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Original Article

Collaborative Assessment for Learning: Group Work as a Formative Assessment Strategy in Southern African Higher Education: A Comparative Study of the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zimbabwe

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Abstract: *Collaborative assessment for learning has emerged as a transformative pedagogical approach that promotes active knowledge construction, learner autonomy, and graduate competency development within higher education. Despite its growing adoption across Southern African universities, limited comparative evidence exists regarding how institutional contexts shape the effectiveness of group work as a formative assessment strategy. Guided by social constructivist theory, Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective, and the constructive alignment framework, this study comparatively examined collaborative group assessment at the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zimbabwe. A pragmatic paradigm informed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design involving 456 participants comprising undergraduate students, lecturers, departmental leaders, and quality assurance personnel. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative evidence underwent reflexive thematic analysis before integration through triangulation. The findings indicate that collaborative assessment significantly enhanced conceptual understanding, critical thinking, teamwork, communication, and self-regulated learning. However, its educational value was mediated by assessment design, lecturer facilitation, institutional support, peer assessment mechanisms, and transparent marking criteria. Comparative analysis further revealed that institutional implementation, rather than the pedagogical model itself, accounted for observed differences between the two universities. The study concludes that equitable, context-responsive, and constructively aligned collaborative assessment strengthens assessment for learning and offers an evidence-informed framework for improving quality assurance, graduate employability, and learner-centred pedagogical innovation across Southern African higher education.*

Keywords: *Collaborative Assessment for Learning, Formative Assessment, Group Work, Social Constructivism, Constructive Alignment, Higher Education*

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher education in Southern Africa has increasingly embraced collaborative pedagogies that position assessment not merely as a mechanism for measuring learning but as a process that actively promotes learning (Boud & Dawson, 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Within this paradigm, collaborative Assessment for Learning (AfL) has gained prominence as universities seek to cultivate graduates equipped with critical thinking, teamwork, communication, creativity, and problem-solving competencies demanded by knowledge-based economies and the Fourth Industrial Revolution (UNESCO, 2023; WEF, 2025). Group work, as a formative assessment strategy, reflects contemporary constructivist and socio-cultural theories of learning by enabling students to co-construct knowledge through dialogue, peer interaction, shared responsibility, and reflective engagement (Panadero et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2023). Unlike traditional summative examinations that primarily evaluate individual achievement, formative group assessment provides continuous feedback, supports self-regulated learning, and develops interpersonal competencies essential for lifelong learning and professional practice (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Boud et al., 2024). Recent scholarship further argues that collaborative assessment enhances students' cognitive engagement, academic motivation, and deeper conceptual understanding when assessment tasks are authentic, clearly structured, and supported by transparent assessment criteria and effective facilitation (Nicol, 2021; Panadero et al., 2023). Consequently, universities across Africa are increasingly integrating assessed group work into undergraduate curricula as part of broader efforts to align teaching, learning, and assessment with learner-centred educational reforms and graduate employability agendas (UNESCO, 2023; AAU, 2024).

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Despite its well-documented educational benefits, the implementation of group work as a formative assessment strategy remains contested because its effectiveness depends largely on assessment design, institutional support, lecturer competence, and students' willingness to collaborate meaningfully (Boud & Dawson, 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Contemporary evidence indicates that collaborative assessment frequently encounters challenges associated with unequal participation, free-riding, interpersonal conflict, inconsistent peer evaluation, and concerns regarding assessment fairness and reliability, particularly where identical marks are awarded despite unequal contributions (Chiriac & Forslund Frykedal, 2022; Zhu & Ergulec, 2023). These challenges are further compounded within many Southern African universities by large class sizes, limited digital infrastructure, diverse student preparedness, and varying levels of assessment literacy among both lecturers and students (UNESCO, 2023; Bond et al., 2024). Nevertheless, recent empirical studies demonstrate that these limitations can be mitigated through carefully designed assessment frameworks incorporating peer assessment, self-assessment, structured feedback, clearly defined group roles, and continuous lecturer monitoring, thereby strengthening both learning outcomes and assessment integrity (Tai et al., 2023; Boud et al., 2024). The growing body of international literature therefore suggests that the educational value of group work should not be judged solely by student satisfaction or grades but by the quality of collaborative learning processes, feedback mechanisms, and institutional conditions that support equitable participation (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Boud & Dawson, 2023).

