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QUALITY ASSURANCE PRACTICES OF INTERNAL EXAMINATIONS IN SELECTED ESWATINI PRIMARY SCHOOLS

ПРАКТИКИ ЗАБЕЗПЕЧЕННЯ ЯКОСТІ ВНУТРІШНІХ ІСПИТІВ У ОКРЕМИХ ПОЧАТКОВИХ ШКОЛАХ ЕСВАТІНІ

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ABSTRACT

Purpose/Aim: Internal examinations are essential for formative assessment, offering valuable insights into learner progress and informing teaching strategies. However, current quality assurance practices in these examinations are prone to various shortcomings. These flaws can significantly affect the reliability and fairness of assessments, potentially resulting in inaccurate evaluations of learner achievement. A key concern is identifying the challenges and limitations that undermine quality assurance in internal examinations within Eswatini's primary schools. By highlighting these issues, this study aims to contribute to improvements that uphold the integrity and effectiveness of this crucial assessment tool.

Methodology: This qualitative case study embedded within the interpretative paradigm enabled the researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of how quality is assured in internal examinations in primary schools. Data was generated from five conveniently selected schools, where two teachers from each school participated in the study by completing an open-ended questionnaire. Five principals from the selected schools were part of the study by participating in semi-structured interviews. Document analysis also formed part of the data-generation process: in each school a sample of examination papers and marked examination scripts were reviewed to assess quality assurance.

Results: The findings revealed that maintaining the quality and integrity of internal examinations in Eswatini's primary schools is still a serious concern. Identified problems affecting quality assurance in internal examinations were fairness, reliability, validity, restricted resources, a lack of second opinions on produced examination papers, insufficient uniformity, and inadequate examination supervision.

Conclusions: Based on the findings the study recommends regular implementation of training programs specifically tailored to equip teachers and

Мета: Внутрішні іспити є важливим інструментом формувального оцінювання, надаючи цінну інформацію про успіхи учнів і допомагаючи вдосконалювати навчальні стратегії. Проте існуючі практики забезпечення якості цих іспитів мають суттєві недоліки. Ці недоліки можуть значно впливати на надійність та справедливість оцінювання, що потенційно призводить до неточних результатів щодо досягнень учнів. Головною проблемою є визначення викликів і обмежень, які підривають забезпечення якості внутрішніх іспитів у початкових школах Есватіні. Висвітлюючи ці проблеми, дослідження спрямоване на покращення практик, що забезпечують цілісність та ефективність важливого інструменту оцінювання.

Методологія: Це якісне кейс-дослідження, засноване на інтерпретативній парадигмі, що дозволило дослідникам отримати глибоке розуміння того, як забезпечується якість внутрішніх іспитів у початкових школах. Дані були зібрані у п'яти вибраних школах, де два вчителі з кожної школи взяли участь у дослідженні, заповнивши анкету з відкритими питаннями. П'ять директорів цих шкіл також взяли участь у дослідженні шляхом напівструктурованих інтерв'ю. Аналіз документів був частиною процесу збору даних: у кожній школі переглядався вибірковий набір екзаменаційних робіт та перевірених екзаменаційних відповідей для оцінки забезпечення якості.

Результати: Дослідження показало, що забезпечення якості та цілісності внутрішніх іспитів у початкових школах Есватіні залишається серйозною проблемою. Основні виявлені недоліки, що впливають на якість оцінювання, включають питання справедливості, надійності та валідності, обмежені ресурси, відсутність другої експертної оцінки екзаменаційних матеріалів, недостатню уніфікацію процедур та неналежний нагляд за проведенням іспитів.

Висновки: На основі отриманих результатів дослідження рекомендуємо регулярно впроваджувати навчальні програми, спеціально розроблені для надання вчителям і

principals with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage school-based assessments. The study further suggests that a policy should be put in place to serve as a guide in the preparation, monitoring, and supervision of internal examinations.

