



Assessment-Related Challenges Encountered by Supervisors in Evaluating Professional Competence of Post Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Education Students within a State University in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe

Shepherd Gama

Department of Educational Policy Studies and Leadership
Midlands State University

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7819-3169>

Email: gamas@staff.msu.ac.zw

Abstract: *Assessing professional competence among students in the Post Diploma in Teacher Education (PDTE) programme at a state university in Zimbabwe's Midlands Province presents complex challenges for academic supervisors. The programme targets semi-skilled lecturers seeking formal andragogical qualifications and requires evaluation during teaching practice across diverse institutional settings. Competence in this context encompasses not only subject knowledge but also andragogical effectiveness, classroom management, ethical conduct, reflective practice, curriculum interpretation, and professional dispositions, all of which are context-dependent and difficult to assess consistently. This study explores key challenges faced by supervisors, including inconsistent interpretation of assessment criteria, limited observation time, heavy workloads, non-standardized assessment tools, and variability in placement environments. Supervisors must also balance formative mentorship with summative evaluation, manage subjective bias, and ensure fairness across varied contexts. Additional constraints include limited training in competency-based assessment and weak coordination between the university and host institutions, undermining reliability, validity, and transparency. Using a qualitative approach, data from 15 academic supervisors reveal gaps in current supervisory and assessment practices. The findings highlight the need for clear and standardized assessment rubrics, context-sensitive evaluation frameworks, enhanced supervisor training, and stronger institutional collaboration. The study contributes to discussions on quality assurance and professional standards in teacher education and offers practical recommendations to improve supervision and competence assessment in PDTE programmes aimed at developing semi-skilled lecturers.*

Keywords: *Professional competence, Teacher education, Andragogy, Assessment challenges, Supervisory practices, Competency-based assessment, Zimbabwe Midlands Province*

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1. Introduction

The assessment of professional competence constitutes a central pillar of teacher education and professional development programmes, particularly within state universities mandated to uphold national standards of quality and accountability. At a state university in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe offering the Post Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Education (PDTE) as a professional development pathway for semi-skilled lecturers, the evaluation of students' competence is fundamental to ensuring that graduates meet the pedagogical and professional standards required in Zimbabwe's education and training sectors.

Within this context, academic supervisors assume a pivotal role in monitoring teaching practice, assessing work-integrated learning, providing constructive feedback, and guiding students' professional growth. However, the assessment of professional competence is inherently complex and multidimensional. It extends beyond theoretical understanding of educational foundations to include instructional planning and delivery, classroom and learner management, curriculum interpretation, ethical and professional conduct, reflective practice, and appropriate professional dispositions. These dimensions are often context-sensitive and difficult to measure with precision, particularly where students are already practicing lecturers with varied academic, technical, and experiential backgrounds.

Despite the significance of supervisory assessment in maintaining programme credibility and institutional standards, supervisors frequently encounter considerable challenges in ensuring accurate, consistent, and fair evaluations. Such challenges may include subjective interpretation of assessment criteria, inconsistencies in grading practices among supervisors, limited time allocated for classroom observation, heavy supervision workloads, and the absence or limited use of standardized competency-based assessment tools. Furthermore, the diverse institutional contexts in which PDTE students undertake their teaching practice—ranging from technical colleges to other tertiary institutions across the Midlands Province—introduce variability that complicates uniform assessment.

While existing scholarship in teacher education has predominantly concentrated on student performance outcomes and policy frameworks, relatively limited attention has been devoted to the lived experiences and constraints of supervisors responsible for competence evaluation. In the Zimbabwean state university context, understanding these supervisory challenges is critical for strengthening quality assurance mechanisms, enhancing the reliability and validity of assessment practices, and

supporting institutional efforts toward professionalization of semi-skilled lecturers.