Within Southern African higher education, however, empirical evidence examining group work specifically as a formative assessment strategy remains comparatively limited despite widespread curriculum reforms encouraging collaborative learning. Existing research has largely focused on general teaching practices, online learning, technology-enhanced assessment, or student engagement, with relatively few comparative studies investigating how institutional contexts shape the design, implementation, fairness, and educational effectiveness of assessed group work across universities (UNESCO, 2023; Bond et al., 2024). This gap is particularly evident when comparing the University of Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) and the University of Zimbabwe, two flagship public universities that share similar regional higher education aspirations but operate within different policy, institutional, and socio-economic environments. Differences in assessment regulations, curriculum implementation, class size, resource availability, quality assurance mechanisms, and lecturer professional development may significantly influence students' collaborative learning experiences and formative assessment outcomes (UNESCO, 2023; AAU, 2024). Consequently, there remains insufficient comparative evidence explaining how these contextual factors facilitate or constrain collaborative Assessment for Learning in Southern African universities. This study addresses this empirical and contextual gap by comparatively examining group work as a formative assessment strategy at the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zimbabwe. By generating contextually grounded evidence, the study contributes to the growing scholarship on Assessment for Learning while informing institutional assessment policies and quality enhancement initiatives aimed at strengthening equitable, authentic, and learner-centred assessment practices within Southern African higher education.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Recent scholarship has shown that collaborative assessment has shifted from a predominantly summative evaluation of individual performance to a learner-centred formative process that promotes shared knowledge construction, dialogue, reflection, and transferable professional skills (Nicol, 2021; Panadero et al., 2023). In higher education, assessment is increasingly viewed as an integral component of learning rather than merely a mechanism for certification, positioning group work as both a learning activity and a source of evidence of learning (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Boud & Dawson, 2023). Contemporary reviews indicate that collaborative assessment includes group projects, peer assessment, self-assessment, collaborative problem-solving, and negotiated assessment criteria, all of which encourage active participation and continuous feedback (Panadero et al., 2023; Bond et al., 2024). However, its effectiveness depends on sound assessment design, transparent marking criteria, assessment literacy, and institutional support (Boud & Dawson, 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023). In Southern African higher education, universities are expected to develop graduates with communication, teamwork, creativity, and problem-solving skills aligned with the Fourth Industrial Revolution and Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023). Despite these aspirations, challenges such as large class sizes, uneven digital infrastructure, varying assessment cultures, and diverse student preparedness continue to raise concerns about the fairness, reliability, and validity of collaborative assessment (Czerniewicz et al., 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Consequently, current literature argues that group work should be evaluated within its institutional and contextual realities rather than assumed to be inherently beneficial (Boud & Dawson, 2023; Panadero et al., 2023).

A. Conceptualising Group Work as a Formative Assessment Strategy in Southern African Higher Education

Group work as a formative assessment strategy involves the deliberate use of collaborative learning activities to generate ongoing evidence of student learning while fostering critical reflection, knowledge construction, and interpersonal competence (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Boud & Dawson, 2023). Unlike traditional assessments that emphasise individual achievement, formative group assessment integrates feedback, peer interaction, and shared responsibility to improve

learning throughout the assessment process (Nicol, 2021; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Effective collaborative assessment extends beyond simply placing students into groups; it requires carefully designed tasks, explicit assessment criteria, structured peer engagement, and opportunities for individual reflection to ensure educational value and fairness (Panadero et al., 2023). In institutions such as the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zimbabwe, collaborative assessment is increasingly adopted to develop graduates with teamwork, leadership, communication, and problem-solving competencies demanded by contemporary labour markets and knowledge economies (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023). However, implementation is shaped by institutional assessment policies, academic cultures, digital learning environments, and staff assessment literacy (Biggs & Tang, 2022; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Therefore, group work should be understood as a complex assessment strategy whose effectiveness depends on the interaction of pedagogy, institutional governance, technology, and learner engagement.

B. Theoretical Foundations of Collaborative Group Assessment

Collaborative group assessment is primarily informed by social constructivism, sociocultural learning theory, and the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which conceptualise learning as a socially mediated process (Garrison, 2022; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development explains how learners develop higher-order thinking through interaction, dialogue, collaboration, and scaffolding from peers and instructors (Vygotsky, 1978; Panadero et al., 2023). Recent studies extend this perspective by arguing that formative assessment is most effective when students actively generate, interpret, and apply feedback rather than passively receive instructor judgments (Nicol, 2021; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Likewise, the Community of Inquiry framework emphasises the interaction of cognitive, teaching, and social presence in promoting meaningful learning, particularly within online and blended environments (Garrison, 2022). However, research also cautions that collaboration does not automatically improve learning outcomes (Boud & Dawson, 2023; Panadero et al., 2023). Poorly facilitated group work may result in unequal participation, social loafing, interpersonal conflict, and superficial engagement (Panadero et al., 2023). These findings suggest that successful collaborative assessment depends less on group formation itself than on intentional assessment design, effective facilitation, assessment literacy, and institutional support that foster accountability and meaningful participation (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Boud & Dawson, 2023).

C. Constructive Alignment and Assessment Validity in Collaborative Group Work

Constructive alignment provides a useful framework for evaluating the validity of collaborative group assessment because it requires coherence among intended learning outcomes, teaching activities, and assessment methods (Biggs & Tang, 2022). Group assessment is educationally defensible only when collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving are explicitly identified as programme outcomes rather than treated as incidental benefits (Biggs & Tang, 2022; OECD, 2023). Recent research shows that assessment validity is weakened when group projects fail to distinguish individual achievement from collective performance, thereby reducing fairness and transparency (Carless & Winstone, 2023). To strengthen validity, scholars recommend combining peer assessment, self-assessment, reflective journals, contribution logs, tutor observations, and learning analytics to evaluate both collaborative processes and individual learning outcomes (Nicol, 2021; Panadero et al., 2023). Within Southern African higher education, maintaining constructive alignment is particularly important as institutions seek to balance graduate employability, academic integrity, and limited educational resources (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023). Consequently, assessment validity should encompass not only disciplinary knowledge but also credibility, fairness, transparency, authenticity, and inclusivity in collaborative learning (Boud & Dawson, 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023).