Keywords: *assessment, internal examination, quality assurance, reliability, standardisation.*

директорам для формування необхідних навичок та знань для управління шкільним оцінюванням. Крім того, дослідження пропонує розробити політику, яка б слугувала керівництвом у підготовці, моніторингу та нагляді за внутрішніми іспитами.

Ключові слова: *оцінювання, внутрішній іспит, забезпечення якості, надійність, стандартизація.*

INTRODUCTION

Internal examinations are vital for formative assessment, providing insights into learner progress and informing teaching strategies. However, existing quality assurance (QA) practices are flawed, compromising the reliability and fairness of assessments. Identifying the key challenges and limitations in Eswatini's primary schools is crucial. By addressing these issues, this study aims to contribute to reforms that strengthen the integrity and effectiveness of internal examinations.

Classroom tests are crucial for evaluating learners' understanding and ability to apply newly acquired knowledge. Typically conducted by teachers, these assessments involve setting, moderating, marking, and verifying tests. However, this centralised approach can lead to disputes among teachers, learners, parents, and education authorities (Essien, 2014). Scholars argue that internal examinations should implement similar QA measures to external examinations to enhance consistency and reliability (Olanipekun & Aina, 2014). Unfortunately, quality control in internal assessments is often overlooked due to examination pressures affecting both teachers and learners. The drive for a 100 per cent pass rate, motivated by school, state, or regional policies, exacerbates these issues, as teachers with perfect pass rates are often seen as highly effective, prioritising results over quality (Nkambule, 2023).

Ensuring quality in internal assessments is essential, as they play a key role in shaping learners' performance in external examinations. Classroom tests and other internal assessments serve as crucial indicators of academic progress at both primary and secondary school levels (Kingori et al., 2018). Okwelle and Ayonmike (2014) argue that educational quality is closely linked to effective assessment practices for both internal and external examinations.

Internal examinations help teachers monitor learner progress, refine teaching strategies, and identify areas for improvement. Continuous assessment methods, such as tests, reports, case studies, oral presentations, and peer reviews, provide valuable insights into learner performance (Brown & Harris, 2014). However, maintaining quality standards in these assessments is increasingly difficult. Issues such as learners neglecting textbooks, copying from peers, using unauthorised materials, and bribing teachers during tests are prevalent (Udim et al., 2018).

Concerns about the reliability, consistency, and validity of internal examinations in Eswatini's primary schools highlight the urgent need for improved QA measures. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach, including moderation, monitoring, and feedback mechanisms, to enhance educational standards.

The study was guided by the following research questions.

- What are teachers' and principals' understanding of the concept of quality assurance of internal examinations?

- Which existing mechanisms are in place for supervision and monitoring of internal examinations?
- What are the key challenges associated with quality assurance of internal examinations within the school system?

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

– Quality assurance in examinations

Quality in education extends beyond test scores, encompassing a holistic approach that includes teaching, training, research, and learning outcomes (Batra et al., 2023). Effective governance and management play a crucial role in fostering high-quality education. Chand (2024) describes educational quality as multi-dimensional, focusing not only on academic performance but also on creating an environment that empowers learners to reach their full potential. This involves quality instruction, adequate resources, and strong institutional leadership.

While quality assurance (QA) is widely recognised across sectors, its role in education, particularly in examinations, is unique. Unlike QA in manufacturing, which focuses on product control, examination QA ensures consistency and adherence to assessment standards (Essien, 2014). Tierney (2016) describes QA as a delicate process that guarantees fairness and accuracy in evaluations. Varouchas (2015) reinforces this by emphasising that assessment conditions must support learners in achieving expected outcomes. QA in examinations is essential in maintaining a fair and reliable system, ensuring that all learners can effectively demonstrate their knowledge.

