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Risk Factors for Resilience During COVID-19 Pandemic in Universities: A Conceptual Review of Students from Disadvantaged Backgrounds

Oluwakemi Ajayi; Peter Aloka; Lilian Zindoga; Nzukiso Mnyamana

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SPECIAL EDITION OF THE JOURNAL OF EDUCATION STUDIES: DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS' RESILIENCE IN EDUCATION DURING CRISIS

Guest Editors:
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Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, resilience has emerged as a critical concern in the South African higher education system, particularly for students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. The pandemic exposed the vulnerability of these students, highlighting that factors like 'access' and 'success' are more dynamic than previously thought. The crisis underscored the fragility of the South African higher education system, revealing that it lacks uniform resilience.

Disadvantaged students in South Africa typically come from historically marginalised communities, often characterised by socio-economic challenges, inadequate access to quality education, and limited resources. These students face various barriers to academic success (Walker, 2020; Zungu, 2022).

Resilience, as conceptualised by Luthar et al. (2000), is a multifaceted phenomenon characterised by the ability to positively adapt in the face of adversity. According to their seminal work, resilience is not merely the absence of distress or difficulty but rather an active process of navigating through challenges while still achieving favorable outcomes. This definition underscores the dynamic nature of resilience, emphasising its capacity to foster growth and development even amidst significant hardships.

Central to the notion of resilience is the concept of bouncing back from adversity. Catterall (1998) and Verma (2017) both highlight this aspect, indicating that resilience involves the ability to recover from setbacks and regain equilibrium after encountering difficult circumstances. This resilience is not passive; rather, it involves active coping strategies and adaptive responses to adversity.

Moreover, resilience is not a fixed trait but rather a dynamic process that unfolds over time. Individuals may demonstrate varying levels of resilience in different situations, and resilience can be fostered and strengthened through various means, including social support, coping strategies, and personal attributes (Luthar et al., 2000).

In essence, resilience represents a complex interplay between individual characteristics, environmental factors, and the specific demands of challenging situations. It encompasses not only the ability to endure adversity but also the capacity to thrive and flourish despite it.

By understanding resilience as a dynamic process of positive adaptation in the face of adversity, researchers and practitioners can better support individuals in building and sustaining their resilience across diverse contexts.

Cross and Atinde (2015) demonstrated that students from disadvantaged backgrounds possessed compensatory capital for resilience, enabling them to persevere in the education system. In this context, resilient students are better equipped to handle difficulties and adversities compared to their less resilient peers. Consequently, they are more likely to progress efficiently and achieve higher scores, leading to timely graduation. Considering this perspective, the focus is on exploring the issue of resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for disadvantaged students.

The aim is to understand the mechanisms and institutional strategies that assist these students in coping effectively amidst the crisis. This matter suggests moving beyond just focusing on individual resilience to prioritising institutional resilience in order to support such students effectively. Bahadur et al. (2015) have examined organisational resilience, highlighting its four essential capacities: adaptive, adoptive, anticipative, and transformative capacities. Universities should give precedence to developing these capacities in order to devise interventions that make a significant impact.

The Papers in this Special Issue

The central theme of the articles in this edition revolves around the resilience of both students and higher education institutions. These articles gathered evidence from empirical and theoretical research in the field of resilience in higher education during the COVID-19 era. Their objective was to develop models that foster adaptation in the present and transform theory and practice in the future.

The first paper, co-authored by Chiramba and Agbaje, shed light on the pandemic’s impact on the South African higher education system. It underscored the system’s fragile nature and the lack of consistent resilience across all institutions especially in implementing blended learning. The authors propose reevaluating blended learning as a viable strategy to cultivate resilient institutions.

During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, the issue of student resilience in the South African higher education system has emerged as a significant concern, particularly for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated vulnerabilities within these groups, revealing that the variables of “access” and subsequent “success” are more intricate and changeable than previously believed.

In the second article by Kajee, the focus was on amplifying the voices of teacher education students who experienced the challenging transition to emergency remote teaching due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The article emphasises the need for higher education institutions to reevaluate teaching and learning practices in response to this unprecedented shift, while also highlighting the valuable lessons that emerged. Through a qualitative case study, the research employed online interviews with students and observed online classes. The findings underscore the importance of adaptability and resilience demonstrated by both students and academics in the face of change, serving as a significant lesson derived from the pandemic.

In the third article, Eryenyu, Atibuni, and Olema present the argument that higher-level formal education plays a crucial role as a sustainable development strategy for nations and regions seeking effective engagement in global political and socioeconomic transformation. For them it is unfortunate that sub-Saharan Africa lags behind the global average in terms of gross enrollment ratio. Using Uganda as a case study, the authors highlight the lack of equity, meritocracy, fairness and inclusion across various dimensions such as location, gender, creed, political affiliation and socioeconomic status, despite the growing demand for higher education in the country. To address these challenges, the paper employed a systematic literature review and suggests bolstering resilience as a means to enhance access and success within Uganda’s higher education sector.

The fourth article by Schreiber focused on the professionalisation of student development, support and services within the South African higher education sector. The author adopted a mixed-method approach, using a national survey to investigate the training and development needs of 362 staff members involved in student affairs and services.

By addressing the lack of explicit South African competencies relevant to the higher education sector, the paper fills an important gap in the existing literature. The article concludes by emphasising the significance of competence as a prerequisite for empowering student affairs and services, with the ultimate goal of promoting student resilience, persistence and access in the higher education sector.

The fifth paper by Bhuda, Maditsi, and Mgoduka delved into the exploration of the knowledge acquired from the shift to online learning and digital transformation within South African higher education establishments amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Drawing upon the University of South Africa and the University of Cape Town as illustrative cases, the authors employed secondary data sources from existing literature to qualitatively construct their research.

The article underscores several valuable insights, indicating how imperative it is for higher education institutions to continue to enhance online teaching and learning strategies, to foster adaptability in addressing comparable challenges as those presented by the Covid-19 crisis and to maintain preparedness to support students and staff during trying times.

Namakula and Kadenge examined the impact of a writing intervention programme implemented at the University of Witwatersrand in the sixth article. Initially launched in 2014 to assist students at risk of academic exclusion, the programme unexpectedly proved to be more effective during the challenging times of the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, it evolved into a mandatory component of a first-year education course. The study delved into the experiences and perspectives of peer tutors who grappled with the task of managing a large number of students enrolled in the writing programme during the transition from face-to-face to online learning. The findings reveal that the peer tutors displayed remarkable resilience as they continued to provide support to students, helping them navigate through the uncertainties imposed by the Covid-19 period.

Using a qualitative approach, the seventh article authored by Malatji, Kadhila, and Malatji examined the effectiveness of students' support initiatives in fostering resilience as universities transitioned from face-to-face to online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study was conducted in three African universities, involving a total of 12 participants from each institution. The research aimed to explore lecturers' daily practices and student support initiatives, and their contribution to the academic agenda of the universities. To gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under investigation, the study employed Kolb's learning theory as a conceptual framework.

The results indicate a strong emphasis on the provision of online resources, while inadequate attention was given to addressing the psychological and academic support required to enhance student resilience.

The eighth article authored by Ogunbayo and Mhlanga delved into the difficulties encountered by educators and students in relation to remote instruction and learning during the COVID-19 crisis. Furthermore, the article highlighted the benefits of e-learning while using Nigeria as a case study, shedding light on the challenges faced by several African nations that had limited exposure to digital tools for educational purposes before the pandemic. By conducting an extensive analysis of 95 recent literature sources, the study emphasises the significance of e-learning during a global pandemic.

In the ninth article, Mavunga and Dzinoreva examined the psychological wellbeing of higher education students in Zimbabwe amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Through a mixed-methods study, the authors highlighted the inadequate focus on the students' psychological wellbeing despite the significant negative effects caused by the pandemic. By using data collected from online questionnaires, the study revealed that students expressed dissatisfaction with the support they received during this challenging period. Consequently, the authors propose the adoption of a resilient and comprehensive approach to address the students' psychological wellbeing, encompassing physical, social and spiritual aspects.

In the 10th article, Erasmos and Motilal explored the impact of resilience, or the lack thereof, on students in higher education. By employing a four-dimensional framework for student resilience, the authors delved into the strategies necessary to cultivate resilience among these students. The study emphasises the significance of resilience for the well-being of higher education students and proposes that families, communities and higher education staff should actively collaborate to foster resilience in students.

In the 11th article by Banda, the impact of online teaching and learning, as an alternative to the traditional face-to-face method, on the resilience and capability for meaningful learning of disadvantaged higher education students during the Covid-19 pandemic is explored using Sen's capability approach and the Salutogenesis theory of resilience. Through the use of document analysis, the authors examined how the shift to online education widened the existing inequalities between students from socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds.

The findings reveal that while students from privileged backgrounds had access to resources that facilitated their online learning experience, students from disadvantaged backgrounds encountered difficulties in engaging meaningfully in online education, leading to a negative impact on their resilience.

