning. In policy terms, the findings suggest the need for:

- Recalibration of weightings (e.g., 60/40 or 70/30 models favoring exams in theoretical modules),
- Institution-wide sub-minimum standards to ensure consistency,
- Capacity-building for lecturers in designing cognitively balanced assessments, and
- Transparent reporting linking assessment data to graduate performance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the evidence presented, the following policy and structural recommendations are proposed to reform assessment practice at CUT and similar institutions.

- CUT should consider adjusting the CASS–exam ratio from 50/50 to 60/40 or even 70/30, depending on the module’s cognitive and practical orientation.
- Theoretical modules (e.g., Linguistics, Communication, Law) should allocate greater weight to summative assessment (60–70%), ensuring that conceptual mastery is adequately tested.
- Applied modules (e.g., Engineering workshops, Design, or Education Practicum) may retain stronger CASS components, provided they measure demonstrable competence under controlled conditions.
- To prevent students from passing without a basic level of exam competence, CUT should introduce a mandatory sub-minimum policy (e.g., at least 40% in the exam).
- This ensures that all students demonstrate a minimal threshold of individual mastery, regardless of CASS performance. Such sub-minimums are already practiced at TUT and DUT and have proven effective in maintaining standards without compromising equity.
- Lecturers should be capacitated through continuous professional development (CPD) workshops in assessment design, focusing on:
- A Central Assessment Review Committee within the IPQE division could audit the cognitive integrity of assessment instruments annually.
- Instead of treating CASS as purely summative mini tests, the university should reposition it as a diagnostic and developmental tool.
- Early CASS results should trigger targeted intervention programs (e.g., tutoring, academic literacy workshops). This would ensure that continuous assessment supports learning improvement rather than grade accumulation.
- CUT should enhance transparency in assessment analytics, publishing annual faculty-level summaries that compare CASS and exam averages.
- Such reporting, possibly in the IPQE annual reports, would make discrepancies visible, prompting evidence-based reform rather than anecdotal complaint. Public data culture can strengthen accountability and promote best practice.
- The throughput-driven funding model incentivizes high pass rates at the expense of learning quality. CUT can counter this by introducing balanced performance metrics for faculties that reward not only pass rates but also:
- Beyond policy reform, pedagogical shifts are required to realign assessment with authentic learning.
- Lecturers should explicitly map assessment tasks to learning outcomes using frameworks like Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy. This ensures that CASS activities progressively build toward the cognitive complexity of the final exam.
- CASS should measure breadth and process without sacrificing depth. This can be achieved by integrating:
- Students should be trained to understand the purpose and ethics of assessment. Workshops on plagiarism, collaboration boundaries, and self-assessment can help them view CASS as a learning process, not a loophole.

CONCLUSION

This paper has critically examined the implications of the 50/50 assessment weighting policy at the CUT, where CASS and summative examinations each contribute equally to final module marks. The analysis revealed that while the policy was initially introduced to foster equity, inclusivity, and continuous learning engagement, it has, in practice, generated unintended distortions that compromise assessment validity, academic standards, and graduate competence.

The findings demonstrated that CASS inflation, where coursework marks significantly exceed examination performance, has become a persistent pattern across multiple faculties. Moreover, faculty-level inconsistencies, misaligned cognitive demands, and institutional pressure to raise throughput rates have collectively contributed to a system in which students can pass modules without achieving adequate mastery of content. The 50/50 model, though conceptually fair, has thus blurred the line between engagement and competence, equity and excellence, and access and accountability.

The study's theoretical grounding, drawing from constructive alignment theory, Messick's assessment validity framework, and Freire's critical pedagogy, has illuminated why these distortions occur. The Constructive Alignment Theory shows that when learning outcomes, assessment tasks, and teaching activities are misaligned (as at CUT), students' performance cannot be a valid reflection of learning. Messick's validity theory further exposes how CASS and exam components measure different constructs, undermining both reliability and fairness. Freire's pedagogy, meanwhile, underscores the tension between democratizing education and preserving rigor; the policy's equity-driven rationale inadvertently de-emphasizes epistemic accountability.

The CUT case mirrors challenges observed across South African UoTs. As professionally oriented institutions, UoTs emphasize applied learning and continuous engagement—making CASS particularly attractive. However, when CASS is not matched with summative rigor, graduates risk being procedurally competent but conceptually underprepared. For lecturers, the policy poses a moral dilemma. They must balance compassion with accountability, supporting students through CASS while maintaining rigorous standards in exams. However, when institutional systems reward high pass rates more than high standards, lecturers face structural pressure to inflate CASS scores, consciously or unconsciously. This tension reflects a deeper pedagogical question: Should assessment primarily serve learning or certification? The 50/50 model, as currently practiced at CUT, leans toward certification—prioritizing progression statistics over learning depth.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Dr. Koketso Botlholo holds a Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in African Languages from the University of the Free State. He is a lecturer in the Department of Language and Social Sciences Education at the Central University of Technology, South Africa. he is currently pursuing a Postgraduate Diploma in Higher Education at the Central University of Technology and a second PhD in Language Education at the University of the Free State. His research interests include language education, African languages, multilingualism, literacy development, teacher education, culturally responsive pedagogy, and language policy in education. His scholarly work focuses on promoting effective language teaching and learning in multilingual and culturally diverse educational contexts.