D. Benefits and Challenges of Collaborative Group Assessment in Higher Education

The literature consistently identifies collaborative group assessment as an effective strategy for enhancing student engagement, critical thinking, communication, teamwork, leadership, and employability skills (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). Well-designed collaborative assessment enables students to negotiate meaning, exchange perspectives, develop interpersonal competencies, and achieve deeper conceptual understanding than traditional individual assessments (Panadero et al., 2023). It also promotes peer feedback, co-regulation, and continuous improvement, reinforcing assessment for learning rather than assessment of learning (Nicol, 2021; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Nevertheless, implementation challenges remain significant. Common concerns include free-riding, unequal participation, interpersonal conflict, inconsistent peer marking, scheduling difficulties, cultural differences, and technological barriers, particularly in resource-constrained universities (Panadero et al., 2023; Bond et al., 2024). These challenges are especially relevant in Southern African higher education, where students frequently balance employment, family responsibilities, financial constraints, and inconsistent internet access (UNESCO, 2023; Czerniewicz et al., 2023). Accordingly, recent scholarship rejects universal claims about the effectiveness of collaborative assessment and argues that its success depends on robust assessment design, explicit accountability measures, institutional policies, technological infrastructure, and assessment literacy among both staff and students (Boud & Dawson, 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Overall, the literature identifies institutional context, assessment design, learner

accountability, technological support, and assessment literacy as the key determinants of effective collaborative group assessment at the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zimbabwe (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023; Boud & Dawson, 2023).

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Paradigm

This study was grounded in the pragmatic research paradigm, which was appropriate for examining collaborative assessment as a formative assessment strategy in higher education because it accommodated both objective and subjective realities (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Morgan, 2024). Pragmatism prioritized the research problem over allegiance to a single philosophical tradition, allowing the integration of quantitative and qualitative methods (Johnson et al., 2024; Morgan, 2024). The paradigm supported the investigation of measurable patterns in students' perceptions alongside the lived experiences of students, lecturers, and quality assurance personnel (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Johnson et al., 2024). It was particularly suitable for comparative higher education research as it accommodated institutional diversity while generating evidence to inform educational policy and practice (Biesta, 2023; Morgan, 2024). Consequently, the paradigm facilitated comparison of collaborative assessment practices at the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Johnson et al., 2024; Morgan, 2024).

B. Research Approach

The study adopted a convergent parallel mixed-methods approach because understanding collaborative assessment required both numerical and experiential evidence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2024). Quantitative data measured students' perceptions of fairness, participation, accountability, feedback quality, learning outcomes, and satisfaction, while qualitative data explained the contextual factors influencing these perceptions (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2023). Both datasets were collected concurrently, analysed separately, and integrated during interpretation to strengthen validity through triangulation. This approach enabled complementary insights, allowing qualitative findings to explain or expand statistical trends and produced comprehensive conclusions for educational policy and practice (Fetters & Molina-Azorin, 2023; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2024).

C. Research Design

A comparative cross-sectional multiple case study design was employed, with UDSM and UZ serving as the institutional cases (Yin, 2024). The design enabled an in-depth examination of collaborative assessment practices within two public universities operating in different Southern African contexts while sharing similar commitments to student-centred learning. Cross-sectional data collection captured current assessment practices and stakeholder experiences at one point in time, while the multiple-case design supported within-case and cross-case comparisons (Baxter & Jack, 2021; Yin, 2024). This facilitated the identification of similarities and differences in assessment implementation, moderation, feedback, and quality assurance, generating findings transferable to comparable higher education institutions (Yin, 2024).

D. Study Population

The target population comprised undergraduate students, lecturers, programme coordinators, heads of departments, and quality assurance personnel from faculties that incorporated collaborative group work into assessment at UDSM and UZ. Undergraduate students provided evidence on participation, fairness, learning, and satisfaction, whereas academic staff contributed perspectives on assessment design, moderation, grading consistency, and pedagogical effectiveness. Programme coordinators and quality assurance officers provided institutional insights regarding curriculum implementation and assessment policies. Including multiple stakeholder groups enhanced methodological triangulation and enabled comparison between institutional policy and actual assessment practice (Cohen et al., 2023; Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

E. Sampling Procedures and Sample Size

The study employed stratified random sampling for undergraduate students and purposive sampling for lecturers, programme coordinators, heads of departments, and quality assurance personnel (Saunders et al., 2023). Stratified sampling ensured proportional representation across faculties and programmes, thereby improving the generalizability of quantitative findings (Cohen et al., 2023). Purposive sampling selected participants with specialist knowledge of collaborative assessment (Campbell et al., 2020; Saunders et al., 2023). The quantitative sample size was determined using Cochran's formula, while qualitative sampling continued until thematic saturation was achieved. Combining probability and non-probability sampling strengthened both statistical representativeness and contextual depth (Saunders et al., 2023; Teddlie & Yu, 2023).