UNESCO (2007) likens examination QA to monitoring and evaluation in manufacturing, ensuring fairness, consistency, and reliability in assessing learner performance. QA is not just about meeting defined standards but also involves planning, implementation, and continuous review to support data-driven decision-making (Oktarina et al., 2023). It is a structured, process-driven approach aimed at systematically defining and achieving quality goals. QA in education serves as a regulatory framework aimed at maintaining and improving academic performance through structured guidelines and continuous system evaluation. It encompasses aspects such as quality planning, control measures, audits, and total quality management (UNESCO, 2007). The effectiveness of internal examinations relies on proper administration, as shortcomings in QA may undermine the credibility and integrity of assessments.

– Challenges of ensuring QA in internal examination

Internal examinations play a crucial role in assessing learner progress; however, several challenges affect their quality and reliability. These challenges include limited resources, a lack of standardisation, inconsistencies in test preparation, subjectivity in marking, and inadequate supervision. This section examines these issues in detail.

Limited Resources

The effectiveness of internal examinations largely hinges on teachers' capacity to design, administer, and evaluate assessments effectively (Udim et al., 2018). However, resource limitations often restrict access to professional development programmes that provide teachers with the necessary skills to create assessments aligned with learning objectives. Without adequate training, examinations may lack clarity, assess irrelevant content, or fail to accurately gauge learners' understanding. In addition, conducting secure and well-organised internal examinations requires essential resources. Teachers should possess the ability to deliver effective teaching, conduct assessments within their

specific subject area, and use the designated resources outlined in the curriculum, all of which are essential for fostering academic success (Chuene & Teane, 2024).

Inadequate Standardisation

A lack of consistency in internal examinations across schools raises concerns regarding fairness and comparability. Schools that set less challenging assessments may produce higher-scoring learners, potentially distorting perceptions of academic performance (Gil-Hernández et al., 2024). Moreover, variations in content coverage can result in assessments that do not accurately reflect learners' mastery of the curriculum.

Variability in Marking Practices

Marking approaches differ significantly among teachers, as interpretations of rubrics can vary, leading to inconsistencies in the allocation of marks. In the absence of standardised marking criteria, subjectivity becomes a key issue, affecting the accuracy and fairness of learner evaluations.

Subjectivity in Marking

Even when standardised marking rubrics are used, unconscious biases can influence grading. Zanga and De Gioannis (2023) argue that teacher perceptions, rather than learners' actual performance, often shape assessment outcomes. Factors such as classroom behaviour, previous academic achievement, and socio-economic background may inadvertently affect how learners' work is assessed. For instance, a disruptive learner might face harsher scrutiny, whereas a high-achieving learner may receive more lenient marking. Similarly, characteristics such as handwriting, gender, or ethnicity can unintentionally influence grading decisions.

These biases compromise the objectivity of assessments, leading to inaccurate evaluations that may disproportionately affect learners from marginalised backgrounds, potentially restricting their academic opportunities (Gil-Hernández et al., 2024). Additionally, inconsistencies in the interpretation of marking criteria – particularly for open-ended questions – contribute to discrepancies in awarded marks, undermining the reliability of internal examinations as objective measures of learner achievement.

Limited Supervision and Monitoring

Insufficient supervision during internal examinations increases the likelihood of academic dishonesty, including copying, unauthorised use of materials, and collusion. According to Alhassan and Anya (2017), such malpractice not only undermines the integrity of assessments but also devalues the efforts of honest learners. When cheating is not addressed, it distorts the true measure of learner achievement. Additionally, weak monitoring systems can enable staff-related misconduct, such as unauthorised grade alterations or the leaking of examination content. Maintaining a rigorous supervision framework is crucial to preserving the credibility of internal assessments and ensuring that learners' results accurately reflect their abilities (Ireen et al., 2024).

Limited Data Analysis and Feedback Utilisation

Internal examinations provide valuable insights into learner performance, yet a lack of expertise in data analysis often prevents schools from making full use of this information. Brown and Harris (2014) highlight that without systematic evaluation, identifying achievement patterns and addressing learning gaps becomes difficult. As a result, interventions tend to be reactive rather than proactive, reducing the effectiveness of targeted support strategies.