This study therefore seeks to examine the challenges faced by supervisors in assessing the professional competence of PDTE students within a state university in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe. By foregrounding supervisors' perspectives, the research aims to generate contextually grounded insights that can inform the refinement of assessment frameworks, capacity-building initiatives for supervisors, and institutional strategies designed to enhance the effectiveness and credibility of the PDTE programme.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Despite the centrality of professional competence assessment in the Post Graduate Diploma in Tertiary Education (PDTE) programme, academic supervisors face persistent challenges in evaluating student lecturers consistently, objectively, and fairly across diverse teaching contexts. The multidimensional nature of competence—encompassing pedagogical skills, professional conduct, and reflective practice—combined with non-standardized assessment tools, limited supervisory time, heavy workloads, and varying institutional environments, undermines the reliability and validity of current evaluation practices. Additionally, inadequate training in competency-based assessment and weak coordination between the university and host institutions further complicate the process. As a result, there is a risk of inconsistent judgments and compromised quality assurance in the professional development of semi-skilled lecturers, highlighting the need for improved assessment frameworks and supervisory support systems.

1.2 Objectives

1. To examine the key challenges faced by academic supervisors in assessing professional competence in the PDTE programme
2. To analyse the factors affecting the reliability, validity, and consistency of current assessment practices
3. To propose strategies for improving competence assessment through standardized frameworks and enhanced supervisory support

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualising Professional Competence in Teacher Education

Professional competence in teacher education encompasses a complex integration of knowledge, skills, dispositions, and ethical and reflective practices that extend beyond theoretical knowledge to effective classroom performance and learner engagement (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Shulman, 1987). Competence frameworks in teacher education typically combine subject mastery, pedagogical content knowledge, classroom management, reflective practice, and professional values (McLean & Snyder, 2015). Within competency-based teacher education, evaluation is not merely about assessing discrete tasks but understanding the holistic enactment of professional behaviours in real classroom contexts (OECD, 2013).

2.2 Supervision and Assessment in Teaching Practice

Supervision of teaching practice is widely recognised as a critical mechanism for formative feedback, professional growth, and quality assurance in teacher education programmes (Bullough & Draper, 2004; Zeichner & Conklin, 2008). In competency-based models, supervisors serve both evaluative and developmental roles—assessing performance against competency standards while coaching reflective practice (Avalos, 2011). Effective supervision requires clear assessment criteria, consistent application of rubrics, and sustained engagement with student teachers through observation and dialogue (Tshabangu, 2019).

2.3 Challenges in Assessing Professional Competence

Despite its importance, research consistently points to multiple assessment-related challenges experienced by supervisors in teacher education programmes.

2.4 Inconsistent and Irregular Supervision

Several studies indicate that scheduling and implementing regular, structured observation is a persistent challenge, particularly within resource-constrained and geographically dispersed contexts (Musingafi, Hammersley-Fletcher, & Mudhovozi, 2011). Studies from Zimbabwean teacher education institutions report that supervision visits are often irregular, infrequent, and poorly coordinated, limiting opportunities for detailed classroom interaction and meaningful feedback (Nhundu, 2022; Musingafi et al., 2011). Workload pressures on supervisors and institutional logistical constraints further exacerbate this problem.

2.5 Feedback Focused on Documentation

Research shows that supervisors often focus disproportionately on checking administrative documentation such as lesson plans, schemes of work, and attendance registers rather than engaging deeply with pedagogical practices (Chitsulo & Chitsulo, 2018). This evaluative pattern has been observed in many African teacher education contexts and is attributed to limited time for observation, heavy supervisory loads, and an administrative orientation in practicum assessment (Chabaya, Mafa, & Chabaya, 2020). Consequently, formative, reflective feedback that supports professional growth is marginalised.

2.6 Misalignment of Assessment Instruments

Assessment tools that are outdated, narrow in scope, or poorly aligned with competency expectations hinder valid evaluation (Ngara & Magwa, 2021). Evidence from Zimbabwean studies indicates that rubrics and assessment forms often emphasise routine instructional tasks rather than holistic 21st-century competencies such as learner-centred pedagogy and integration of technology (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2023). The result is constrained and superficial assessments that do not adequately reflect professional competence.