Marutlulle's 12th article delved into the topic of student resilience and the role of institutional support in fostering resilience among students amidst the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. By conducting a literature review and analysing policy documents, the article explored the interplay between Covid-19 and higher education models. The research findings indicate that the pandemic had a significant impact on both students' health and the wellbeing of their family members. However, the crisis also presented an opportunity for students to engage in online collaboration which ultimately bolstered their resilience. Considering these findings, the author emphasises the importance of higher education institutions providing relevant support to students in order to enhance their resilience and academic performance.

Article 13 written by Ajayi, Aloka, Zindoga, and Mnyamana discusses the various factors that contributed to the resilience of university students during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The authors highlight that students from disadvantaged backgrounds faced mental health challenges and had to deal with multiple stressors amid the pandemic. By employing the resilience theory, the study reveals that social support, problem-solving skills, self-control and self-efficacy played a vital role in bolstering students' resilience in the face of these challenges. In light of their findings, the authors suggest that university students should seek support from their peers during times of crisis.

In article 14, Bhuda and Maditsi assert that rural students and those from indigenous communities lack the necessary skills to adapt to urban life and navigate university culture. The authors highlight that these students, who are accustomed to indigenous lifestyles and communicate primarily in their mother tongue, often encounter difficulties in interacting with others and using technology. Consequently, many of these students experience frustration, leading to high dropout rates, although a resilient few persist. The authors support their argument by drawing upon secondary data sources and ultimately propose that universities should embrace the principles of Ubuntu in their institutional culture and demonstrate greater inclusivity towards students from rural backgrounds.

Moodley's 15th article focuses on the experience of pre-service student teachers who underwent their teaching practice through online programmes during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite encountering various challenges, such as resistance from school principals to host them and intense competition among pre-service teachers for placements due to Covid-19-related backlogs, the article highlights the resilience displayed by these student teachers. In addition, the article discusses the curriculum modifications that were implemented to ensure these students received credits for their teaching practice during the pandemic. The study used a qualitative approach based on the Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge theoretical framework. The findings indicate that pre-service teachers adapted positively to the online programmes and achieved success in their teaching practice.

Ogunbayo and Mhlanga in article 16 explored the roles and experiences of School Management Teams (SMTs) in implementing feeding programmes. The authors assert that the introduction of school feeding initiatives led to an increase in enrollment and a decrease in the dropout rate, which was estimated to be approximately 30% in Nigerian public schools. However, the Covid-19 pandemic had a detrimental effect on the SMTs' ability to sustain these feeding programmes. The authors supported their claims by conducting a thorough literature review.

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PROMOTING INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING DURING AND POST-COVID-19 IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in significant disruptions to the education sector worldwide, forcing educational institutions to rapidly adapt and implement remote learning solutions to ensure the continuity of education. Blended learning, a combination of face-to-face and online instruction, thus emerged as a viable approach to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on educational institutions. This conceptual paper aims to explore the role of blended learning in promoting institutional resilience during and after the COVID-19 crisis. We argue that universities can enhance institutional resilience by exploring innovative approaches to integrate blended learning into their systems. By examining the benefits, challenges and best practices associated with blended learning, this paper provides insights into how educational institutions can leverage this approach to foster resilience in the face of future disruptions. The paper extends its scope beyond the examination of students' resilience, which has been the focus of the majority of the papers in this issue, to reconsider the measures universities can take to promote institutional resilience through blended learning in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Blended Learning, COVID-19, Institutional Resilience, Face-To-Face Teaching And Learning, Online Instruction

Introduction

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions worldwide were forced to confront unprecedented challenges. Subsequently, education has through an infusion of online learning, acknowledged the influence of technology on our daily lives and the future interactions of students beyond their academic years. Nevertheless, numerous educators and institutions harbour doubts regarding online instruction and the possibilities it creates to replicate the familiar in-person classroom experience (Stein & Graham, 2020). The sudden shift to remote learning highlighted the vulnerabilities within traditional educational systems and underscored the urgent need for adaptable and resilient approaches to education. Blended learning, a pedagogical model that combines online and in-person instruction, has emerged as a promising solution to promote institutional resilience in the post-pandemic era (Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia & Koole, 2020). Blended learning, also known as hybrid or mixed-mode learning, allows for the integration of technology and face-to-face interactions, creating a dynamic learning environment that can adapt to various circumstances.

It combines the best of both worlds, leveraging the flexibility and accessibility of online platforms while preserving the essential human connection and social interaction that is vital for effective learning. Stein and Graham (2020) argue that blended learning is the best when designed effectively but designing it well can be challenging. Achieving a seamless integration between the online and in-person components presents the greatest difficulty in implementing blended learning.

This paper aims to explore the role of blended learning in promoting institutional resilience in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. By examining the benefits, challenges and best practices associated with implementing blended learning models, we gained valuable insights into how educational institutions can harness this approach to build robust and adaptable systems that can withstand future disruptions (Chen, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic has not only revealed the shortcomings of traditional educational practices but has also accelerated the digital transformation of education (Narayanan, 2020). As schools and universities have gradually returned to in-person learning, it is crucial to capitalise on the lessons learnt during this crisis and integrate the strengths of online and offline learning modalities. Blended learning offers a unique opportunity to reimagine education, fostering resilience, innovation and inclusivity. In this paper, a comprehensive literature review was conducted to explore existing scholarly works related to institutional resilience and blended learning during and post COVID-19 pandemic. The search strategy involved querying multiple databases using keywords such as blended learning during crises, promoting institutional resilience amidst crises, harnessing blended learning in higher education.

Two questions are central to this exploration.

1. How have universities in South Africa implemented blended learning post-COVID-19?
2. How may we implement blended learning in a more effective way in higher education?

Throughout this paper, we delve into the key aspects of blended learning, its background and conceptual definitions, including its role as a pedagogical strategy. We explore the theory of resilience and the potential of blended learning in contributing to resilient teaching and learning innovatively and effectively. We also review the literature to explore how various educational institutions have implemented blended learning models. We then suggest possible strategies for blended learning that may enhance institutional resilience. By understanding the potential of blended learning and its influence on educational systems, policymakers, administrators, educators and other stakeholders can make informed decisions to transform their institutions into resilient learning communities. Together, we can navigate the challenges of the post-pandemic world and lay the foundation for a more adaptable, inclusive and future-ready education system.

The following section looks at the background of blended learning. Reviewing the background of blended learning includes models that have been successfully implemented in various higher educational contexts. This helps in identifying best practices and effective strategies that can be adapted and applied to different institutions in particular the South African higher education context.

Background to Blended Learning

While there is no definitive single point of origin for blended learning, several key events and trends have contributed to its emergence. One significant development was the advent of computer-assisted instruction (CAI) in the 1960s and 1970s (Graham, 2006). Researchers and educators began exploring the use of computers to deliver instructional content and engage students in interactive learning experiences. Early examples of CAI systems, such as PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations), at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, laid the foundation for incorporating technology in education (Graham & Anderson, 2005).

The expansion of the Internet and the proliferation of online learning platforms in the 1990s and early 2000s further paved the way for blended learning in universities worldwide. The rise of learning management systems (LMS) like Blackboard and Moodle has provided platforms for educators to deliver online content, manage student progress and facilitate communication and collaboration (Graham, 2006). In the late 1990s, educational researchers such as Charles Graham and Terry Anderson began to advocate the integration of online and face-to-face learning in what they referred to as “blended learning” or “hybrid learning” (Stein & Graham, 2020). Their work focused on leveraging the unique affordances of both modes of instruction to enhance student learning outcomes and engagement (Graham, 2006).

The Sloan Consortium (now the Online Learning Consortium), founded in 1992, in Philadelphia also played a crucial role in promoting blended learning (Graham, 2006). The consortium conducted research, organised conferences and provided resources to advance the field of online and blended learning, contributing to the wider adoption and acceptance of blended learning practices (Graham, 2006). In addition, the evolution of educational technologies, such as video conferencing, multimedia tools and mobile devices, has facilitated the growth of blended learning. These technologies have enabled educators, internationally to deliver engaging online content, foster interactive discussions and provide personalised learning experiences. It is important to note that the specific origins and terminology of blended learning can vary depending on the context and the field of education. Nevertheless, the aforementioned developments and contributions have collectively shaped the concept and implementation of blended learning as we understand it today.

A Conceptual Overview of Blended Learning

Watson (2008) argues that different institutions may use terms like “blended” and “hybrid”, or choose not to label it specifically; however, in this article, we refer to it as blended learning. While the concept of blended learning has been widely discussed and implemented, there is no single universally accepted definition. Different educational institutions and researchers may have variations in their interpretation and implementation of the concept.

According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008), blended learning refers to an educational approach that combines traditional face-to-face instruction with online learning activities, leveraging the benefits of both modes to enhance the learning experience. Bonk and Graham (2012) argue that students engage in a mix of in-person classroom sessions and online interactions, allowing for greater flexibility, personalised learning and the integration of technology into the educational process. The next section focuses on the models of blended learning. Knowledge of these models can guide the development of resilient and flexible teaching methodologies in universities in South Africa.

