

Supporting Assessment Readiness for Online Assessment: Experiences from a Higher Education Course for Instructional Leaders

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Abstract

Online assessment has emerged as a fundamental aspect of higher education; however, students' preparedness to participate in digital assessment methods is inconsistent, especially within professional development settings. The study examines the perceptions of instructional leaders regarding the support for perceived assessment readiness in an online higher education course. Data were gathered from 884 participants through a post-session evaluation form that included Likert-scale items and an open-ended question. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were employed to assess participants' comprehension of online quizzes, written assignments, and the Portfolio of Evidence. The findings demonstrate that structured, practical support improved perceived confidence and preparedness for online quizzes and assignments; however, perceived readiness for more complex assessment components varied significantly. This study emphasises the significance of deliberate, course-level strategies in facilitating perceived assessment readiness within online professional learning contexts.

Keywords: *Online assessment; assessment readiness; instructional leadership; professional development; higher education.*

1. Introduction

A growing number of higher education programs and courses are being delivered online to ensure accessibility and flexibility for adults (Heil & Ifenthaler, 2023). Institutions are increasingly utilising digital platforms for teaching, learning, and assessment, with particular emphasis on the management of the assessment process in professional development contexts (Tahir et al., 2025). Therefore, online assessments have become an essential element of higher education teaching and learning, particularly in the context of continuous professional development courses (Heil & Ifenthaler, 2023; Tahir et al., 2025). Not only has the transition

to online assessments changed how assessments are submitted, but it has also fundamentally altered their design, experience, and interpretation (Hu, Liu, & Daniel, 2025). Despite the ongoing digital transformation in higher education, Hu et al. (2025) contend that assessment practices are often lagging behind pedagogical innovation in online environments.

Online assessments are often perceived as a technical or administrative process. Heil and Ifenthaler (2023) highlight that, for online assessments to be deemed successful, they require pedagogical clarity, assessment experience, and students' preparedness and comfort with technology to access, complete, and submit their assignments. However, students commonly report challenges with learning management system navigation, assessment interpretation, submission procedures, and feedback (Tahir et al., 2025). These challenges can have a negative impact on students, consequently affecting their confidence, performance and overall online engagement. This points to assessment readiness as a critical factor influencing success in online assessments (Tahir et al., 2025). In this study, assessment readiness refers to students' preparedness to engage with online assessment tasks, including understanding and managing assessment expectations and demands, familiarity with the LMS and submission portals, and effective use of digital tools (Heil & Ifenthaler, 2023; Tahir et al., 2025). Limited assessment preparedness often leads to increased anxiety, higher submission errors, and perceptions of unfairness in assessment processes.

Instructional Leaders enrolled in higher education courses constitute a unique student cohort. Although they possess professional experience in teaching and leadership, they may have varied exposure to online assessment practices, if any exposure at all (Cowart & Jin, 2024). Thus, it should not be assumed that professional expertise necessarily equates to assessment readiness in digital higher education contexts. In addition, Cowart & Jin (2024) state that instructional leaders' assessment readiness may be influenced by their assessment engagement in CPD, as they struggle to balance professional responsibilities and assessment demands.

Heil & Ifenthaler (2023) emphasise the importance of higher education course-level strategies such as explicit guidance, formative assessment opportunities, and timely feedback in supporting assessment readiness. Early assessment experiences and structured support are shown to reduce uncertainty about assessment completion and submission and to help build students' confidence. However, research rarely explores how such support is experienced across various courses. According to Tahir et al. (2025), current research on online assessment readiness primarily focuses on undergraduate or fully online courses. However, there is limited empirical research on professional development courses with practical-based evidence offered by online higher education institutions.