2.7 Limited Training for Supervisors

Supervisors' effectiveness in assessing professional competence is influenced by their preparation and familiarity with competency-based assessment practices. Studies reveal that supervisors are frequently appointed based on seniority or teaching experience without formal training in supervision, assessment literacy, or feedback strategies (Chipato, 2022; Musingafi et al., 2011). This lack of preparation contributes to variability and inconsistency in assessment outcomes.

2.8 Technological and Innovation-Related Constraints

The integration of digital tools and online supervision practices introduced during and after the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted gaps in technological readiness among supervisors and teacher candidates alike. Uneven internet connectivity, limited training in video observation and digital feedback methods, and unclear guidelines have undermined efforts to conduct remote assessments effectively (Muzamhindo & Nyakudya, 2023). These challenges are particularly pronounced in regions with limited infrastructure capacity such as Zimbabwe's Midlands Province.

2.9 Contextual Challenges within Zimbabwean Teacher Education

Empirical studies in Zimbabwe highlight context-specific constraints that affect supervision and assessment. Resource limitations, including transport challenges and weak institutional support, particularly for supervisors assigned to rural and distant placement sites, are commonly reported (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2023). Research also points to structural weaknesses in practicum coordination frameworks and diffusion of responsibility between universities and host schools, which further complicate standardised assessment (Chipato, 2022; Nhundu, 2022).

2.10 Identified gaps

Despite the breadth of literature on professional competence and supervision in teacher education, several important gaps remain. Firstly, there is limited empirical research focusing specifically on the assessment of professional competence within Post Diploma in Teacher Education (PDTE) programmes, particularly those targeting in-service or semi-skilled lecturers. Much of the existing scholarship concentrates on pre-service teacher education, thereby overlooking the unique assessment dynamics associated with practicing lecturers undergoing professional upgrading. Furthermore, while challenges such as inconsistent supervision, heavy workloads, and inadequate assessment tools are widely documented, there is a lack of in-depth qualitative evidence that captures the lived experiences and perspectives of academic supervisors engaged in competency-based assessment. The literature also identifies weaknesses in assessment instruments but offers limited direction on the development of standardized, context-responsive, and competency-aligned evaluation frameworks. In addition, insufficient attention has been given to how supervisors navigate the dual roles of formative mentorship and summative evaluation, particularly in resource-constrained environments. Although gaps in supervisor training are acknowledged, few studies explore effective capacity-building models to enhance assessment literacy and supervisory practice. Moreover, coordination and communication between universities and host institutions remain underexplored, despite their critical role in ensuring consistency and fairness in assessment. The integration of digital technologies in supervision is another under-researched area, especially within low-resource settings such as Zimbabwe's Midlands Province. Overall, there is a lack of holistic studies examining how contextual, institutional, and systemic factors interact to influence the reliability, validity, and equity of professional competence assessment.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study was conducted at a State university in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe that offers the Professional Diploma in Teacher Education (PDTE) as a professional development qualification for semi-skilled lecturers. A qualitative research design was adopted because it aligns with the purpose of the study, which is to explore and interpret the lived experiences, perceptions, and meanings that supervisors attach to the challenges they encounter when assessing PDTE students' professional competence. Qualitative research is appropriate where the aim is to understand how and why phenomena occur within specific social contexts rather than to quantify variables or test hypotheses (Tenny, 2022).

Qualitative inquiry enables an in-depth, contextualised understanding of supervisors' experiences, decision-making processes, perceptions of assessment tools, feedback practices, training needs, and institutional constraints as they naturally occur within the PDTE supervision process (Tenny, 2022; Shava & Nkengbeza, 2024). In the context of a State university in the Midlands Province, assessment challenges are shaped by local institutional policies, workload demands, placement environments, and the diverse professional backgrounds of PDTE candidates. These realities are socially constructed and context-bound, making them unsuitable for purely numerical measurement (Kivunja, 2017; Shava & Nkengbeza, 2024).

The qualitative design also permits the generation of rich, detailed data that capture participants' voices and meanings, which is essential when examining complex and multifaceted phenomena such as professional competence assessment (Kivunja, 2017). Furthermore, it supports the use of complementary data collection methods and thematic analysis, enabling the identification of patterns of meaning across participants' accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The design is therefore appropriate for producing findings grounded in the real-world supervisory practices of the PDTE programme.