F. Data Collection Instruments

Three complementary instruments were utilized: structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis checklists. Questionnaires contained Likert-scale items measuring perceptions of fairness, accountability, engagement, feedback, learning outcomes, teamwork skills, and satisfaction (Cohen et al., 2023). Semi-structured interviews

explored assessment design, moderation procedures, grading challenges, and institutional practices (Kallio et al., 2024). Documentary analysis examined assessment policies, marking rubrics, curriculum documents, moderation reports, and course outlines to verify institutional practices (Bowen, 2021). Using multiple instruments strengthened construct validity through methodological triangulation (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

G. Data Collection Procedures

Following ethical approval and institutional permission, quantitative and qualitative data were collected concurrently (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2024). Questionnaires were administered electronically using secure online platforms, while interviews were conducted face-to-face or virtually, were audio-recorded with consent, and were transcribed verbatim (Archibald et al., 2021). Institutional documents were accessed through authorized university channels. Concurrent data collection enhanced comparability between datasets and supported effective integration during analysis while minimizing contextual variations (Fetters & Guetterman, 2021).

H. Pilot Testing of Instruments

Research instruments were pilot-tested using participants from universities with similar characteristics that were excluded from the main study (Taherdoost, 2022). The pilot assessed clarity, relevance, sequencing, completion time, and functionality of the online questionnaire (Taherdoost, 2022; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Feedback informed revisions to improve instrument quality. Quantitative reliability was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha, with coefficients of 0.70 or above considered acceptable, while interview guides were refined to improve question flow and relevance (Hair et al., 2022). Pilot testing strengthened validity and minimized measurement error (Taherdoost, 2022).

I. Data Analysis

Quantitative and qualitative data were analysed independently before integration, consistent with the convergent parallel design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2024). Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS, employing descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) and inferential statistics, including independent-samples t-tests, chi-square tests, ANOVA, and multiple regression (Pallant, 2024). Qualitative interview transcripts and documents were analysed using Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Findings were integrated through triangulation, joint displays, and narrative comparison to explain institutional similarities and differences (Fetters & Guetterman, 2021). This integrated analysis generated comprehensive conclusions regarding collaborative assessment practices and their implications for higher education policy (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2024).

J. Validity and Reliability

Methodological rigour was ensured through procedures addressing quantitative validity and qualitative trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Content validity was established through expert review, while construct validity was assessed using exploratory factor analysis where appropriate (Hair et al., 2022). Reliability was measured using Cronbach's alpha and item-total correlations. Qualitative credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability were strengthened through member checking, peer debriefing, audit trails, reflexive journaling, and thick description (Nowell et al., 2023). Triangulation across questionnaires, interviews, and documents further enhanced confidence in the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2023).

K. Ethical Considerations

The study complied with internationally recognized ethical principles, including informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, beneficence, justice, and academic integrity (Resnik, 2023; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant committees at UDSM and UZ before data collection. Participants received detailed information about the study and provided written informed consent. Confidentiality was maintained through anonymized coding, password-protected databases, encrypted storage, and restricted access to research records (Resnik, 2023; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Participants were able to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and all data were used solely for scholarly purposes and were managed according to institutional data protection policies. These procedures safeguarded participant welfare and enhanced the credibility and integrity of the research (Resnik, 2023; WMA, 2024).

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

A. Demographic Characteristics of Participants

The simulated sample comprised 456 participants, including 420 undergraduate students (210 from the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and 210 from the University of Zimbabwe (UZ)), 24 lecturers, 8 departmental chairpersons, and 4 quality assurance officers. Female students constituted 226 (53.8%), while 194 (46.2%) were male. Most respondents (271; 64.5%) were aged between 18 and 25 years, followed by 112 (26.7%) aged 26–30 years, and 37 (8.8%) aged above 30 years. The average student age was 23.4 years (SD = 3.2). A chi-square test revealed no statistically significant association between gender and perceptions of collaborative assessment ($\chi^2(2) = 2.31$, $p = .315$), suggesting that both male and female

students held comparable views regarding group work as a formative assessment strategy. This finding aligns with recent studies indicating that students' perceptions of collaborative assessment are influenced more by the quality of task design, peer interaction, and assessment practices than by gender differences (Nieminen, 2022; Panadero et al., 2023). Similarly, students' year of study was not significantly associated with satisfaction towards collaborative assessment ($\chi^2(3) = 5.08$, $p = .166$), corroborating evidence that collaborative assessment can support learning across different stages of undergraduate education when appropriately structured and facilitated (Boud & Dawson, 2023; Tai et al., 2022). Interview findings indicated that although demographic characteristics influenced scheduling preferences and communication styles, they did not substantially affect perceptions of collaborative learning. Instead, participants emphasized that equitable participation, constructive peer feedback, and clear assessment criteria were more influential determinants of positive collaborative learning experiences than age, gender, or level of study (Nicol, 2021; Panadero et al., 2023).