The true benefit of internal assessments lies in their formative role, offering continuous feedback to both learners and teachers. However, Ritzhaupt et al. (2020) argue that simply assigning scores is insufficient. Without meaningful feedback, learners may struggle to recognise areas for improvement, while teachers risk continuing ineffective instructional approaches.

To enhance the impact of internal assessments, schools should prioritise providing actionable feedback. This involves clearly communicating performance outcomes, identifying areas requiring development, and offering specific strategies for improvement. When assessment data is used effectively, it can inform teaching practices, personalise learning experiences, and support learner progress beyond numerical grades.

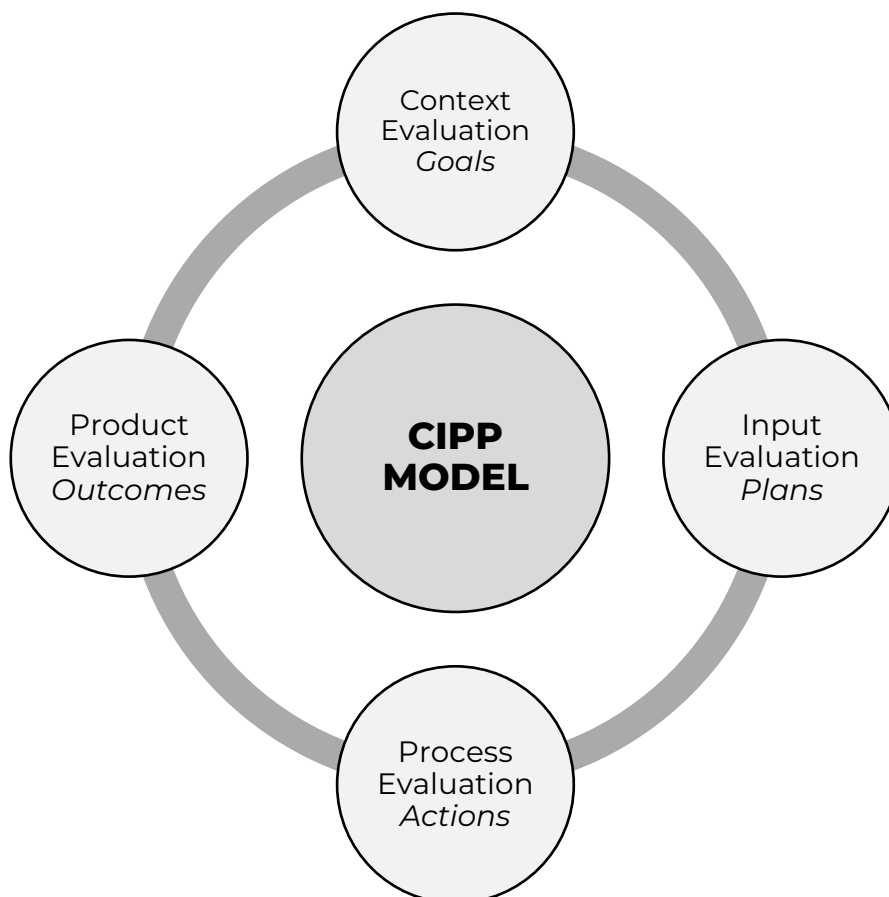
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The Context, Input, Process, Product (CIPP) model, developed by Daniel Stufflebeam, served as the theoretical framework for this study on QA in internal examinations within Eswatini's primary schools. This model identifies key components necessary for effective QA (Stufflebeam, 2002). Evaluation is a continuous process aimed at assessing and improving specific aspects of educational quality. It should involve informed decision-making to uphold and enhance academic standards. Maintaining quality education requires a structured assessment approach that systematically monitors and strengthens learning outcomes (Rejina & Baral, 2023).