Therefore, this study responds to calls for context-specific research on online assessment practices, particularly examining how assessment readiness is supported within higher education professional development courses for instructional leaders. Using participant

feedback, the study explores experiences with assessment preparation and the support provided to instructional leaders, answering the following research question: “How do instructional leaders perceive the assessment readiness support provided in an online higher education course?” This study measures perceived assessment readiness – that is, participants’ self-reported confidence and preparedness – rather than actual assessment performance outcomes.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research Design and Context

The study was conducted with instructional leaders in the Limpopo Province, South Africa, who were enrolled in a professional development course at the University of South Africa (UNISA). The instructional leaders consisted of education district officials, principals, deputy principals, departmental heads and a few teachers. The course used a blended teaching and learning approach, with the majority of the course delivered online. The instructional leaders enrolled in the course were expected to make use of the learning management system for teaching and learning, as well as for assessment completion and submission. The face-to-face component of the course occurred during support sessions led by the course facilitators. The support sessions were intended to provide technical support for using the LMS, guidance on completing assessments, and practical demonstrations of how to complete assessments online and submit them. The first support session was conducted across 5 days, during which the participants attended on their allocated days.

2.2. Data Collection

To evaluate the effectiveness of the support sessions, a Microsoft Form was used to collect data after each support session, with 884 instructional leaders participating. Although 1000 instructional leaders were enrolled, not all attended the first support session. The form consisted of Likert-scale questions, divided into 9 sections; those relevant to this study include: Online quiz understanding (5 items), which assessed the level of understanding of participants regarding the process of accessing, completing, and submitting online quizzes, as well as the comprehension of the quiz demonstration, randomised questions, and re-attempt procedures. Followed by Assignment Understanding (5 items), which evaluated the extent to which participants are aware of the following: the usefulness of assignment information, the creation of folders, the comprehension of assignment expectations, the understanding of due dates, and the ability to access assignments. Lastly, Portfolio of Evidence (1 item), in which participants' comprehension of the methods for approaching and completing the Portfolio of Evidence requirement was evaluated. The evaluation form used a 5-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree. Furthermore, the section

on session evaluation and feedback contained open-ended questions, with one question specifically addressing assessment preparedness (1 item).

2.3. Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the Microsoft Forms evaluation (n=884) were analysed with descriptive statistics, generated by MS Forms built-in analytics. The frequencies and percentages of all Likert-scale responses were analysed to evaluate participants' levels of understanding and confidence across the assessment categories. AI-assisted thematic analysis (Claude, Anthropic) was used to analyse the extensive text responses to the open-ended question on assessment preparedness. The AI tool facilitated the identification of recurring themes, the categorisation of response patterns, and the generation of frequency counts for prevalent themes. The researchers then reviewed, validated, and interpreted the AI-generated categories to ensure they accurately and meaningfully reflected participants' expressed readiness to complete assessments.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Online quiz understanding

The results reveal that the majority of participants found the session on comprehending the online quiz beneficial and prepared them to complete it. 91% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop helped them grasp how to access the online quiz, with 4.3% neutral and 4.1% disagreeing or strongly disagreeing. Following the session, 89.2% said they agreed or strongly agreed that they knew how to complete and submit the online quiz, while 6.4% were neutral and 4.4% disagreed or strongly disagreed. In terms of how to retake the quiz, 85.7% said they agreed/strongly agreed, 10.1% were neutral, and 4.2% disagreed/strongly disagreed. 85.1% agreed or strongly agreed that they now knew how randomised questions worked, 11.4% were neutral, and 3.5% disagreed/strongly disagreed. Finally, 90.8% of participants thought the quiz demonstration was clear and easy to follow, 6.3% were neutral, and 2.9% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 1. Online Quiz Understanding (n=884)

Item	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Session helped understand how to access online quiz	1.6	2.5	4.3	44.3	47.3
Know how to complete and submit online quiz	1.2	3.2	6.4	42.9	46.3
Understand how to re-attempt a quiz	1.2	2.9	10.1	47.4	38.3
Understand randomised questions and answers	1.1	2.4	11.4	49.2	35.9
Quiz demonstration was clear and easy to follow	1.4	1.5	6.3	48.3	42.5

Overall, these results demonstrate that the majority of participants felt more prepared to complete the online quiz after learning what it was, how it operated, and what they were expected to do. In essence, this demonstrates that the support session was effective in getting participants ready for the online assessment. Furthermore, the participants felt more confident because this support session was practical, and they were able to complete a demo quiz on the LMS using their cellphones. As a result, participants will feel more confident when taking the online quiz, potentially leading to improved performance on the quiz.