Models for Blended Learning

We acknowledge that there are various models associated with blended learning. The presence of these models suggests that there are multiple ways to implement blended learning, each with its unique characteristics and components. These models can vary in terms of the proportion of online and in-person components, the integration of technology, the types of activities employed and the overall instructional design (Horn & Staker, 2011). Graham (2006 pp. 18–19) summarised how these models work in a very significant way.

“Evolving blended learning models provide the essential methodological scaffolding needed to effectively combine face to face instruction, online instruction and arrays of content objects and assets of all form factors. For example, in such a blended learning scenario, a student may find him or herself participating in a face-to-face class discussion; he or she may then log in and complete an online mastery exercise or two, and then copy some practice exercise.”

In most cases, educators do not think of blended learning in the way it is presented above. Instead, “they are stuck with traditional face-to-face and always seek ways for online initiatives to support high grade face-to-face experience” (Graham, 2006, p. 18). According to Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p. X), blended learning should be innovative and not a “mere substitutive use of technology in teaching and learning”.

This paper focuses on two specific models, the Station Rotation Model and flipped classroom, which the authors consider to be important in delivering meaningful blended learning. This helps in the efficient use of these models to create agile universities. The Station Rotation Model may involve a rotation model, where students alternate between in-person classes and online activities. If it is integrated effectively in South African universities, it offers a mix of in-person and digital learning experiences. According to Horn and Staker (2011), the Station Rotation Model involves dividing students into smaller groups and rotating them through different learning stations.

Each station represents a distinct learning activity or environment, such as face-to-face instruction, online modules, collaborative projects or individualised tasks (Horn & Staker, 2011). The rotation can occur within a single class period or over multiple sessions, depending on the desired learning outcomes (Graham, 2013). In this model, a portion of the class starts at a specific station while other groups engage in different activities. The students rotate between stations according to a predetermined schedule, ensuring that each group experiences every learning station (Watson, 2008). This rotation allows for a diversified learning experience, catering to different learning styles and preferences (Crawford & Jenkins, 2017). It also encourages student engagement and active participation in various learning contexts.

The Station Rotation Model may provide several benefits in higher education in South Africa. According to Crawford and Jenkins (2017), it offers flexibility in terms of time and location, allowing students to access online resources and complete activities at their own pace outside of the classroom. Kundu, Bej, and Nath Dey (2021) also argued that the flexibility in the Station Rotation Model is particularly advantageous for non-traditional students, part-time learners or those with other commitments. They further argue that the model promotes student-centred learning by incorporating active learning strategies (Kundu et al., 2021). Students actively participate in diverse activities, collaborate with peers, engage in discussions and receive individualised instruction. This approach enhances critical thinking, problem-solving skills and student engagement, leading to deeper understanding and improved learning outcomes (Crawford & Jenkins, 2017).

Mariam et al. (2023) argue that the Station Rotation Model supports personalised learning experiences. Online modules can be tailored to meet the individual needs and learning styles of students (Mariam et al., 2023). They further argue that adaptive technologies and data analytics can track student progress and provide real-time feedback, enabling instructors to intervene and provide targeted support when needed (Mariam et al., 2023). However, implementing the Station Rotation Model requires careful planning, infrastructure and technological support. Instructors must design engaging and interactive online modules, establish clear guidelines and expectations for students and ensure seamless integration of the face-to-face and online components (Kundu et al., 2021).

Adequate resources, such as reliable internet access and appropriate learning management systems, are essential for successful implementation. While careful planning and support are necessary for successful implementation, the Station Rotation Model has the potential to enhance student engagement, flexibility and learning outcomes in higher education. Another common approach is the flipped classroom model (Khasanah & Anggoro, 2022).

The flipped classroom is a new pedagogical method which employs asynchronous video lectures and practice problems as homework, and active, group-based activities. In this model, students learn new content online at their own pace and then come to class to engage in collaborative activities, discussions and problem-solving (Khasanah & Anggoro, 2022; Wang, 2022). The flipped classroom model is a form of blended learning that has gained popularity in education. In this model, the traditional roles of in-class lectures and homework assignments are reversed. Students engage with lecture materials outside of the classroom, typically through pre-recorded videos or online resources, and then come to class ready to apply and deepen their understanding through collaborative activities, discussions and hands-on exercises (Wang, 2022).

According to Lage et al. (2000), the main benefit of the flipped classroom is that it allows pre-class learning. The model gives students the opportunity to acquire basic knowledge and understanding before attending the class session. This can be done through watching instructional videos, reading textbooks or accessing online resources (Lage et al., 2000). By completing this pre-class learning independently, students can progress at their own pace and review the material as needed.

Tucker (2012) added in-class activities as another significant benefit of the flipped classroom. The benefit is seen through how classroom time in this model is dedicated to interactive and collaborative activities that promote deeper learning (Tucker, 2012). Students engage in discussions, problem-solving exercises and group projects, and receive individualised attention from the instructor (Wang, 2022). This active learning approach allows students to apply their knowledge, ask questions and receive immediate feedback. Arguing for this model, Tucker (2012 p. 82) contends that “it’s not the instructional videos on their own, but how they are integrated into an overall approach, that makes the difference”. Barrett (2012) also argues that the flipped classroom model offers flexibility in terms of when and where students engage with the learning materials. Students can access pre-recorded lectures or resources from home, allowing them to review content at their own pace and revisit challenging concepts (Barrett, 2012). This approach also allows for more personalised instruction, as teachers can identify individual student needs and provide targeted support during in-class activities. Barrett (2012) further argues that the flipped classroom is not meant to replace traditional ways of teaching and learning but enhance them. As a result, he contends that in this model, “Students cannot passively receive material in class, which is one reason some students dislike flipping.

Instead, they gather the information largely outside of class, by reading, watching recorded lectures, or listening to podcasts" (Barrett, 2012, p. 1). According to Bishop and Verleger (2013), the flipped classroom model also encourages enhanced student participation and engagement. Students are actively involved in the learning process through discussions, collaboration and problem-solving activities.

This engagement can lead to increased motivation, deeper understanding and improved retention of the material (Bishop & Verleger, 2013). It is important to note that the flipped classroom model may have varying implementations and adaptations across different educational settings and disciplines. The discussion provided above can serve as a starting point to explore the flipped classroom model further and gain a deeper understanding of its benefits and practical considerations.

Use of Blended Learning During and post-COVID-19 in South Africa

South Africa's higher education system experienced significant changes and challenges in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Mpungose, 2021). Before the pandemic, traditional face-to-face teaching and learning methods were predominant in South African universities (Chaka, 2020). However, the global health crisis taught educational institutions to adapt quickly and implement alternative modes of instruction, including blended learning (Chaka, 2020; Dhawan, 2020). For blended learning to be effective, it needs to integrate the best aspects of both traditional classroom-based instruction and online learning platforms (Ali, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal functioning of higher education institutions in South Africa, leading to the temporary closure of campuses and the suspension of in-person classes (Dhawan, 2020). In response, universities rapidly transitioned to remote teaching and learning methods. This shift highlighted the importance of digital technologies and online platforms in ensuring the continuity of education (Chaka, 2020).

South African higher education institutions used various online tools and platforms such as LMS, video conferencing software and online content repositories to deliver educational content and facilitate interaction between students and educators (Mpungose, 2021). Universities also made efforts to ensure that students had access to the necessary technological infrastructure and internet connectivity to participate in remote learning. Blended learning approaches were implemented to combine online instruction with limited in-person activities when it was safe to do so (Chaka, 2020). This hybrid model allowed for the gradual return of students to campuses while adhering to social distancing and health protocols. In-person activities, such as laboratory work, practical sessions and small group discussions, were prioritised for face-to-face interaction, while lectures and larger classes are often conducted online (Ali, 2020).

The shift to blended learning in South African higher education post-COVID-19 has highlighted both its benefits and challenges (Dhawan, 2020). Some of the advantages include increased flexibility for students, access to a broader range of resources and the development of digital skills necessary for the modern workforce (Chaka, 2020). Blended learning also has proved its potential to reach more students, including those in remote areas or with limited mobility.

However, challenges remain, particularly related to the digital divide and ensuring equitable access to technology and Internet connectivity for all students (Chaka, 2020). Some students face difficulties in adapting to online learning environments and educators may need additional training and support to effectively use blended learning strategies (Mpungose, 2021). South African higher education institutions should continue exploring and refining blended learning approaches in the post-COVID-19 era.

The pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies in education and universities may need to invest further in infrastructure, training and resources to enhance the quality and accessibility of blended learning experiences for students (Matizirofa et al., 2021).