The CIPP model offers a comprehensive framework for assessing and improving the quality of internal examinations (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Conceptual framework of implementation of CIPP model for quality evaluation



The CIPP model was ideal for this study due to its comprehensive, data-driven, and stakeholder-focused approach. It provided a holistic view of the internal examination system, using various data sources, such as policy documents and interviews, for evidence-based analysis. The model's emphasis on stakeholder perspectives ensured that the views of all involved, including teachers and principals, were considered in the QA process.

METHODOLOGY

This study was conducted within the interpretive paradigm and adopted a qualitative research approach. According to Junjie and Yingxin (2022), interpretive qualitative research seeks to explore the complexities of human sense-making in real-world contexts, rather than relying on predefined variables. This approach is well suited to the interpretive paradigm as it prioritises understanding the world through individuals' subjective experiences. In line with this, the study aimed to examine how primary schools in Eswatini implement QA practices in their internal examinations, with a focus on identifying areas for improvement. Ito et al. (2024) note that qualitative research takes an idiographic method, emphasising the individuals' perspective on the event, process, and relationships.

Data was generated from five conveniently selected schools in Eswatini, where two teachers from each school participated in the study by completing an open-ended questionnaire. Five principals from the selected schools were part of the study by participating in semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted on site in schools. Both principals and teachers were selected purposively based on having been in the same school for a period of three years. Reassurance was given to participants that the aim of the study was not to judge or evaluate their tests and testing skills but to establish QA practices in internal examinations. Document analysis also formed part of the data-generation process, where in each school a sample of examination papers and marked examination scripts were reviewed to assess for QA.

Thematic analysis enables the researcher to look deeply into the data, allowing the researcher to thoroughly explore participants' perceptions and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The thematic analysis process is termed systematic because it follows a structured, sequential approach to interpreting research data. Each step builds on the one before, leading to a thorough comprehension of the data. This organised method enhances the consistency and replicability of the findings, and it enables clear connections between the data, interpretation, and final conclusions (Dawadi, 2020). Thematic analysis was employed and focused on addressing specific research questions and approached the data with these questions in mind. Accordingly, data was coded to reflect or represent key aspects relevant to the study. These key aspects are reported on as the themes in this study.

Trustworthiness was upheld throughout the study by employing various strategies. One such method was credibility, which was achieved through prolonged engagement (Creswell, 2014), including dedicating sufficient time to meet the study's objectives, such as understanding the assessment culture in schools. Midway through the interview process, member checking was conducted to further ensure trustworthiness. Participants were invited to review the manuscripts for accuracy and to confirm the clarity and sequencing of events. Additionally, triangulation was used to enhance credibility by integrating multiple data-collection methods, including document analysis, interviews, and open-ended questionnaires.

The findings were presented with detailed explanations, incorporating direct quotations from participants to ensure authenticity. Approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Ministry of Education and Training, as well as school principals, who acted as gatekeepers. Teachers were also invited to participate in the research. The study followed established ethical guidelines, emphasising confidentiality and anonymity (Mirza et al., 2023). These principles were clearly communicated to participants before and during the study. Additionally, participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without facing any penalties or consequences. However, all participants willingly chose to take part.

RESULTS

The findings are presented via themes derived from the collected data.

Theme 1: Understanding of QA practices in internal examination

The study sought to understand teachers' and principals' perceptions of QA in internal examinations. The findings indicate a range of perspectives, highlighting both a general understanding and specific challenges faced in implementing QA practices. Many participants recognised QA as essential for maintaining fairness and accuracy in examinations. For instance, Teacher 5 stated the importance of creating fair tests, asserting: 'It means making sure the tests we give are fair and everyone has a chance to do well.'

Similarly, Principal 3 noted the role of QA in maintaining standards and fairness, saying: 'Quality assurance in examinations is important for maintaining standards and ensuring fairness.' Participants like Teacher 3 stressed the need for clear and balanced questions that accurately assess student learning. However, resource limitations were a common concern, as Teacher 5 explained: 'We try to write clear questions that cover the material we taught, but sometimes it's hard with limited resources.'