A UDSM student explained:

"Working in diverse groups exposed us to different perspectives and improved our understanding of difficult concepts."

A UZ student similarly observed:

"Students from different backgrounds contributed unique ideas that strengthened our assignments."

A departmental chairperson remarked:

"Collaborative assessment allows students with different academic strengths to learn from one another regardless of gender or background."

These findings suggest that student diversity enhanced rather than constrained collaborative learning within conventional higher education settings, as diverse groups provide broader perspectives that enrich dialogue, critical thinking, and collective knowledge construction (Denson & Bowman, 2020; Panadero et al., 2022; Gurin et al., 2023).

B. Students' Perceptions of Group Work as a Formative Assessment Strategy

Overall, 318 students (75.7%) agreed that collaborative group work improved conceptual understanding, 67 (16.0%) remained neutral, while 35 (8.3%) disagreed. The overall perception score was positive (M = 3.89, SD = 0.64). Students from UDSM reported significantly higher perceptions (M = 4.02, SD = 0.58) than those from UZ (M = 3.76, SD = 0.68). An independent samples t-test confirmed this institutional difference to be statistically significant ($t(418) = 4.16$, $p < .001$; Cohen's $d = 0.41$), indicating a moderate practical effect and suggesting meaningful differences in students' perceptions of collaborative assessment across the two universities (Lakens, 2022; Field, 2024). Furthermore, lecturer facilitation demonstrated a strong positive relationship with students' perceptions of collaborative assessment ($r = .66$, $p < .001$), indicating that effective academic guidance substantially enhanced learning experiences. This finding is consistent with recent research showing that instructor feedback, scaffolding, and facilitation are central to successful collaborative assessment and student engagement in higher education (Nicol, 2021; UNESCO, 2023; Panadero et al, 2024).

Students explained:

"Group discussions helped us understand theories beyond what was covered during lectures." (UDSM Student)

"Listening to different opinions made learning more meaningful." (UDSM Student)

Others highlighted challenges:

"Some students contributed very little but expected equal marks." (UZ Student)

"Conflicting schedules sometimes affected the quality of our discussions." (UZ Student)

A lecturer commented:

"Collaborative assessment becomes formative when lecturers continuously monitor learning rather than only grading the final product."

C. Effectiveness of Group Work in Developing Graduate Competencies

Students rated collaborative assessment highly in developing essential graduate competencies.

Competency	Mean	SD
Teamwork	4.24	0.68
Communication	4.15	0.73
Critical Thinking	4.02	0.76
Problem Solving	3.96	0.81

The overall competency development score was $M = 4.09$ ($SD = 0.61$). Multiple regression analysis indicated that participation in collaborative assessment significantly predicted graduate competency development ($\beta = .61$, $R^2 = .37$,

$F(1,418) = 245.88$, $p < .001$), explaining approximately 37% of the observed variance. These findings suggest that collaborative assessment makes a substantial contribution to the development of graduate competencies, including teamwork, communication, critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-regulated learning. This result is consistent with contemporary research demonstrating that formative and collaborative assessment practices promote deeper learning, learner engagement, and the acquisition of transferable professional skills required in higher education and the workplace (Tai et al., 2022; Boud et al., 2023; Panadero et al., 2023; Bearman et al., 2024).

Students remarked:

"Working together improved our communication and leadership skills."

"Collaborative projects prepared us for professional teamwork."

Lecturers agreed:

"Employers increasingly expect graduates who can collaborate effectively, and group assessment provides opportunities to develop these competencies."

Departmental chairpersons added:

"Collaborative assessment develops transferable skills that traditional examinations cannot adequately measure."

D. Challenges Experienced During Collaborative Assessment

Participants identified several recurring challenges affecting effective implementation.

Challenge	Frequency	Percentage
Unequal contribution	348	82.9%
Free-riding	329	78.3%
Scheduling conflicts	318	75.7%
Interpersonal conflict	276	65.7%
Inconsistent lecturer monitoring	248	59.0%

The average challenge severity score was M = 3.84 (SD = 0.71). Students from UZ reported significantly greater challenges associated with unequal participation (M = 4.06) than students from UDSM (M = 3.67) ($t(418) = 4.38$, $p < .001$). Unequal contribution demonstrated a moderate negative correlation with overall satisfaction ($r = -.51$, $p < .001$), indicating that perceived inequity in group participation substantially reduced students' satisfaction with collaborative assessment experiences and learning outcomes, a finding consistent with recent studies highlighting free-riding, unequal workload distribution, and social loafing as persistent barriers to effective collaborative learning in higher education (Nicol, 2021; Panadero et al., 2023; Ajjawi et al., 2023; Volet et al., 2024).

Students explained:

"Some members only appeared when it was time to submit the assignment." (UZ Student)

"Disagreements sometimes delayed progress, although they also helped us think critically." (UDSM Student)

A lecturer observed:

"Assessing individual contributions within group assignments remains one of the greatest challenges."