3.2. Philosophical Paradigm

The study is anchored in the interpretivist paradigm, which holds that reality is socially constructed and that knowledge is derived from individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations (Bryman, 2016; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Unlike positivist approaches that emphasize objective measurement and generalization, interpretivism seeks to understand how individuals make

sense of their social world (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2020).

In the context of assessing PDTE students at a State university in the Midlands Province, supervisors' judgments of professional competence are influenced by personal teaching histories, institutional guidelines, resource availability, placement contexts, and professional values. An interpretivist stance enables the researcher to explore these nuanced influences and capture the meanings supervisors attach to their assessment decisions (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2019).

This paradigm supports the use of qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews and document analysis, which facilitate in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives (Flick, 2020). It also acknowledges the researcher's role in interpreting data and therefore emphasizes reflexivity to ensure contextual sensitivity and minimize bias (Bryman, 2016).

3.3 Population and Sampling

3.3.1. Population

The population for this study comprised teaching practice supervisors at the State University in the Midlands Province who are actively involved in assessing the professional competence of PDTE students. These supervisors are directly responsible for observing teaching practice, evaluating instructional delivery, reviewing professional documentation, and providing feedback.

Supervisors were selected as the focus population because they possess firsthand knowledge of the processes, tools, and contextual constraints associated with professional competence assessment (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Teaching practice supervision is inherently context-dependent and shaped by institutional and environmental factors, making supervisors' insights critical to understanding how assessment challenges emerge in practice (Shava & Nkengbeza, 2024).

3.3.2. Sampling Strategy

Purposive sampling was employed to select participants who are information-rich and directly experienced in supervising PDTE students. Purposive sampling allows researchers to intentionally select participants who can provide detailed and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2020).

Supervisors who had assessed PDTE students within recent academic cycles were included to ensure the relevance and timeliness of data. This approach aligns with qualitative

research principles that prioritize depth of understanding over statistical generalization (Coyne, 2021; Saunders et al., 2020).

A sample of approximately 10–15 supervisors was considered sufficient to achieve thematic saturation, the point at which no new themes emerge from additional data collection (Moser & Korstjens, 2020; Palinkas et al., 2020). The sampling strategy also allowed flexibility to include participants from varied supervision contexts within the Midlands Province, thereby capturing diverse perspectives.

3.3.3. Data Collection Methods

To explore the multifaceted and context-bound challenges faced by supervisors, the study employed semi-structured interviews and document analysis.

3.3.3.1. Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method because they enable participants to articulate their experiences and perceptions in their own words while allowing the researcher to probe emergent issues (Saunders et al., 2020). This method is particularly suited to studies examining professional practice, where participants' interpretations and decision-making processes are central to understanding the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

In this study, interviews explored issues such as inconsistencies in assessment standards, workload pressures, limited observation time, misalignment of assessment tools, and institutional or technological constraints affecting supervision. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews ensured that subtle and context-specific challenges within the PDTE programme could be captured.

3.3.3.2. Document Analysis

Document analysis was used to examine relevant institutional materials, including supervision guidelines, assessment rubrics, practicum policies, and quality assurance frameworks. Document analysis enables systematic review of existing records to contextualize participants' experiences and enhance the credibility of findings (Flick, 2020).

By comparing supervisors' accounts with official documentation, the study was able to identify alignments and discrepancies between policy expectations and actual practice. The integration of interviews and document analysis strengthened methodological rigor through triangulation (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.4. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted as the primary method of data analysis. This method involves systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is consistent with interpretivist research, as it facilitates exploration of meanings embedded in participants' narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2023).

The analysis process involved familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, identification of themes, review and refinement of themes, and synthesis into coherent categories. Themes such as inconsistent supervision practices, limited training in competency-based assessment, structural constraints, and variability in placement environments were identified through iterative coding.

Thematic analysis also supported triangulation by enabling comparison of themes derived from interviews with findings from document analysis, thereby enhancing credibility and depth of interpretation (Nowell et al., 2017).