Inadequate Preparation for Online and Blended Learning

Blended learning has been increasingly used in South Africa as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic and the need for remote learning solutions. During the global COVID-19 pandemic, South African institutions just like other numerous institutions across the globe prioritised continuity over meaningful engagement in teaching and learning (Matizirofa et al., 2021). The sudden shift to online and blended learning revealed significant inadequacies in the preparation and readiness of these institutions to effectively deliver education remotely. The preparation fell short in several aspects including infrastructure challenges (Mhlanga et al., 2022). Many institutions struggled with inadequate technological infrastructure and limited access to essential resources, such as high-speed internet, computers and software licenses. Insufficient investment in infrastructure and insufficient planning hindered seamless online learning experiences (Mhlanga et al., 2022). The lack of standardised platforms and tools exacerbated the situation, making it difficult for students and faculty to navigate different systems. The other challenge was faculty training and support (Hauala et al., 2023). The sudden transition to online and blended learning required faculty members to quickly adapt their teaching methods and use digital tools effectively. However, the lack of comprehensive training programmes and support mechanisms left many instructors ill-equipped to navigate the new pedagogical landscape (Mhlanga et al., 2022). Inadequate training on instructional design for online environments, multimedia production and online assessment strategies resulted in suboptimal learning experiences. What was also a major issue was pedagogical approaches (Mapudzi & Chikandiwa, 2022).

Effective online and blended learning requires a thoughtful redesign of pedagogical approaches to engage students in a virtual environment. However, institutions often failed to provide faculty with guidance on implementing active learning strategies, fostering interaction and promoting collaboration among students (Mapudzi & Chikandiwa, 2022). The absence of well-structured course design models and limited knowledge of online instructional strategies hindered the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Hauala et al., 2023). There was also a challenge with student support. Effective online and blended learning requires a thoughtful redesign of pedagogical approaches to engage students in a virtual environment.

The Four-Capacity Resilience Theory: How Can it be Leveraged Through Blended Learning?

The resilience theory can guide institutions in designing and implementing effective blended learning strategies post-pandemic. By adapting to changing circumstances, building supportive environments, promoting self-regulation, leveraging technology for personalised learning and emphasising continuous growth, educators can foster resilience among students and staff in the blended learning landscape. Below is the four-capacity framework that shows us how blended learning may help achieve resilience in higher education.

Adoptive Capacity

This entails the capability to adapt and persevere in the face of challenging situations. Both individuals and institutions demonstrate resilience by recovering from stress and difficulties (Jeans et al., 2017). They effectively use their skills and available resources to combat adverse circumstances (Bahadur, Peters, Wilkinson, Pichon, Gray & Tanner, 2015). By possessing this capacity, individuals and institutions can withstand the impact of unfavourable conditions (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014). The extent to which this fundamental capacity is used directly influences the three subsequent capacities (Chiramba, 2020). According to Graham (2021), blended learning provides flexibility in terms of time and location, allowing students to access educational resources and participate in activities at their convenience. This accessibility enhances adoptive and adaptive capacity by enabling students to engage in continuous learning beyond the confines of physical classrooms. He further argues that blended learning can accommodate diverse learning styles and preferences by offering a mix of instructional strategies, including multimedia resources, interactive activities and collaborative projects. This personalised approach fosters student engagement and self-directed learning, which are key factors in developing adoptive capacity (Graham, 2021). Gomez et al. (2021) further argue that the integration of online learning tools and digital resources in blended learning cultivates students' digital literacy and technological skills. As technology continues to play a significant role in post-pandemic societies, being proficient in digital tools and platforms is crucial for individuals to adapt to new ways of working, communicating and accessing information.

Blended learning equips learners with the necessary technological competencies, enhancing their adoptive capacity.

Adaptive Capacity

The ability to adapt enables gradual transformation (Chiramba, 2020), allowing both organisations and individuals to actively participate in responding to challenging situations (OECD, 2014). People and institutions adapt by revising and refining previous strategies to overcome hardships, emphasising the need for flexibility and the effective use of available resources (Jeans et al., 2017).

According to Gomez et al. (2021), blended learning, with its combination of online and face-to-face components, offers a flexible framework that can adapt to changing circumstances. In the post-pandemic era, this adaptability can help educational institutions and students quickly transition between different learning modes as needed, ensuring continuous access to education even in challenging circumstances. It also expands access to educational resources beyond the limitations of traditional classroom settings. Online components can provide a wealth of supplementary materials such as interactive simulations, videos and online forums, enhancing students' learning experience. Moreover, blended learning can overcome geographical barriers by offering remote access to educational opportunities, ensuring that students can access high-quality resources regardless of their location (Gomez et al., 2021).

Anticipative Capacity

Anticipative capacity encompasses the inherent capability of both individuals and institutions to proactively plan and equip themselves for unexpected challenges (Bahadur et al., 2015). This capacity demands that individuals and institutions possess the necessary tools and strategies to effectively anticipate and prepare for an unpredictable and uncertain future. It underscores the need for proactive measures to be in place, ensuring readiness and resilience in the face of unforeseen circumstances.

Almajed et al. (2020) argue that blended learning allows for flexibility in terms of time and location, enabling students to continue their education even during disruptions such as pandemics or natural disasters. With online components, students can access course materials, participate in discussions and complete assignments remotely. This flexibility helps individuals develop adaptability skills, ensuring they can continue their education regardless of external circumstances. Gomez et al. (2021) have the idea that blended learning platforms often facilitate collaboration and communication among students and instructors through discussion forums, virtual group projects and video conferences. Engaging in collaborative activities develops students' interpersonal skills and the ability to work effectively as part of a team.

These skills are essential in building anticipative capacity as they enable individuals to share insights, exchange ideas and collectively anticipate challenges in various contexts.

Transformative Capacity

Every institution should strive to develop this final and essential capability which entails a purposeful endeavour to transform the current systems (Chiramba, 2020). While higher education systems face various obstacles that hinder teaching and learning, there is optimism that universities, through their commitment to change, can bring about substantial transformations.

Blended learning promotes resilience by going beyond simply delivering content and facilitating interactions to deeply engaging learners and fostering transformative learning experiences. According to Garrison and Kanuka (2004), transformative learning is a process that involves challenging learners' existing beliefs and perspectives, leading to critical reflection and the construction of new knowledge and understanding. Blended learning, with its flexibility and diverse instructional strategies, can facilitate transformative learning by providing learners with opportunities to engage in meaningful activities, collaborate with peers and reflect on their learning experiences. In the context of blended learning, the transformative capacity is influenced by various factors.

These factors include the design and sequencing of online and face-to-face activities, the use of interactive technologies and multimedia resources, the quality of facilitation and instructor presence, and the alignment of learning outcomes with the instructional strategies employed in the blended learning environment.

Blended learning has the potential to promote transformative learning experiences and outcomes. Studies have shown that learners in blended learning environments have reported increased motivation, improved critical thinking skills, enhanced self-directed learning abilities and a deeper understanding of the subject matter (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Vaughan, 2007). The four capacities can be very useful if leveraged through blended learning in higher education in South Africa.

Conclusion

Institutional resilience can be promoted through blended learning ecosystem that adapts to changing circumstances, provides quality education and prepares students for the challenges of the future. Blended learning has proved to possess various benefits that can be useful for various contexts of higher education. As we transition to a post-pandemic era, it is crucial to build institutional resilience by leveraging the benefits of blended learning. We highlight six significant recommendations required for creating resilient institutions through blended learning.

1. Develop a comprehensive blended learning strategy: Institutions should develop a well-defined and comprehensive blended learning strategy that aligns with their educational goals and objectives. This strategy should consider factors such as curriculum design, LMSs, infrastructure requirements, teacher training and student support services. A clear roadmap will facilitate a smooth transition to blended learning and ensure that all stakeholders are well-prepared.

2. Enhance teacher training and professional development: Teachers play a vital role in the successful implementation of blended learning. Institutions should invest in robust training programmes to equip teachers with the necessary skills and pedagogical approaches for effective blended instruction. Professional development opportunities should focus on areas such as online teaching techniques, LMS use, data analysis for personalised learning and student assessment in a blended environment. Ongoing support and collaboration platforms for teachers can further enhance their confidence and competence in delivering quality blended learning experiences.

3. Foster student-centred and personalised learning: Blended learning offers the opportunity for greater personalisation and differentiation of instruction. Institutions should emphasise student-centred learning approaches where students have a more active role in their education. This can be achieved using adaptive learning technologies, online discussion forums, collaborative projects and interactive multimedia resources. Providing students with choices in how, where and when they learn can enhance their engagement and motivation.

4. Strengthen technological infrastructure and support services: To ensure a seamless blended learning experience, institutions need to invest in robust technological infrastructure. This includes reliable Internet connectivity, up-to-date hardware and software, and adequate technical support. Institutions should also establish dedicated support services to assist students and lecturers in navigating the digital learning environment. Technical support staff should be easily accessible to address any technological challenges faced by users, thus minimising disruptions to the learning process.

5. Promote collaboration and community building: Blended learning should not be limited to isolated online experiences. Institutions should create opportunities for collaboration and community building among students and teachers. This can be facilitated through virtual group projects, online discussion boards, peer-to-peer learning activities and virtual clubs or interest groups. Building a sense of belonging and social interaction can contribute to students' overall well-being and academic success.

6. Monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of blended learning: Institutions should establish mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of their blended learning initiatives. Regular assessment of student outcomes, feedback from teachers and students, and analysis of data generated by LMSs can provide valuable insights into the strengths and areas of improvement. This feedback loop will enable institutions to make informed decisions, refine their strategies and continuously enhance the quality of blended learning experiences.