Assignment Understanding

The findings in this category focused on the participants' preparation for the course's written assessments. Item one asks whether the session helped them understand where to find the assignment on the learning management system: 84.7% agreed/strongly agreed, 11.7% were neutral, and 3.6% disagreed/strongly disagreed. Regarding assignment dates, 89.4% agree/strongly agree, 7.5% were neutral, and 3.1% disagree/strongly disagree. The question about knowing how to make a folder focused on whether they knew how to create folders for various assigned activities; 71.1% agreed/strongly agreed, 18.9% were neutral, and 9.4% disagreed/strongly disagreed. In the issue on understanding assignment expectations, 80% agreed/strongly agreed, 16.4% were neutral, and 3.6% disagreed/strongly disagreed. Finally, 77.5% agreed or strongly agreed that the assignment information was useful and easy to comprehend, 18.2% were neutral, and 4.3% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 2. Assignment Understanding (n=884)

Item	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
The session helped understand where to access the assignment	1.5	2.1	11.7	52.0	32.7
Know assignment opening and due dates	1.1	2.0	7.5	47.5	41.9
Know how to create a folder	1.8	7.6	18.9	41.5	30.2
Understand assignment expectations	1.0	2.6	16.4	55.9	24.1
Assignment information was helpful and easy to understand	1.4	2.9	18.2	56.0	21.5

The data indicated a significant proportion of participants who agreed or strongly agreed that the session on the written assignment was advantageous. Nevertheless, this session had more participants who expressed neutrality, possibly because they lacked access to the real assignments, which prevented them from viewing the assignment questions and structure, unlike in the online quiz assessment. Furthermore, some individuals did not have their laptops, making it challenging to engage with this segment of the session, as cellphones proved less effective than laptops, particularly during the folder-creation portion. Those equipped with laptops were able to create folders while we progressed through the presentation. Although facilitators conducted a practical demonstration during the lecture, it was challenging to follow without a laptop.

Portfolio of Evidence

The results on the portfolio of evidence indicated that only 59.7% of participants agree or strongly agree that they understand how to approach and finish the PoE, while 31.7% remained neutral and 8.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Table 3. Portfolio of Evidence (n=884)

Item	Strongly Disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Know how to approach and complete the PoE	1.8	6.8	31.7	45.1	14.6

These findings indicate an overall lack of comprehensive understanding concerning the PoE. The participant's lack of confidence on this item may be associated with their overall confidence in the assignments area, particularly in relation to folder creation, all of which constitute the

PoE. This indicates that the facilitators must offer more robust and customised support at the following face-to-face session regarding the PoE

The responses to the open-ended question: "Do you feel more prepared to complete your assessments and PoE?"