3.5. Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this study was ensured through adherence to the criteria of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability as proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and further discussed by Shava and Nkengbeza (2024). Credibility was enhanced through methodological triangulation, specifically the integration of semi-structured interviews and document analysis, as well as member checking, whereby selected participants reviewed preliminary interpretations to verify the accuracy and authenticity of the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Dependability was supported by maintaining a comprehensive audit trail that systematically documented all methodological decisions, data collection procedures, coding processes, and theme development stages, thereby ensuring transparency and procedural consistency (Nowell et al., 2017). Transferability was achieved through the provision of rich, thick descriptions of the State university context in the Midlands Province and the operational dynamics of PDTE supervision, enabling readers to determine the applicability of the findings to similar educational settings (Shava & Nkengbeza, 2024). Confirmability was ensured through the use of reflexive journaling, which allowed the researcher to critically examine personal assumptions and minimize bias throughout the research process, thereby grounding interpretations firmly in participants' accounts (Bryman, 2016).

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university ethics committee prior to data collection. Informed consent was secured from all participants, who were informed of the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and their right to withdraw without penalty (Creswell & Poth, 2023; Orb, Eisenhauer & Wynaden, 2001).

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage. Given the hierarchical structure within university settings, particular care was taken to reassure participants that their responses would not affect their professional standing (Shava & Nkengbeza, 2024).

The researcher ensured that interviews were conducted respectfully and sensitively, minimizing any potential discomfort associated with discussing institutional or professional challenges. These ethical measures strengthened the credibility and integrity of the study while safeguarding participants' rights and dignity.

Results and Discussion

4.1 Irregular and Inconsistent Supervision

Participants consistently reported that supervision of PDTE students at the State University in the Midlands Province was irregular and often insufficient to support thorough competence assessment. One supervisor explained, *"In most cases I only manage to visit a student once in a semester because we are overloaded."* Another remarked, *"Our supervision schedule looks good on paper, but in practice we struggle to follow it because of transport challenges and competing academic duties."* These verbatim accounts indicate that supervision was frequently constrained by heavy workloads, limited institutional resources, and the wide geographical distribution of placement sites. Some participants acknowledged that observing students only once or twice per semester limited their ability to make informed, balanced judgments about professional competence.

These findings resonate with studies in Zimbabwean teacher education that describe supervision as fragmented and inconsistent (Musingafi et al., 2021; Nhundu, 2022). In the Midlands Province context, irregular visits reduce opportunities for formative feedback and sustained mentorship, thereby weakening supervision as a developmental process. The evidence suggests the need for structured visitation schedules supported by institutional

logistics and workload adjustments to enhance consistency and depth of assessment.

4.2 Feedback Limited to Documentation Rather than Competence

A dominant theme emerging from interviews was the tendency to focus on documentation rather than holistic competence. One participant stated, *“Most of the time we check lesson plans, schemes, and files because that is what the rubric emphasizes.”* Another admitted, *“You end up assessing paperwork more than actual teaching because there isn’t enough time to sit through full lessons and give detailed feedback.”* These responses suggest that assessment practices often prioritize compliance with administrative requirements over reflective engagement with pedagogical practice.

Participants expressed concern that this approach does not adequately capture students’ instructional creativity, classroom interaction skills, or reflective capacity. This pattern aligns with earlier findings that teaching practice assessment in Zimbabwe tends to emphasize administrative completeness (Chabaya et al., 2020). In the PDTE programme context, overreliance on documentation risks reducing competence assessment to procedural compliance, limiting opportunities for critical professional growth. Effective supervision requires balancing documentary verification with meaningful observation and dialogic feedback.

4.3 Misaligned Assessment Instruments

Supervisors also highlighted weaknesses in the design and scope of assessment instruments. One respondent noted, *“The template we use does not really capture innovation or learner-centred methods; it focuses on traditional teaching indicators.”* Another commented, *“We are using tools that do not fully reflect modern expectations like digital integration or critical thinking.”* These verbatim responses indicate frustration with evaluation tools perceived as outdated or narrow in scope.