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STUDENT VOICES DURING COVID-19: RESILIENCE IN TIMES OF CHANGE

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has dictated that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) reconsider and reshape teaching and learning in real time, which has taught us several lessons. The unanticipated closure of education institutions in South Africa, and worldwide has induced questions around adaptability, readiness and response to change in the HEI sector. As teacher educators, we need to proceed efficaciously to post-COVID-19 educational environments. To do so we need to heed the lessons learnt during the pandemic by listening to the voices of our students. The aim of this paper is to add to emerging research in the field of the impact of the pandemic on education, by providing the voices of teacher education students during the rapid and unplanned move to emergency remote teaching and learning. The research paradigm of this study is interpretative, and the approach is a qualitative case study. The methods include student interviews with and narratives by students, conducted online because of social distancing rules imposed at the time. The author also conducted participant observations of online classes. The theoretical lens is provided as a humanising pedagogy and resilience, as well as a literature review of emergency remote teaching. Findings indicate that the students experienced challenges with technology and connectivity and felt that their academic performance was compromised as a result of emergency remote teaching and learning. This was further exacerbated because of impediments to their mental and physical health during the pandemic. Despite these findings, however, students demonstrated resilience in attempting to overcome their adverse experiences.

Keywords: Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning, COVID-19, Student Voices, Humanising Pedagogy, Resilience

Introduction

After the turbulence of the COVID-19 pandemic, most schools and HEIs have reopened worldwide. However, education is still in recovery by way of ascertaining the damage done and lessons learned from the pandemic. The pandemic affected more than 1.5 billion youth, with the most vulnerable being hit the hardest (UNESCO, 2020). Cyril Ramaphosa, President of South Africa, declared a national state of disaster and the closure of all educational institutions on 15 March 2020, to contain the spread of the coronavirus (http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/2020/cram0323.pdf). The caused significant concern within the education sector and ushered in changes never experienced before. These changes demanded thought around addressing teaching and learning in schools and universities.

The World Economic Forum and the World Bank (2020), highlighted the need for a revival of educational systems post-Covid (World Economic Forum, 2020). As a result, the COVID-19 has dictated that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) reconsider, reshape, and respond to teaching and learning in real time, and this has subsequently taught us several lessons. The unforeseen closure of educational institutions in South Africa, and worldwide has induced questions around the HEI sector's adaptability, readiness and response to change. Given the immediate, unprecedented demand to transform university programmes to digital platforms, universities were challenged to create and implement digital models of education, given the immediate demand for the digital transformation of university programmes. Teaching and learning required immediate modification through the assimilation of digital technology (UNESCO, 2020).

The rapid changes called into question several matters: in-person teaching and learning practices; availability of and access to digital resources; academic staffing, and student preparation for teaching and learning in digital environments; and access to internet services and facilities. Given these shifting academic and student roles, worldwide scrutiny of teaching and learning ensued. For the successful implementation of justifiable pedagogical approaches broad consultation with key participants such as academics and students is essential. Lack of rigorous academic and student engagement has the potential to incapacitate the sustainability of any new pedagogical models that are introduced.

Given the educational challenges, as teacher educators, we need to heed these lessons by listening to the voices of our students, to move successfully to post-COVID-19 educational environments. This paper presents the voices of students studying or working in teacher education during the instantaneous move to emergency remote teaching and learning during the pandemic. In particular, the aim of the paper is to explore teacher education students' experiences of remote teaching and learning. As an emerging field of study, the work intends to add value to experiences of the pandemic encountered worldwide. In this interpretative study, I adopt a qualitative approach, and draw on student interviews and narratives, conducted online because of social distancing rules. I also utilised participant observations of online classes. The theoretical lens is provided as a humanising pedagogy and resilience, as well as a literature review of emergency remote teaching.

Theoretical Lens

Humanising Pedagogy

The use of a humanising pedagogy in framing this study is justified given its purpose to develop students to own and become empowered through knowledge.

The pedagogy is interwoven with resilience in the sense that the Covid-19 pandemic has undeniably changed human lives worldwide, and students who demonstrate resilient behaviour appear to cope with sudden changes to pedagogy and pedagogical instruction (Hodges et al, 2020). Society is wont to raise critical questions during times of crisis by asking how we ought to live (Le Grange, 2020), consequently times of crisis necessitate that we remain consistently responsive to our students. The possibility of disadvantaged students being further disadvantaged is plausible in shifts such as those to emergency remote teaching (ERT). This possibility raises the need to draw on theories such as humanisation and resilience. In this section I draw on theories of humanising pedagogy, and then introduce theories of resilience. I conclude the section by engaging with discussion on emergency remote teaching and learning.

“Humanization cannot be imposed on or imparted to the oppressed; but rather, it can only occur by engaging the oppressed in their liberation.” (Salazar, 2013, p. 126). For Freire (1970), Price & Osborne (2000) and Roberts (2000) a humanizing pedagogy may best be described as a process of ‘becoming’ for students, as well as teachers. Roberts (2000, p. 41) continues “One can never, on the Freirean view, become fully human—one can, at best, become *more* fully human” (my italics). Being more human presupposes the growth and evolution of relationships with others (Price and Osbourne, 2000, p. 29). Supplementary to a humanising pedagogy is respect for and use of reality, authenticity, history, and student perspectives as integral to educational practice, rather than viewing education in parochial and technical ways (Bartolomé, 1994). The pedagogy commensurates with teacher and student accomplishment and is intrinsic to student academic and social resilience. Freire's conceptualization of "humanisation," "pedagogy," and "humanising pedagogy" as a response to dehumanization in education is pertinent during the pandemic (Salazar, 2013). A humanising pedagogy promotes deferential, relationships of trust between teachers and students, as well as academic rigor where teachers and students share power (Bartolomé, 1996). Utilizing such pedagogies values students’ background knowledge, language, culture, and life experiences, that is their life worlds, which is significant in current times (Macedo & Bartolomé, 1999).

Freire explains that the humanising teacher practices mutual humanisation, where students and teachers preserve a dialogic relationship. This dialogic approach develops ‘critical consciousness’, described by Freire as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (pg. 17). Humanising teachers are transformative, reflective practitioners. Therefore Freire’s (1970) proposes revolutionary teachers (rather than reactionary teachers), to create enduring relationships with students from ‘subordinate’ cultural and linguistic groups. Revolutionary teachers who subscribe to a humanising pedagogy practice methods that are not manipulative, but rather expressions of consciousness (pg 51).

The crisis calls for more than just teaching students, we are obligated to pay attention to strengthening awareness of their circumstances and identities. Worldwide, weaknesses in higher education provision across the world have intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Vulnerable students and tertiary institutions have been disproportionately impacted by national lockdowns. Muyor-Rodríguez, Caravaca-Sánchez and Fernández-Prados (2021) attest to this in their quantitative work with college students in Europe.

While studies have been conducted on the psychological effects of the COVID-19 pandemic among college students as a vulnerable group, the authors expand the work by examining "the prevalence of, risk of, and protective factors associated with fear of COVID-19" (p.1). In South Africa, disadvantaged students did not want to return to their homes given that university accommodation and resources were considered superior (Peterson, 2021). Challenges posed by the pandemic were exacerbated in South Africa, which remains one of the world's most unequal societies and where inequities in higher education continue to be a major concern. Efforts to ameliorate the impact of national lockdowns on weaker universities have been slow, for example, national schemes to ensure that disadvantaged students could access laptops and data required for remote emergency teaching and learning was dogged by numerous delays (Peterson, 2021). For students to thrive in the adversities brought on by the lockdown, great resilience is required.

Resilience

When people are faced with extreme adversity, resilience comes into play. Resilience, for Ungar (2008; 2018), is the capacity for individuals (and groups) to make their way around and through the psycho-social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their wellbeing in culturally meaningful ways. Resilience may refer to children who, for example, have been born into disadvantage yet thrive. Resilience may also refer to one's competence under stressful circumstances, or to recovery from trauma (Ungar, 2008). The common element among these overlapping understandings is that resilience occurs in adversity, in the case of this study the pandemic could be regarded a significant adversity. Resilience then, "refers to patterns of positive adaptation in the context of significant risk or adversity" (Masten, Powell and Luthar, 2003, p.4). Ungar (2008) foregrounds privileging local knowledge and evaluating the influence of resilience. This means that we must "Intervene in ways that address the many different pathways through the … tensions that children and youth navigate" (Ungar, 2008, p. 234).

Theoretically too, Gunnestad's (2006) three-dimensional model of resilience proposes that student resilience may be considered as three viewpoints: existential, external and internal. The existential perspective involves (students') values, faith, and meanings. Second, the external level involves support received from family, friends and/ or teachers (that is, significant others); and third, internal support from one's own abilities and skills.

Humans are social beings and as such their belief systems, culture and worldviews prioritise their resilience. This may be country-specific. For instance, in his work, Gunnestad (2006) suggests Sudanese international students as resilient given their problem-solving training and ability. Adverse life conditions, hardship, pain, suffering, poverty, wars, and unemployment are said to provoke the development of coping mechanisms such as resilience in people. The pandemic certainly qualifies as a crisis condition.