Principal 4 highlighted the potential benefits of standardised procedures and teacher training to improve consistency across examinations. Several participants pointed out challenges in implementing QA. Teacher 4 focused on examination security, stating: 'For me, quality assurance means making sure the examinations are secure and there's no cheating', but acknowledged the lack of adequate supervision during examination sessions.

Similarly, Principal 2 expressed that QA could feel burdensome due to limited resources and competing responsibilities: 'We have limited resources and a lot on our plates already.' While some participants provided broader insights into QA, others focused on specific aspects. Teacher 6 addressed the issue of bias in examinations and the difficulties of maintaining objectivity with large class sizes and limited marking time. Principal 5 expanded the scope of QA to include the analysis of examination results to identify areas for teaching improvement, indicating: 'It also involves analysing the results to see if they accurately reflect student learning.'

The findings suggest that while participants share a foundational understanding of QA, there is a need for better support and resources to enhance its implementation. Standardised procedures, training, and collaboration among educators were commonly identified as strategies to address these challenges. These insights align with Varouchas (2015), who highlights the importance of QA in ensuring student performance reflects their true learning and abilities.

Theme 2: Mechanisms for supervising and monitoring internal examinations in schools

The study also examined the mechanisms currently in place for supervising and monitoring internal examinations in schools. Participants provided insights into the strategies employed and the challenges encountered in ensuring fairness and quality in the examination process.

Participants highlighted collaboration as a key strategy in examination development. Principal 1 noted: 'We try to have teachers from different grades collaborate on examination development to ensure coverage and consistency.' Similarly, Principal 2 described a self-review process for question papers to check for clarity and potential biases before administration. Post-examination reviews were also mentioned, with Principal 5 indicating: 'We sometimes conduct a review session with teachers to discuss the performance and identify areas for improvement in future examinations.'

Several measures were identified to maintain order and minimise academic dishonesty during examinations, and these included implementing random seating arrangements, as noted by Principal 3: 'We implement random seating arrangements during examinations to minimise opportunities for cheating, though we do not have enough furniture.' Teachers not involved in teaching specific subjects were assigned as supervisors, as described by Principal 4: 'We assign teachers who are not teaching that particular subject to supervise examination halls and maintain order during testing.'

Participants also indicated that efforts to ensure consistency and fairness include the use of standardised marking schemes as Teacher 10 remarked: 'Standardised marking schemes are sometimes used to ensure consistency in how examination answers are evaluated.' Procedures for securely storing examination papers post-administration were also in place, as noted by Teacher 4, who acknowledged that: 'We have established procedures for collecting and securely storing examination papers after completion to maintain their integrity.'

Participants also highlighted strategies that they employ to address cheating included limiting students' access to unauthorised materials during examinations. Teacher 5 stated: 'During examinations, students are only allowed access to authorised materials to prevent the use of unauthorised resources.' Additionally, examinations were designed with specific time limits to encourage effective time management, as highlighted by Teacher 7: 'Examinations are designed with specific time limits to ensure students manage their time effectively.'

The mechanisms outlined suggest a proactive approach to supervision and monitoring, yet several challenges were identified. Resource constraints, such as a shortage of furniture and budget limitations for printing examination materials, were recurring issues. Inconsistent procedures and lack of training further exacerbated these problems. Teacher 2 indicated the need for clear instructions to reduce student confusion. These findings highlight the importance of addressing resource shortages and establishing standardised procedures to enhance supervision. Despite promising mechanisms, such as teacher collaboration and random seating, their effectiveness is hindered by systemic constraints, echoing Batra et al. (2023) on the challenges posed by such systemic constraints in ensuring quality internal examinations.

Theme 3: Challenges associated with QA in internal examinations

The study identified several challenges that hinder the effectiveness and fairness of internal examinations in schools. These challenges reveal issues of marking consistency,

resource limitations, teacher bias, and time constraints, collectively undermining QA efforts.