Document analysis confirmed that existing assessment rubrics emphasize routine instructional tasks and compliance-based criteria, with limited alignment to contemporary competency frameworks (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2023). This misalignment constrains supervisors to assess observable technical elements rather than holistic professional competence (Ngara & Magwa, 2021). In a programme aimed at professionalizing semi-skilled lecturers, such limitations compromise the validity of assessment outcomes. Updating and standardizing assessment instruments to reflect current pedagogical standards is therefore essential.

4.4 Limited Supervisor Training and Professional Development

Participants reported limited formal preparation for their supervisory roles. One supervisor acknowledged, *“I was appointed to supervise because of my experience, not because I received specific training on assessment.”* Another stated, *“We rely on our own understanding of teaching, which sometimes leads to different interpretations of the same performance.”* These responses suggest that supervisory practices are largely informed by personal teaching experience rather than structured assessment training.

This finding is consistent with research indicating that supervisors in Zimbabwe are often appointed without systematic preparation in competency-based assessment (Chipato, 2022; Musingafi et al., 2021). The absence of targeted professional development contributes to variability in assessment standards and reduces confidence in the reliability of judgments. Capacity-building initiatives focusing on assessment literacy, rubric interpretation, and feedback strategies would enhance consistency and strengthen quality assurance mechanisms within the PDTE programme.

4.5 Technological and Innovation-Related Constraints

Supervisors described difficulties adapting to digital supervision modalities introduced during and after the COVID-19 period. One participant remarked, *“Online lesson observation was challenging because of poor connectivity and lack of clear guidelines.”* Another added, *“We were not trained adequately to assess video-recorded lessons, so it was difficult to judge fairly.”* These statements illustrate gaps in digital readiness and clarity of protocols.

Such challenges align with studies documenting uneven technological preparedness in Zimbabwean higher education (Muzamhindo & Nyakudya, 2023). Although digital tools offer potential for expanding supervision reach and flexibility, their effective integration depends on infrastructure, training, and clear assessment criteria. Without these supports, digital supervision risks introducing further inconsistencies into competence evaluation.

4.6 Resource and Structural Challenges

Logistical and structural constraints were repeatedly emphasized. One supervisor explained, *“Transport to remote colleges is a major issue; sometimes visits are*

postponed because there are no vehicles available.” Another observed, *“Coordination between the university and placement institutions is not always smooth, which affects scheduling and communication.”* These responses highlight systemic barriers affecting direct observation and sustained engagement with students.

Such structural challenges have been widely documented in Zimbabwean teacher education contexts (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2023; Musingafi et al., 2021). In the Midlands Province, resource limitations and coordination gaps undermine the effectiveness of supervision, particularly in rural placements. Addressing these issues requires institutional investment in transport, logistical planning, and strengthened communication frameworks between the university and host institutions.

4.7 Synthesis of Findings

The findings reveal interconnected and systemic challenges affecting supervisors’ ability to assess PDTE students’ professional competence effectively. Irregular supervision, documentation-driven feedback, misaligned assessment tools, limited training, technological gaps, and structural constraints collectively weaken the reliability and developmental value of assessment. These challenges extend beyond individual practice to institutional and procedural dimensions, suggesting that meaningful reform requires a comprehensive approach involving updated competency-based instruments, structured supervisor training, improved digital integration, and strengthened institutional and logistical support within the State University in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe.

4.8 Document Analysis Support

Document analysis conducted at a State University in Midlands Province, where this study was undertaken, revealed significant structural and procedural challenges embedded within institutional policies, assessment instruments, and supervision guidelines governing the Professional Diploma in Teacher Education (PDTE) programme. Examination of official documents, including the *Teaching Practice Handbook* (MSU, 2022), *Faculty of Education Practicum Guidelines* (MSU, 2021), and selected departmental supervision reports (MSU, 2023), indicates that supervision visits are often widely spaced, with limited mechanisms for follow-up engagement or structured reflective dialogue. The documents show that while policy prescribes multiple supervisory visits per semester, logistical constraints and workload considerations frequently result in reduced contact time. This pattern aligns with broader Zimbabwean research highlighting fragmented supervision and limited consensus among assessors, which weakens quality assurance

functions in teacher education (Musingafi et al., 2021; Nhundu, 2022).