Emergency Remote Teaching

Emergency remote teaching (ERT) measures are established in times of crisis, such as during the pandemic. There are vast differences between modules that are offered in response to crisis situations and those module experiences offered online. The latter teaching and learning online experiences referred to take months to plan, design and implement. Institutions in South Africa opted to close in March 2020, which continued into 2021. Staff and students have a range of capabilities to function online, and there are several challenges when confronted with the reality of teaching and learning in a fast-moving, little understood pandemic. Technological access was always a priority, and universities delivered tablets and laptops to students without access to maintain a smoother flow of teaching and learning. Data was also distributed to staff and students; however, most of the data was allocated to little used late-night hours. Universities began to conduct sessions on the praxis of online teaching and learning, and some staff and students every so often declared unease at their limited technological ability. Needlessly, technology support staff were inundated with requests for assistance.

Design solution models that have been developed and implemented include models of distance learning, distributed learning, blended learning, online learning, and mobile learning (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020). In their conceptualisation of the models, the authors propose a specific term for the type of instruction being delivered in these pressing circumstances: emergency remote teaching. Emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a temporary shift in teaching to a different mode of delivery during crisis circumstances (Hodges et al., 2020). ERT constitutes utilising fully remote teaching that would otherwise be delivered face-to-face. Usually this kind of teaching returns to its original format when the crisis regresses. The objective is not to reproduce a robust educational system, rather to provide temporary access to instruction that is quick to set up with what is available.

Methodology

In this study I frame the work in an interpretivist paradigm and utilise a qualitative case study. The aim is to examine the experiences of students at a university in Johannesburg during the Covid-19 lockdown. Case studies are rigorous, descriptive, and interpretive and focus on bounded instances (Yin, 1994; Knobel & Lankshear, 2007; Gillham, 2000) that draw on real-life circumstances and multiple data collection sources.

In this case study, random purposive sampling was used to gain appropriate insight into student experiences, that is, a sample from which the most could be learnt (Merriam, 2002). For this study, 20 undergraduate and 10 postgraduate students in the Faculty of Education at the university constituted the sample.

Data was collected through online interviews as well as observations of online classes I teach. Online interviews were utilised because of Covid-19 social distancing restrictions at the time. Interviewing is a valuable source to access the participants' views, that is to ascertain how participants feel and think. All interviews were voice recorded, and later transcribed. The second component in data collection was participant observations. These constitute watching people's actions, listening to their conversations, and asking them questions to clarify at times (Gillham, 2000, p. 45). I made copious notes after each class to reflect on what students said, and how they responded in class. In this study, I utilise Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework of thematic analysis. The goal of thematic analysis is to identify themes, or patterns in the data that are important. Good thematic analysis understands, interprets and makes sense of the data by providing methodical and efficient procedures to generate codes and themes from the data. Codes, which are the smallest unit of analysis, constitute a framework for themes, which are more substantial patterns of meaning.

For ethical reasons (including voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, confidentiality, potential for harm, and results communication), the anonymity of participants was maintained through the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research, as well as its procedures. I also acknowledge my positionality as the researcher in this process, as a lecturer of the modules observed. This means that I, like my students was also grappling with the shift to emergency remote teaching and learning. Thus, this research is an attempt to understand students' teaching and learning experiences during this period.

Findings

In discussing the findings of the study, I present extracts from some of the interviews with student participants. The participants are referred to as undergraduate students (UGS A-T) and postgraduate students (PGS A-J).

Student Voices: A Screen is not Human

UGS A: This Covid is for real…I did not believe something like this could happen in my life. First, I thought it's like a holiday, then I saw how serious it is. We were not ready, the university was not ready. It's too weird like seeing people with masks everywhere. I don't mind my classes online…but a screen is not the same…a screen is not human. In class we can interact with human beings. I feel like I am not connected in class because the human (presence) is just not there.

But I am going to be a teacher, so somehow this helps me if I have to teach like this one day too. I am learning through the pandemic. It is an opportunity.

UGS B: I have family members who are ill. My uncle passed. Covid is a killer. How do we focus on studies and learning? Even our lecturers are not secure with Blackboard and uLink [the online learning platforms used at the university]. They post slides – this is not teaching. It is something but it is not teaching to read slides. They need to learn other ways of using the system, even if they are trying their best. Some lecturers are better than others.

UGS C: It's either connectivity or loadshedding. I have to find a place where I can connect. I cannot always connect at home. At home there is noise…children…they need to play too, or neighbours making noise. When it is time for class the little ones are playing or crying or making a noise, how can I ask a question or respond in class? It is embarrassing but I have nowhere else to go to study. It's hard to focus. Then there is loadshedding and we have no connection. How do we study? How do we attend class? Lecturers want to just teach anyway. Say one third of the class can attend? Is this a class? Mostly we just listen. If you live in a rural area it is worse. No connection, and you have to do work at home – farm work and so on.

UGS D: This year is a loss… how long will this last…the next few years? I have not seen my lecturers or the other students really. From March we went online…. this is not university life. There was little time to leave university…we just had to pack and leave. Some friends didn't take everything home, now their books and notes are still on campus. They cannot go back to fetch (them). How can they study? I fell some lecturers are making an effort. There are Whatsapp groups for our classes. I can see (name of lecturer withheld) is trying to help us communicate, we feel like she (the lecturer) is there for us, like we are in this thing together. For others it is different. It is as if we are still in class, it is only about doing the work, we do not even have a number to contact him, and emails are not answered. Sometimes we may need an extension on an assignment, but this is not allowed, it seems. WE have to try harder to make this work.

PGS A: This is different for postgrad students. I am doing my Masters. Part-time. I see my supervisor every month, or when I submit work and she corrects it. Then we meet and discuss the corrections, and so on. It's about the same when we meet online…but something changes too…I like to see a person as they explain in person. So, it is the same thing, but the situation is different. She seems more distant even though she tries. At least I save money on travelling to meetings.

PGS B: My Phd is important to me. I came from Cameroon, to study here. Then they said go home. I couldn't make it, I had to stay in South Africa. So I am here in my room, my family is at home far away. I can use the university resources to study but studying is not everything. I think about my family, are they OK, is their health fine, what if they get Covid?

These are concerns for adult students with families. It is psychological. Covid has made it much harder. I have made sacrifices to be here. My family has sacrificed. I will be strong to finish this degree because it will improve things for me back home.

PGS C: You know I used to work, my research in the library. I can't work where I stay… it is not a good area… noisy, and connectivity is not good. I have to think about how to access the library, how to write. I fear this will delay my studies. Will the university give us extra time? It's not only my studies that have slowed down, it's my career…my future. I will have to make this up somehow. I am also teaching…so I am going through the same thing when I teach online. I have the same problems with my learners…connectivity, no connectivity, everyone does not log on, they don't know how to use the system, their home situation is not ideal for study…to share laptops and so on. They take turns. Some do not attend. We are just giving homework and hope they do it.

Initial Feelings and Readiness

The initial pleasure that some students felt at not having to attend physical classes was short-lived and soon replaced by a sense of unease and discomfort at what the rest of the year held. Feelings of uncertainty were articulated at the possibility of not being able to continue their studies, and at the interruption of physical classes. None of the students had expected the situation to continue over two years, at the time of writing this paper. They felt forced into a situation they were not prepared for and were overwhelmed. These views were similar for undergraduate and international postgraduate students, although postgraduate students also expressed concern about their families living in other countries. For them the gravity of not completing their studies timeously was also worrying. Similar views were expressed by participants in Cicha's and colleagues (2021) study of Polish students.

Connectivity and other Challenges

Internet connectivity, together with frequent loadshedding was a primary common concern. Participants expressed challenges with ERT, and of not always being able to log on to classes. I noted in all the classes I observed, students who were constantly disconnected from the class and had to try to re-join which was frustrating and overwhelming to students. Erratic access was a matter of great concern. While acknowledging the data that the university provided them with, all were dissatisfied with the data they received, and at how late it was sent to them, "How can we only study at midnight with free data – our classes are not in the middle of the night" (UGS F). Those who lived in rural areas felt their circumstances were not fully considered. While on campus they had access to all facilities, this was not possible in rural areas where they lived. Here they also had to work to assist their families on farm plots, and do other chores, which hampered their study time.

Given the sudden move to ERT, some students had also left important books and notes at their residences on campus and could not return to collect them. Such was the uncertainty of the situation.

Postgraduate students felt a little more comfortable, as all had laptops, however, inconsistent connectivity remained an issue. International students were not able to return home and felt disenfranchised. Coursework was conducted remotely, as were supervision sessions. Many experienced similar issues to the undergraduate students. Being supervised online was not ideal. They felt they could make more substantial progress in face-to-face supervision sessions. Many postgraduate students were also teaching remotely (in the Faculty of Education, most PGS are teachers), and experienced similar challenges to the academic staff at the university. They also had family commitments, as parents. As PGS C said, “It’s not only my studies that have slowed down, it’s my career…my future. I will have to make this up somehow”.