Table 4. Themes emerging from open-ended questions

Theme	Frequency n (%)	Description	Participant Quotes
Fully Prepared and Confident	541 (61.2%)	Participants expressed confidence and readiness to complete assessments and PoE	• "The process was thoroughly explained and I feel more ready and in a good position to complete the assessments and the portfolio." • "Yes, I know what to do in completing assessments and my PoE." • "Yes! Clear guidelines have been explained."
Prepared with Conditions/Concerns	56 (6.3%)	Participants indicated preparedness but expressed specific conditions or minor concerns	• "Yes I can complete an online quiz and assignment. The PoE questions should be posted on time for us to do our best." • "Yes, but under the guidance of the tutors." • "Yes but it needs time."
Uncertain/Partially Prepared	177 (20.0%)	Participants expressed partial preparedness or need for additional support/clarity	• "I'm partially prepared, need some orientation." • "I still need time to listen to the recordings and take notes since we don't have hard copies study materials." • "More still need to be done as High school principal one is faced with more challenges of always been committed because of the demand of work."
Not Prepared	110 (12.4%)	Participants indicated they were not yet ready due to time constraints, workload, or lack of engagement with materials	• "No. I have not gotten into the study materials and time is running out, there will be more work for me to do and the school term's work is also demanding." • "Not exactly because of time frame, the due date of submitting the assignment and the preparation of mid-year exams." • "Honestly I am not prepared, just overwhelmed."

Four themes emerged from the open-ended responses concerning overall assessment preparedness, namely *Fully Prepared and Confident*, *Prepared with Conditions/Concerns*, *Uncertain/Partially prepared* and *Not Prepared*.

The bulk of the participants (61.2%) expressed full confidence and preparedness to complete the assignments and the PoE. One of the participants commented, "The process was thoroughly

explained, and I feel more ready and in a good position to complete the assessments and the portfolio". Another said, "Yes, I know what to do in completing assessments and PoE." While another stated that clear directions had been given. This shows that overall, there is a basic understanding of what is expected and how to approach the written assignments in the online course.

A smaller cohort (6.3%) indicated preparedness, but with specific conditions or concerns, mainly related to assessment timelines and ongoing support from the facilitators. One of the participants explained, "Yes, I can complete an online quiz and assignment. The PoE questions should be posted on time for us to do our best", while another indicated, "Yes, but under the guidance of the facilitators".

20% of the participants exhibited uncertainty or partial preparedness, with one stating, "I'm partially prepared, need some orientation," and another explaining, "I still need time to listen to the recordings and take notes since we don't have hard copies of study materials." This shows that some individuals may require further time, practice, or clarification. Another participant stated that the current workload for instructional leaders in schools is overwhelming, leaving them with a lack of confidence. According to the participant, "More still needs to be done as a High school principal, one is faced with more challenges, always being committed because of the demands of work."

Lastly, 12.4% of participants reported that they were not yet prepared, as they had not yet had the opportunity to engage with the study material. One participant expressed, "No. I have not yet had the opportunity to engage with the study materials, and time is running out. There will be additional work to complete, and the school term is also demanding." Alluding to time constraints being another significant factor, as one participant observed, "Not exactly due to the time frame, the due date of submitting the assignment, and the preparation of mid-year exams."

4. Conclusion

The study explored instructional leaders' perceptions of assessment-readiness support following face-to-face support sessions for an online professional development course. The session, more particularly the practical demonstrations and guided engagement with the LMS, contributed to increased perceived confidence for the online quizzes and written assignments. This demonstrates that perceived assessment readiness is crucial to ensuring that students are prepared and confident to complete their online assignments, thereby supporting their overall performance. It is important to note, however, that this study measured perceived confidence rather than actual assessment readiness or performance outcomes. The findings therefore reflect participants' self-reported experiences and should not be interpreted as a direct measure of assessment performance or competence. Thus, institutions of higher education offering professional development should integrate tailored support sessions that focus on assessment

preparation into their programmes, ensuring differentiated support across assessment types and accessible device guidance. In addition, online courses should align their support sessions closely with the actual assessments by paying close attention to the technical aspects of assignment completion and submission. However, the study had limitations, including reliance on self-reported perceptions from a single training and support session. Another disadvantage was that the study did not analyse the performance outcomes of the formal online quiz and written assignments. As a result, it is proposed that researchers conduct longitudinal studies to evaluate the association between perceived assessment readiness and assessment performance. However, there is a need to promote and encourage assessment readiness through intentional, well-designed assessment support, thereby improving equality, confidence, and overall participation in online assessment contexts.

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