In relation to feedback practices, documentary analysis at MSU confirms that practicum supervision has historically emphasized verification of documentation over reflective engagement with pedagogical practice. The *Teaching Practice Assessment Form* (MSU, 2022) and associated marking templates allocate substantial weighting to lesson plans, schemes of work, record keeping, and file organization, while comparatively less emphasis is placed on critical reflection, learner engagement strategies, and adaptive instructional competence. Supervision reports reviewed during the study frequently contained brief, prescriptive comments such as “improve lesson pacing” or “ensure objectives are clearly stated,” with minimal elaboration on deeper pedagogical reasoning or professional growth. These findings resonate with national observations that teaching practice assessment in Zimbabwe tends to prioritize administrative compliance rather than developmental feedback (Chabaya et al., 2020).

Further analysis of the State University practicum instruments reveals partial misalignment between existing assessment tools and contemporary competency frameworks. While institutional documents reference learner-centred pedagogy and innovation in principle (MSU, 2021), the operational rubrics primarily assess observable routine teaching behaviours and procedural adherence. There is limited explicit integration of indicators related to 21st-century skills, digital pedagogy, critical thinking facilitation, or reflective practice. This gap reflects concerns raised in Zimbabwean scholarship regarding the mismatch between teacher education policy aspirations and assessment instrument design (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2023; Ngara & Magwa, 2021). Consequently, supervisors may be constrained to evaluate technical compliance rather than holistic professional competence.

Documentary evidence also indicates that formalized training for supervisors is not consistently mandated within institutional policy. The *Practicum Coordination Framework* (MSU, 2021) outlines supervisory roles and responsibilities but does not specify structured induction or continuous professional development requirements for newly appointed supervisors. Internal memoranda reviewed during the study show that supervisors are typically appointed based on academic rank or teaching experience rather than certified preparation in competency-based assessment. This institutional pattern aligns with national findings that mentorship and supervision roles in Zimbabwe are often assigned without systematic preparation, resulting in variability in evaluation standards (Chipato, 2022; Musingafi et al., 2021).

Finally, documentary review of post-COVID practicum guidelines at the State University highlights evolving but still underdeveloped approaches to digital supervision. The *Blended and Online Teaching Practice Addendum* (MSU, 2022) permits video-recorded lesson observations and virtual feedback sessions; however, the guidelines provide limited detail on standardized evaluation criteria for digital lesson delivery. This institutional ambiguity reflects wider technological readiness challenges identified in Zimbabwean higher education, including uneven connectivity, limited training in video-based assessment, and unclear digital feedback protocols (Muzamhindo & Nyakudya, 2023).

Overall, documentary evidence from the State University in Midlands Province underscores that structural, procedural, and capacity-related constraints embedded within existing policy documents, supervision guidelines, and assessment tools continue to limit supervisors' ability to conduct consistent, comprehensive, and competency-aligned evaluation of PDTE students' professional competence.

4.9 Implications for Practice

The findings from this study conducted at a State university in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe reveal systemic and interrelated challenges within the supervision and assessment of PDTE students' professional competence. Issues such as irregular supervision visits, feedback that prioritizes documentation over reflective pedagogical growth, misalignment between assessment instruments and contemporary competency expectations, limited formal preparation of supervisors, technological readiness gaps, and logistical constraints collectively undermine the reliability, validity, and developmental value of competence assessment within the programme.

Addressing these challenges requires deliberate institutional reform. First, the university should establish structured and enforceable supervision schedules supported by clear accountability mechanisms to ensure consistent and meaningful engagement with students during teaching practice. Second, existing assessment instruments need to be reviewed and redesigned to align explicitly with competency-based education principles, learner-centred pedagogy, digital integration, and reflective professional practice relevant to Zimbabwe's higher and tertiary education context. Third, targeted capacity-building initiatives should be implemented to strengthen supervisors' assessment literacy, standardize interpretation of rubrics, enhance feedback strategies, and build digital supervision competencies.