Compromised Academic Performance

Some students spoke about lecturers who took time to check on them: they formed class Whatsapp groups, sent them messages, and responded to their queries timeously. This they appreciated “I can see she is trying to help us communicate, we feel like she (the lecturer) is there for us, like we are in this thing together” (UGS D). However, this was not always the case. Some found their lecturers aloof and uncompromising “It is as if we are still in class, it is only about doing the work, we do not even have a number to contact him, and emails are not answered. Sometimes we may need an extension on an assignment, but this is not allowed, it seems” (UGS D).

Some participants found time management difficult to balance. They found the lack of routine created by university timetables difficult. “When it is time for class the little ones are playing or crying or making a noise, how can I ask a question or respond in class. It is embarrassing but I have nowhere else to go to study” (UGS C). “My academic performance is dropping, I don’t understand everything in class – you cannot feel a screen, a screen is not human, so my marks drop because I cannot cope with the readings and assignments” (Student UGS F). As teacher education students, these students also had to do work integrated learning (WIL) at local schools. Under normal circumstances their lecturers would visit the schools to advise and assess them. During this time, they had to teach at local schools, however lecturers were not allowed to visit them because of Covid protocols. Instead, students had to record lessons for assessment. This, they felt compromised their performance. I observed twenty of these video-recorded lessons and noted the poor visual and audio quality of the recordings. About an overall decline in academic performance, Cicha and colleagues’ (2021, p. 15-19) study also confirmed a drop in academic performance for reasons such as the lack of a quiet place to study, lack of adequate access to course study material, lack of digital skills, and lack of adequate access to a good Internet connection.

Some students (such as UGS F) were dissatisfied with the quality of their lecturers' ability to teach remotely. While all students felt lecturers were initially trying their best, they were dissatisfied with the quality of some lecturers' materials as well as how they facilitated online classes over the course of time. They also felt that some lecturers seemed to lose interest and focus. They were disappointed at the minimal level of interaction and communication. Unlike Karalis and Raikou's (2020) study in Greece, where cooperation and participation improved online, this study appears to demonstrate that quality in fact declined, according to the views of students. Students felt when they asked questions, they did not always get responses, and were deterred by other students who did not participate in discussion at all. Some lecturers created breakaway groups to facilitate discussion, but even these they felt were a dismal failure because not all students participated in these sessions. These are signs of a new educational reality, for students and academics. Studies conducted early in the pandemic appear to have revealed more positive results (Karalis & Raikou, 2020). The authors found that at the beginning of remote classes, their participants were optimistic and enthusiastic, however these emotions soon declined.

Thus, Pokhrel and Chettri (2021) say that teachers are obliged to develop creative initiatives that assist to overcome the limitations of remote teaching. This does not always appear to be the case in my study, based on student views. Students found academics to be mostly lacking in initiative and skills to teach remotely.

Mental and Physical Health

For most students, mental health was a foremost concern. Like their lecturers, they felt anxious, lonely, isolated, and depressed. Some lived alone, and for others, their overcrowded homes were not conducive to study, however, they had nowhere else to go. They had to "fight for space" with family members to work. Others did not have time to move back to their homes when inter provincial travel was restricted in the country and had to remain in the rooms they rented during term time. These rooms were also not ideal and were often noisy and Internet access was not ideal. Often, they found themselves without money and had to resort to community feeding schemes or grocery donations. As a result, their physical health suffered as well, however, many said they could not afford to visit doctors, given that medical facilities were not open on campus. Many also recounted going hungry during this phase.

The pandemic was a time of confusion, anxiety, and apprehension for most undergraduate and postgraduate students in the study. Students said they were affected mentally and physically, and while they appeared to try to draw on coping mechanisms, often this was inconsistent. For all, the lack of human interface and interaction was disconcerting. The pandemic impacted greatly on their lives, and students did not believe they could recoup lost time.

Academics used various online platforms, as well as synchronous and asynchronous methods of teaching, and student responses to these methods varied.

Resilience

While participants appeared to navigate their way around a new system of teaching and learning, moments of resilience emerged. Faced with the adversities presented by the pandemic and remote teaching and learning, some saw this as an opportunity to learn. As a prospective teacher, UGS A felt "But I am going to be a teacher, so somehow this helps me if I have to teach like this one day too. I am learning through the pandemic. It is an opportunity". Postgraduate students, although concerned about the time to complete their studies, were firm in their belief of the sacrifices that were made by themselves and their families to study. Many were determined to utilise the pandemic as a time for their studies, despite the concerns around being far away from home. As PGS B said, "I will be strong to finish this degree because it will improve things for me back home".

Conclusion

Given the experiences of the group of students in this study, it is important that teaching is not just about dogged perseverance. Academics and students must be compliant with change. In the face of the changing nature of teaching and learning, it is the adaptable student who can persevere emotionally and physically. This highlights the need for resilience. Resilience involves a process of "(rebounding) from adversity strengthened and more resourceful" (Walsh, 2006, p.4). To demonstrates recovery in the wake of significant adversity. Resilience too, is essential in a humanising pedagogy. In embracing a humanising pedagogy, teachers recognise the social and political contexts of their own and their students' lives. This encompasses the influence of societal power, racial identities, and cultural values (Bartolomé, 1994; Freire, 1970; Salazar & Fránquiz, 2008). The researchers believe that marginalized students (due to race, economic class, culture) experience difference in how they learn. We need to listen to the voices of the classroom, which would benefit institutions. This would benefit the university with its contingency plans. Despite the challenges, Roy (2020) refers to the pandemic as a portal, which has allowed us opportunities to reinvent ourselves, as well as how we teach and learn. This observation is a worldwide phenomenon, and not unique to South Africa, and the lessons learnt are invaluable as we transition through and beyond the realities of emergence remote learning.

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ILLUSIONS OF MERITOCRACY IN THE UGANDAN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' FINANCING SCHEMES: REINFORCEMENT OF RESILIENCE FOR EQUITY

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Abstract

Formal education is key to socioeconomic transformation. Master's degrees are the minimum formal education credential high-skilled employers require worldwide. Nations and regions that want to engage effectively in global political and socioeconomic transformation support higher-level formal education as part of their sustainable development strategy. Higher education produces imaginative and critical thinkers who can solve citizens' problems. Higher education leads to better jobs, higher wages and a higher standard of living. In Africa, tertiary institutions and universities have considerably fewer students than primary schools. Sub-Saharan Africa's gross enrolment ratio is significantly below the world average. Uganda's Gross Enrolment Ratio is lower than the African average. Despite the increased demand for higher education in Uganda, meritocracy, equity, fairness and inclusion are skewed by location, gender, creed, political affiliation and socioeconomic level. In this paper, we use systematic literature review methodology to analyse the illusions of meritocracy in Ugandan higher education, and propose resilience reinforcement as a policy and practice buffer to improve poor socioeconomic strata access and success in higher education.

Keywords: Academic Resilience, Meritocracy, Higher Education Access, Equity, Inclusion.

Introduction

The Ugandan government has embraced higher education (HE) as a key pillar of socioeconomic development. The government has implemented a variety of funding alternatives and policies to facilitate access to HE for Ugandans. HE in Uganda is funded by the government, parents and donors/humanitarian organisations. This article examines questions around meritocracy in government student funding processes. While the government has created pro-education policies to facilitate citizens' access to HE, individuals have also played a significant role in facilitating their own, their children's, and their relatives' access to HE. This push for access to and acquisition of advanced knowledge and skills through HE has led to a growth in the Ugandan HE market. Government finance methods for accessing and advancing through HE are based on individual merit and are complemented by affirmative action measures. The market dynamics, however, come into play because the current infrastructure of both public and private HE institutions do not match the market expansion.

Hyuha (2017) notes that the demand for university education surpasses other levels due to universities' and the labour market's preference for degree holders over certificate and diploma holders. Similarly, science-based courses are in more demand than those in other fields. This is due to the fact that students who study science and technology-related degrees are more likely to be employed sooner and have greater career opportunities than those who study other fields (Hyuha, 2017). Therefore, it is not uncommon for individuals or groups to devise ways of outsmarting others in their pursuit of admission to and advancement withinHEIs. Several strategies have been noted to violate the government's intended merit-based criteria. This article examines the inherent impediments to meritocracy in accessing HE posed by government funding systems. We contend that meritocracy, equity, fairness and inclusion in HE access, completion and achievement in Uganda are grossly disproportionate by area, gender, religion, political affiliation and socioeconomic class. The article is divided into the following sections: introduction, methodology, funding patterns in HE, policy and practice initiatives to foster inclusiveness, problem statement, challenges to meritocracy, the call for resilience building, conclusion and recommendations.

The Research Problem and Question

The number of students who are qualified to enter universities based on their A-level education and other types of mature age entry is far greater than what the government of Uganda can support for HE. Thus, competition for merit-based government sponsorship or assistance at all levels grows intense and tends to favour elite socioeconomic classes over meritocracy. There are four primary legal measures throughwhich the Ugandan government can assist students in gaining entrance to and advancing in HE. Among these are the national merit system, district quota system, the diploma entry system and the student loan programme. All these programmes receive an excessive number of applicants, prompting some candidates to employ unconventional techniques that tend to overshadow the principles of meritocracy.