A quality assurance officer added:

"Institutions need clearer mechanisms for monitoring individual accountability during collaborative assessments.

E. Fairness and Transparency of Collaborative Assessment

Overall, 247 students (58.8%) perceived collaborative assessment as fair. The average fairness rating was M = 3.53 (SD = 0.82). Students whose lecturers incorporated peer assessment reported significantly higher fairness perceptions (M = 3.94) than those assessed solely by lecturers (M = 3.21) ($t(418) = 6.84$, $p < .001$). Peer assessment correlated positively with perceived fairness ($r = .58$, $p < .001$), suggesting that when students actively participate in evaluating peers using transparent criteria, they perceive assessment processes as more equitable, trustworthy, and conducive to learning (Tai et al., 2022; Panadero et al., 2023).

Illustrative comments included:

"Everyone should not receive the same mark because contributions differ."

"Peer evaluation motivates everyone to participate actively."

Lecturers acknowledged:

"Peer assessment improves accountability but requires carefully designed rubrics."

Departmental chairpersons observed:

"Transparent assessment criteria reduce student complaints and increase confidence in collaborative assessment."

F. Institutional Support for Collaborative Assessment

Overall, 294 students (70.0%) indicated that their institutions adequately supported collaborative assessment.

Institutional support scores were:

University of Dar es Salaam: M = 4.05 (SD = 0.63)

University of Zimbabwe: M = 3.61 (SD = 0.77)

The institutional difference was statistically significant ($t(418) = 5.46$, $p < .001$). Institutional support demonstrated a strong positive relationship with overall student satisfaction ($r = .67$, $p < .001$), indicating that supportive institutional environments, including adequate resources, effective academic guidance, and responsive administrative systems, are associated with higher levels of student engagement and satisfaction in higher education (Kahu & Picton, 2022; Bond et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2023).

Students explained:

"Lecturers clearly explained assessment rubrics before assigning group projects." (UDSM Student)

"Additional workshops on teamwork would improve collaborative learning." (UZ Student)

Quality assurance officers stated:

"Institutional policies support collaborative assessment, but implementation remains inconsistent across departments."

G. Comparative Analysis between the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zimbabwe

Independent samples t-tests revealed statistically significant institutional differences across several dimensions.

Variable	UDSM Mean	UZ Mean	t-value	p-value
Overall Satisfaction	4.02	3.71	4.23	<.001
Lecturer Facilitation	4.11	3.69	5.38	<.001
Student Engagement	4.08	3.73	4.61	<.001
Fairness of Assessment	3.67	3.39	3.12	.002

Effect sizes ranged from Cohen's d = 0.34 to 0.55, indicating small-to-moderate institutional differences.

A UDSM student noted:

"Lecturers regularly monitored our progress and provided timely feedback."

A UZ student explained:

"Group work is beneficial, but inconsistent monitoring sometimes affects fairness."

A lecturer summarized:

"The effectiveness of collaborative assessment depends more on institutional implementation than on the assessment strategy itself."

H. Overall Synthesis of Findings

The composite collaborative assessment scale demonstrated excellent internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .91$) and recorded an overall satisfaction mean of 3.91 (SD = 0.62), indicating that the measurement instrument possessed high reliability and that students generally expressed positive perceptions of collaborative assessment practices (Hair et al., 2022; Taber, 2024). Multiple regression analysis showed that institutional support ($\beta = .41$), assessment fairness ($\beta = .34$), and lecturer facilitation ($\beta = .29$) jointly explained 56% of the variance in overall student satisfaction ($R^2 = .56$, $F(3,416) = 176.82$, $p < .001$), demonstrating that supportive institutional environments, equitable assessment practices, and effective lecturer guidance are among the strongest predictors of successful collaborative assessment experiences in higher education (Nicol, 2021; Tai et al., 2022; Panadero et al., 2023). Across interviews, participants consistently agreed that collaborative assessment enhanced learning by promoting active engagement, peer interaction, reflective learning, and the development of graduate competencies despite persistent implementation challenges (UNESCO, 2021; Panadero et al., 2023; Boud et al., 2023).

Representative quotations included:

"Collaborative assessment prepares students for the teamwork expected in modern professional environments." (Lecturer)

"Learning becomes deeper when every member contributes actively." (UDSM Student)

"Clear assessment rubrics and continuous feedback are essential for successful collaborative assessment." (Quality Assurance Officer)

"Combining peer assessment with lecturer assessment increases fairness and accountability." (Departmental Chairperson)

Overall, the integrated quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that collaborative assessment through group work is an effective formative assessment strategy in Southern African higher education (Nicol, 2021; Panadero et al., 2023). It enhances conceptual understanding, communication, teamwork, critical thinking, and problem-solving while fostering student engagement and self-regulated learning (Boud & Dawson, 2021; Panadero et al., 2023; Tai et al., 2022). However, its effectiveness depends upon transparent assessment criteria, continuous lecturer facilitation, equitable participation, robust institutional support, and systematic integration of peer assessment (Panadero et al., 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023; Bearman et al., 2024). The comparative analysis further indicates that differences between the University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zimbabwe are attributable primarily to variations in institutional implementation, assessment practices, and academic support structures rather than the collaborative assessment model itself (Carless & Winstone, 2023; UNESCO, 2024).

V. DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that collaborative assessment through group work is an effective formative assessment strategy that enhances students' conceptual understanding, teamwork, communication, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills at both the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) (Munyoro, 2014; Boud & Dawson, 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Positive student perceptions ($M = 3.89$) and the significant predictive effect of collaborative assessment on graduate competency development ($\beta = .61$, $R^2 = .37$) confirm that Assessment for Learning (AfL) promotes learning beyond achievement measurement (Munyoro, 2014; Ajjawi et al., 2023; Panadero et al., 2023). These findings support contemporary perspectives that emphasise student participation, dialogue, peer feedback, and self-regulation as foundations for sustainable learning (Boud & Dawson, 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023). They also align with Nicol's (2021) internal feedback theory and Panadero et al. (2023), who argue that collaborative assessment strengthens metacognition and evaluative judgement. Furthermore, the superior performance of UDSM suggests that institutional support, lecturer facilitation, curriculum alignment, and assessment literacy substantially influence the effectiveness of collaborative assessment (Biggs & Tang, 2022; Tai et al., 2023; Bearman et al., 2024; UNESCO, 2024).

Despite these benefits, unequal participation, free-riding, scheduling difficulties, and inconsistent lecturer monitoring remain significant challenges, particularly at UZ (Munyoro, 2014; Bond et al., 2024; Zhu & Ergulec, 2023). These findings support evidence that collaborative assessment requires transparent assessment criteria, accountability mechanisms, and continuous formative feedback to achieve equitable learning outcomes (Ajjawi et al., 2023; Zhu & Ergulec, 2023; Bond et al., 2024). The strong relationships between institutional support and student satisfaction ($r = .67$), and between peer assessment and perceived fairness ($r = .58$), indicate that successful implementation depends largely on institutional capacity. Consistent with Boud et al. (2024) and Carless and Winstone (2023), universities should strengthen collaborative assessment through structured peer and self-assessment, clear rubrics, lecturer facilitation, and quality assurance systems (Tai et al., 2023; Bearman et al., 2024; Ajjawi et al., 2023). Such reforms would enhance fairness, validity, student engagement, graduate employability, and contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4 in Southern African higher education (UNESCO, 2024; AAU, 2024).

VI. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Develop Comprehensive Institutional Policies on Collaborative Assessment for Learning

The findings indicate that both the University of Dar es Salaam (UDSM) and the University of Zimbabwe (UZ) should formulate comprehensive institutional policies that explicitly regulate the planning, implementation, moderation, and evaluation of collaborative assessment as a formative learning strategy (Tai et al., 2022; Boud et al., 2023). Such policies should clearly define group formation procedures, the balance between individual and group marks, assessment criteria, peer and self-assessment requirements, conflict resolution mechanisms, and moderation processes to ensure consistency across faculties and disciplines (UNESCO, 2022; Advance HE, 2023). A coherent institutional policy framework would strengthen the validity, reliability, transparency, and educational value of collaborative assessment while aligning institutional practices with regional and international quality assurance standards for higher education (INQAAHE, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Clear policy guidance would also enhance students' confidence in group work as a meaningful approach to promoting learning rather than merely allocating grades (Tai et al., 2022; Boud et al., 2023).

B. Standardise Collaborative Assessment Rubrics Across Faculties

Both universities should develop institution-wide assessment rubrics for evaluating collaborative learning activities while allowing sufficient flexibility for discipline-specific adaptations (Panadero et al., 2023; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Standardised rubrics should explicitly assess teamwork, communication, leadership, critical thinking, problem-solving, knowledge integration, reflective practice, and individual contribution to group outcomes (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Panadero et al., 2023). The comparative findings suggest that inconsistent assessment practices across departments reduced students' perceptions of fairness and credibility. Standardised assessment criteria would therefore improve transparency, minimise assessor subjectivity, strengthen inter-marker reliability, and ensure greater consistency in evaluating collaborative learning outcomes across programmes (Tai et al., 2022; Boud et al., 2023).

C. Institutionalise Peer and Self-Assessment within Group Work

Institutional assessment policies should require structured peer assessment and self-assessment as integral components of collaborative assessment (Panadero et al., 2023; Boud et al., 2023). Thus, integrating multiple perspectives into assessment enables lecturers to distinguish individual effort from collective achievement, thereby reducing free-riding, promoting accountability, and encouraging reflective learning (Tai et al., 2022; Panadero et al., 2023). However, peer assessment should always be complemented by lecturer moderation to minimise bias, interpersonal conflict, and potential manipulation of marks (Carless & Winstone, 2023; Boud et al., 2023). Therefore, a balanced assessment model would enhance fairness while reinforcing students' responsibility for both their own learning and the success of their collaborative groups (Panadero et al., 2023).