In addition, institutional investment in logistical and technological infrastructure—including transport support

for site visits, improved coordination systems, and reliable digital platforms for blended supervision—is essential to improve the overall quality of practicum oversight. Strengthening collaboration between the university and placement institutions within the Midlands Province would further enhance coherence and shared understanding of professional standards.

Collectively, these practice-oriented reforms have the potential to improve the consistency, transparency, and credibility of professional competence assessment in the PDTE programme. Ultimately, strengthening supervision systems will enhance quality assurance and ensure that graduates of the State University are better equipped with the pedagogical, ethical, and professional competencies required for effective practice in Zimbabwe's education and training sector.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study, conducted at a State university in the Midlands Province of Zimbabwe, established that the supervision and assessment of PDTE students' professional competence are affected by multiple, interrelated institutional and systemic challenges. First, supervision activities were found to be irregular and inconsistent, largely due to heavy academic workloads, logistical limitations, and the wide geographical distribution of placement sites across the province. Such inconsistencies restrict sustained classroom observation and meaningful engagement, thereby weakening the developmental and evaluative functions of teaching practice supervision (Musingafi et al., 2021; Nhundu, 2022).

Second, the findings indicate that supervisory feedback tends to emphasize verification of documentation—such as lesson plans and schemes of work—rather than reflective dialogue and formative professional guidance. This administrative orientation limits opportunities for PDTE students, who are largely semi-skilled lecturers undergoing professionalization, to critically interrogate and improve their pedagogical practice (Chabaya et al., 2020).

Third, assessment instruments currently in use at the university were found to be partially misaligned with contemporary competency-based frameworks. While policy documents reference learner-centred pedagogy and innovation, existing rubrics insufficiently capture 21st-century teaching competencies, reflective practice, and digital integration. Consequently, supervisors are constrained in conducting holistic evaluations of professional competence, underscoring the need for

systematic review and updating of assessment tools (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2023; Ngara & Magwa, 2021).

Fourth, limited formal training and ongoing professional development for supervisors emerged as a significant concern. Many supervisors rely primarily on personal teaching experience rather than standardized and collectively interpreted assessment criteria, leading to variability and potential inconsistencies in evaluation practices (Chipato, 2022; Musingafi et al., 2021).

Fifth, technological and innovation-related constraints—particularly those exposed during and after the COVID-19 period—have affected the effective integration of digital tools into supervision processes. Uneven digital readiness, inadequate training in video-based lesson assessment, and the absence of detailed digital supervision protocols limit the potential of technology-enhanced assessment (Muzamhindo & Nyakudya, 2023).

Finally, persistent structural and resource-related challenges, including transport limitations, weak coordination between the university and placement institutions, and constrained institutional support, impede thorough and equitable supervision, particularly in rural and remote contexts within the Midlands Province (Mafa & Mapolisa, 2023; Musingafi et al., 2021).

5.2 Recommendations

Collectively, these findings point to systemic weaknesses within the PDTE supervision framework at the State University. Addressing these challenges requires the establishment of structured and enforceable supervision schedules, alignment of assessment instruments with competency-based standards, targeted professional development for supervisors, and integration of digital supervision supported by clear institutional guidelines, and strengthened logistical and administrative support systems. Implementing these measures will enhance the reliability, validity, and credibility of professional competence assessment and contribute to the preparation of PDTE graduates who are better equipped to meet the evolving demands of effective teaching practice in Zimbabwe's education and training sector.

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Declaration

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest in relation to this study. All data collection, analysis, and reporting were conducted independently without undue influence from any individual or organization.

Ethical Approval: Ethical clearance for this study was obtained from the Midlands State University Research Ethics Committee. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained throughout the research process in accordance with institutional and national research ethics guidelines.

Data Availability Statement: The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request. Access to institutional documents is subject to approval by Midlands State University authorities due to confidentiality restrictions.

Author Contributions: The research was conceived, designed, executed, and analyzed solely by the author. The author conducted all literature review, data collection, transcription, thematic analysis, and manuscript preparation. The author also takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the reported findings.

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