A major challenge identified was the subjectivity in evaluating student responses. Teacher 9 explained, 'Sometimes it is challenging to interpret student responses in exactly the same way, especially in open-ended questions. Detailed marking schemes help, but there is always some room for individual judgment.' Similarly, Principal 5 highlighted the difficulty of maintaining consistent marking across different teachers and subjects, noting efforts to implement standardised marking schemes and training programs as a solution.

Unconscious bias among teachers emerged as another concern. Teacher 2 acknowledged: 'It is important to assess the learning objectives we covered, but unconsciously, I might favour certain types of responses based on my teaching style.' This bias may disadvantage students whose learning styles do not align with the teacher's approach, potentially affecting their performance. Resource constraints were a recurring theme throughout the study. Principal 1 stated: 'Budgetary constraints limit resources for printing examinations, marker training, and sophisticated moderation processes.' Participants also pointed out the lack of funds for critical aspects of QA, such as printing tests and providing adequate furniture for examination halls. These limitations hinder the schools' ability to implement comprehensive and effective QA measures.

Participants noted that limited time for in-depth training and collaboration posed a challenge to ensuring quality in internal examinations. Teacher 7 remarked: 'Sometimes we do not have enough time for in-depth training or collaboration with colleagues on marking.' Time pressures reduce opportunities for teachers to align their marking practices and ensure consistency.

Another issue raised was the temptation to prioritise high grades over genuine assessments of learning. Teacher 1 reflected: 'While we want students to succeed, maintaining pressure for high grades can be tempting.' This pressure may compromise the integrity of the evaluation process and the validity of examination results.

These align with Batra et al. (2023), who noted that resource constraints significantly impair the preparation and administration of internal assessments. The study highlights the recurring nature of these challenges, emphasising the urgent need for targeted interventions to address them.

Findings from document analysis

To enrich the data collection, the study included document analysis, reviewing primary sources such as the tests administered to students and their marked exercise books. This examination highlighted key issues in assessment practices. One significant finding was inconsistencies in the marking process, particularly with open-ended questions. Some tests had unclear or ambiguous instructions, leading to confusion and misinterpretations. Additionally, the absence of marking guides allowed subjective criteria, resulting in inconsistent marking. This variation misrepresented student learning, as marks reflected the marker's interpretation rather than actual understanding. These findings align with Adeogun, who criticised the lack of clear instructions in student tests. Inconsistent marking undermines the assessment's purpose, making it difficult to accurately assess student knowledge. It also risks demotivating students, especially those receiving lower marks due to unclear

instructions or subjective evaluation. Ultimately, inconsistent marking creates an unfair environment, disadvantaging some students.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal that both teachers and principals demonstrated an appropriate understanding of QA in managing internal examinations, though the depth of their knowledge varied. Some participants emphasised core QA elements like fairness, clarity, and standardised procedures. Others focused on issues like examination security and resource limitations. This aligns with Varouchas (2015), who identified assessment QA as essential for ensuring that student performance accurately reflects their learning.

The mechanisms described for supervising and monitoring internal exams showed both strengths and weaknesses. Efforts such as teacher collaboration and designated supervisors aim to ensure fairness, but their effectiveness is limited by factors like heavy workloads (Selkan, Dağlı, Altınay, Altınay, 2024). Random seating and clear instructions help address cheating concerns, though resource limitations, such as a shortage of furniture, hinder examination security. Furthermore, the consistent implementation of post-examination reviews and marking schemes across schools remains uncertain. The overall system seems reliant on a patchwork of practices, and both principals and teachers acknowledged that limited resources, including insufficient funding for exam development and printing, compromised QA practices. This lack of resources, alongside the absence of standardised procedures and training, weakens the quality and fairness of internal examinations, echoing Batra et al. (2023), who identified resource constraints as a challenge in QA for internal examinations.