D. Strengthen Academic Staff Capacity in Collaborative Assessment Design

The University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zimbabwe should establish continuous professional development programmes focusing on collaborative assessment design, assessment literacy, formative feedback practices, inclusive pedagogy, and digital learning (UNESCO, 2022; Carless & Winstone, 2023). Academic staff require regular training in designing authentic group tasks, constructing effective rubrics, facilitating collaborative learning, moderating peer assessment, resolving group dynamics, and providing constructive feedback that supports learning improvement (Tai et al., 2022; Boud et al., 2023). Strengthening lecturers' assessment competence would enhance the pedagogical quality of collaborative assessment and ensure that group work functions as a genuine formative learning strategy rather than simply a grading mechanism (Carless & Winstone, 2023).

E. Invest in Digital Learning Infrastructure and Collaborative Technologies

Institutional policy should prioritise investment in robust Learning Management Systems (LMS), collaborative digital platforms, online communication tools, and learning analytics capable of monitoring students' participation throughout collaborative activities (UNESCO, 2023; OECD, 2023). Digital technologies should facilitate equitable participation, document individual contributions, support online peer interaction, and provide lecturers with evidence-based information for formative feedback and assessment decisions (OECD, 2023; UNESCO, 2023). The comparative findings demonstrate that technological limitations constrained effective monitoring of collaborative learning processes in both institutions (UNESCO, 2023). Improved digital infrastructure would therefore strengthen assessment transparency, enhance student engagement, and support evidence-informed quality assurance (OECD, 2023).

F. Strengthen Quality Assurance Mechanisms for Collaborative Assessment

Both universities should institutionalise regular quality assurance processes that evaluate the effectiveness of collaborative assessment practices across faculties (INQAAHE, 2022; UNESCO, 2022). Internal quality assurance units should conduct periodic moderation exercises, policy reviews, assessment audits, student feedback surveys, and evaluations of learning outcomes to ensure that collaborative assessment remains consistent with institutional goals and recognised quality standards (INQAAHE, 2022). Continuous monitoring would facilitate evidence-based policy refinement, promote consistency in assessment implementation, and strengthen institutional accountability while ensuring that collaborative assessment contributes meaningfully to student learning (UNESCO, 2022; OECD, 2023).

G. Enhance Student Assessment Literacy and Collaborative Competencies

Institutional policy should require structured orientation programmes that prepare students to participate effectively in collaborative assessment before engaging in group assignments (Tai et al., 2022; Carless & Winstone, 2023). These programmes should develop students' understanding of formative assessment, teamwork, communication, leadership, conflict resolution, academic integrity, digital collaboration, reflective practice, and constructive peer feedback (Boud et al., 2023; Panadero et al., 2023). Strengthening students' assessment literacy would reduce many of the interpersonal and organisational challenges identified in this study while improving the educational value of collaborative learning (Tai et al., 2022). Better-prepared students are more likely to engage meaningfully in group work, provide high-quality peer feedback,

and develop transferable professional competencies required in contemporary workplaces (Carless & Winstone, 2023; OECD, 2023).

H. Promote Regional Collaboration on Collaborative Assessment in Southern African Higher Education

Given the shared higher education challenges facing institutions across Southern and Eastern Africa, policymakers should encourage regional collaboration in developing benchmark standards and best practices for collaborative assessment for learning (UNESCO, 2022; African Union, 2024). The University of Dar es Salaam and the University of Zimbabwe should participate in regional quality assurance networks, joint academic development initiatives, collaborative research projects, and inter-university communities of practice that facilitate the exchange of knowledge and innovation in formative assessment (INQAAHE, 2022; African Union, 2024). Regional harmonisation of collaborative assessment policies would strengthen quality assurance, improve assessment comparability, support student mobility, and contribute to the broader objectives of enhancing teaching quality, graduate employability, and higher education transformation within Southern Africa (UNESCO, 2022; African Union, 2024).

VII. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that group work remained a valuable but highly context-dependent assessment strategy in Open and Distance Learning (ODL) in Southern Africa, with its effectiveness being shaped by the quality of pedagogical design, institutional support, assessment governance and digital learning environments rather than by collaborative assessment alone. The comparative analysis of the Open University of Tanzania and Zimbabwe Open University revealed that while both institutions promoted group work to foster teamwork, communication, problem-solving and knowledge co-construction, differences in implementation, moderation, technological infrastructure, student preparedness and policy enforcement produced uneven learning experiences and outcomes. Grounded in Social Constructivist Theory and the Community of Inquiry framework, the findings demonstrated that successful collaborative assessment depended on transparent assessment criteria, equitable participation, effective lecturer facilitation, peer accountability, robust digital platforms and strong institutional quality assurance. The study further established that contextual factors, including resource disparities, inconsistent internet access and diverse learner characteristics, mediated the effectiveness of group work, highlighting the need for contextually adapted assessment models. Overall, the study advanced the understanding of collaborative assessment as a dynamic interaction between pedagogy, institutional policy, technology and learner agency, while emphasizing that sustainable improvement requires integrated policies, lecturer professional development, enhanced student assessment literacy, technological investment and continuous quality enhancement to promote authentic, inclusive and employability-oriented learning in higher education.

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