The study also revealed that QA in internal examinations faces numerous challenges, particularly subjectivity in marking. Variations in how markers interpret and evaluate responses undermine the validity of the assessments. Teacher bias, often unconscious, may also lead to tests that align with a teacher's methods, disadvantaging students with different learning styles (Abdo, Chehabeddine, Chehabeddine, Nasrallah, El-Kak, & Hatem, 2024). Resource limitations are another significant hurdle, as schools lack sufficient budgets for comprehensive QA procedures. This includes insufficient funds for test printing and inadequate furniture, which hinders proper exam administration. These findings align with Udim et al. (2018), who noted that resource constraints negatively affect the preparation and management of internal examinations.

The document analysis highlighted several issues in assessment practices, particularly the need for consistency, clarity, and standardisation. Tests and exercise books, as foundational tools for understanding student learning, must be reliable and valid (Mangena, & Chidakwa, 2024). However, inconsistencies in marking and ambiguous instructions undermine these qualities. Inconsistent marking, especially for open-ended questions, poses significant challenges. The absence of standardised marking guides introduces subjectivity, leading to variations in scores, which distorts the understanding of student performance. This finding aligns with Peter et al. (2024), who stated that assessment reliability hinges on standardisation and objective criteria.

The lack of consistency in marking also compromises fairness. When students perceive evaluations as arbitrary or biased, it can negatively impact their motivation and confidence. Hansen (2024) argues that clear and fair assessments are crucial for fostering engagement and promoting learning. Ambiguity in test instructions is another significant issue. Unclear or missing instructions can lead to student misinterpretation, resulting in answers that do not meet the expected criteria. This not only disadvantages

capable students but also complicates the marking process, as markers must infer the intended meaning of the tasks. Grocott et al. (2024) assert that ambiguous instructions undermine an assessment's validity, failing to accurately measure student knowledge and skills.

The absence of marking guides exacerbates these issues by leaving markers without a standardised framework for evaluation. Olson and Krysiak (2021) stress the importance of rubrics and marking schemes in ensuring consistency and transparency in assessments. These guides allow markers to apply uniform standards, fostering fairness and reliability in grading. Without them, the likelihood of subjective scoring increases, further diminishing the reliability of assessments.

Inconsistent marking and unclear instructions hinder assessments from reliably measuring student learning. To address these issues, schools and educators must prioritise developing and implementing clear marking guides and well-defined test instructions. Professional development focused on standardised assessment practices could enhance consistency and fairness. Peer reviews and moderation sessions may also help identify discrepancies in marking. According to Sapigao and Mero (2024), such collaborative efforts can strengthen assessment reliability and ensure that evaluations accurately reflect student performance. By aligning assessment practices with established standards and guidelines, educators can uphold the integrity of educational assessments, ensuring that evaluations accurately represent students' knowledge and skills.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the study concludes that limited resources significantly restrict schools' ability to develop and administer high-quality examinations. The absence of standardised procedures and a subject-relevant second reviewer for examination papers contributes to inconsistencies in internal assessments. Additionally, subjectivity in marking, combined with weak examination supervision, raises concerns about the integrity of the assessment process. Furthermore, the study highlights the lack of training programmes for teachers on effective examination development and marking techniques, which further exacerbates these challenges.

Based on the findings the study recommends that:

- There is a need for increased funding dedicated to internal examinations development and administration, which could include resources for printing examinations and acquiring necessary materials, such as desks, for ensuring adequate spacing.
- Schools must implement standardised guidelines for all aspects of internal examination. This should encompass clear procedures for examination development, marking schemes, and supervision. These guidelines can ensure consistency across schools and minimise subjectivity in internal examinations.
- The Ministry of Education and Training in Eswatini should implement regular training programmes to equip teachers and principals with the necessary skills and knowledge to manage school-based assessments effectively. These programmes can focus on effective examination development techniques, objective and reliable marking techniques, and implementing secure and effective examination supervision procedures.

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- Principals and teachers should establish a system where a second reviewer, other than the principal or the deputy, evaluates prepared examination papers before administration. This will help identify potential biases, ensure clarity of instructions, and improve the overall quality of examination content.
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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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