Private sponsorship is the final option for students to enrol and proceed through HE. However, whereas public universities rely heavily on government subventions that are even less than what they require to operate their programmes, students who pay fees both at private and public universities pay less than the unit expenses for their respective programmes. Attempts to make tuition fees proportionate to unit costs limit the availability of many qualified students to HE due to their inability to pay. This is partially because of the low per capita income of most Ugandan citizens. This indicates the pressure placed on government financing choices by the large number of Ugandan students seeking admission to HE. We note that access to HE for the majority of Ugandans is entangled with academic merit, socioeconomic and political forces that tend to undermine meritocratic values within the current legislative framework.

Methodology

This study utilised systematic literature review based on the Ugandan HE financing policies on the national merit, district quota, diploma/mature age admittance and student loan schemes. These policies are situated within the complex corpus of literature on meritocracy, equity, fairness, inclusion and academic resilience. The literature has been examined from a realist perspective in an effort to comprehend why meritocracy principles succeed or fail in relation to the conflict theory of surplus societal resources (McNamee & Miller, 2009).

Trends of Higher Education (HE) Funding in Uganda

In Uganda, HE, commonly known as post-advanced level (A' level) education, began in 1922 with the founding of Makerere Technical Institute. This was a British protectorate government programme. Following the suggestion of the Earl de la Warr committee, Makerere became a university college in 1937. Students who would complete A' level were admitted to Makerere University and received post-A' level certificates (Magara, 2009). Makerere then began awarding degrees of the University of London as a constituent college in 1949, eventually becoming a constituent college of the University of East Africa in 1963, and finally an independent University in 1970 through the passing of the MakerereUniversity Act of 1970. At each of these stages, the government was the primary or sole financier of HE. Makerere was the only university in Uganda until 1988, when the government, through an act of parliament, founded the Islamic University in Uganda (IUIU) in association with the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). IUIU subsequently became the first private institution in Uganda (Magara, 2009).

Ugandan government then established the Education Policy Review Commission in 1987, chaired by Professor George William SentezaKajubi. The report of the commision published in 1989 led to the establsihement of the government white paper on education in 1992. The white paper became the government's education policy, which guided all reforms and initiatives in the education sector.

The government continued its oversight of higher education (HE), establishing and executing policies through the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), particularly through the department of HE. The liberalisation policy was one of the major reforms that had a considerable impact on Uganda's HE industry. In the 1980s and 1990s, the liberalisation strategy was part of the World Bank's structural adjustment plans. In a number of developing nations, the structural adjustment policies, which were deemed the greatest strategy for attaining economic growth through savings, efficiency and effective use of resources, had detrimental consequences on social services such as education systems (UNESCO, 2010). According to Nantege (2007), the liberalisation approach resulted in a systematic diminution of the state's role in providing HE as a social service to its citizens.

This allowed market access principles to influence and permeate HE. When Higher Education was liberalised, numerous private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) arose. Even state universities began to offer privatised programmes. In 2018, Uganda had nine public universities, nine private chartered universities and one private university established by a parliamentary act, and a number of private institutions at various stages of growth and development (NCHE, 2019).

Policy and Practice Strategies to Inculcate Inclusion in Ugandan Higher Education

The Ugandan government, like all democratic governments, has created measures for equal access to HE. The policies are aimed at facilitating the practice of meritocracy that are complemented by affirmative action policies. The rationale of these policies is to foster meritocracy, equity, fairness, inclusiveness and good governance. It is the responsibility of the Ugandan government, through parliament, the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES) and the National Council for Higher Education (NCHE), to define policies governing the HE subsector.

The Equal Opportunity Act of 2010 reinforces Article 21 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda, which outlaws all forms of discrimination. The equal opportunity legislation mandates that all government policies have specific instruments to promote equity. The Universities and Other Tertiary Institutions Act of 2001 is another key sector-specific policy governing Uganda's HE landscape. Owing to these legal provisions, the Ugandan government has developed accords for merit-based access to HE for students.

These include the following:

Nationalmerit Scholarship

This refers to the direct sponsorship of 4,000 students whose academic performance at A' level are extraordinary. Sadly, the majority of these students had relatively easy access to HE, attended the "best" primary and secondary schools in the country, and could afford to pay their own tuition and academic demands inHE institutions.

The District Quota System

This scheme, which was introduced in 2005/2006, is intended to benefit the top students from each district, with the admissions boards of public universities reserving certain places for these students. The district quota scheme is part of Uganda's affirmative HE access programmes. Other positive initiatives include the gender in education sector policy that supports gender mainstreaming, affirmative action for persons with disabilities and for sportsmen and women who are enrolling inHEIs.

It is anticipated that all students will benefit from these legal provisions through a meritocratic procedure.

The Loan Scheme

The other option available to students who intend to enrol in HE is the student loan scheme. This scheme is similarly limited to Ugandan students enrolled in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) programmes at specified institutions of HE.

The Diploma and Mature Age Entry Schemes

This programme provides access to citizens who hold a diploma in a relevant profession, are already working, and seek to enrol in Bachelor's degree programmes in their field of practice. Typically, they are required to pass aptitude tests for selection into the desired programme.

Higher Education Access Certificate

The most recent rout to access HE is through higher education access certificate (HEAC) programme. This programme serves as a bridge between A' level and university entry in which the students pursue a one-year certificate that qualifies them for admission totheir desired degree or diploma programmes. HEAC started in 2019 under the sponsorship of Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE) Uganda chapter to support students who fail to access HE due to poor academic scores at A' level. Since then, HEAC has gained popularity, attracting private paying students. It is hoped that government at one point will start funding HEAC students.

Effectiveness of the Merit-Based Access and Inclusion Strategies

Unquestionably, the Ugandan government has implemented programmes to increase student access to higher education. National merit, the district quota system, the Diploma entry scheme, the loan scheme and other affirmative policies led to the increased access to HE among students (Bagonza et al., 2021). These financial aid policies are intended to benefit students depending on their abilities. However, a significant number of studies have questioned the ability of meritocracy to deliver merit in a social structure that is predominantly heterogeneous (McNamee & Miller, 2009). Kaahwa et al. (2019, p.125) observes that 'although district quota systems appear to have provided opportunity to students previously disadvantaged by the national merit admission system because of their socioeconomic and geographical backgrounds, the extent to which these opportunities are available is less than anticipated.' Many African institutions are regarded to be governed by politicians and wealthy individuals in a manner that violates meritocratic norms. D'orsi (2022) explains:

"The applicability of the principle of merit has historically been an argumentative topic and African politicians have traditionally tended to establish control over universities through their administration, usually through political appointments without due consideration for academic merit. Therefore, "yes men" and a culture of silence are maintained at African universities because of party loyalty rather than merit."

It is impossible to separate politics from the business of HEIs despite the fact that political goals are not always based on merit. Therefore, the question of who exactly oversees the execution of merit in the implementation of the various HE finance programmes remains unanswered. Since the Ugandan government has no specific agency devoted to the promotion of equity in HE during policy implementation (Darvas et al., 2017; Emong & Eron, 2016), it remains the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Sports, the National Council for Higher Education, individual HEIs, the legislature, the legal fraternity and possibly non-governmental organisations. This is where the meritocracy principles become muddled with human discretion.

Barriers to Meritocracy in Ugandan Higher Education

Meritocracy is an ideal phenomenon that confronts numerous obstacles. Unlike resilience, meritocracy can only support the exceptional few, leaving out the majority of students eligible for access to HE. Each financing option presents obstacles that obscure meritocratic practices. First impediment to meritocracy is the fact that all government financing models in Uganda are tied to STEM programmes. A funding policy that promotes only STEM programmes has been viewed as promoting inequality among students seeking admission to HE to study Arts and Humanities. The policies violate the meritocracy, equity and social inclusion principles. All funding policies disadvantage students of Arts and Humanities, as well as women, in terms of fair competition. Original research by Galukande et al. (2018) confirmed significant inequalities in HE training in Uganda by gender, regional representation and schools attended. Each of the four government funding initiatives seems to have its own impediment to meritocracy.

Mijs (2016) disaggregated the concept of meritocracy into three components, namely; career opportunities which are open to talents, education opportunities that match students' natural abilities and meritocratic achievements as a basis of social inequities and equities in society. This paper provides a spotlight on the meritocracy in HE access, specifically in the Ugandan context. Considering thatHEIs are incubators for career development and opportunities, this has ramifications for meritocracy. The central tenet of meritocracy is the allocation of reward/resources on the basis of a person's natural traits, which are reflected in their abilities and accomplishments. Therefore, meritocracy refers to a system in which an individual's success in life is primarily determined by his or her talent, skills and efforts. It is a system in which individuals are rewarded based on their meritorious efforts and labour.

While "merit" is a characteristic of individuals, "meritocracy" is a characteristic of societies as a whole, according to McNamee and Miller (2009, p.2). In a meritocratic society, individuals are expected to advance in life and receive rewards commensurate with their efforts and skills.

Many academics have questioned the extent to which meritocracy can be implemented in normal societies, given the existence of socioeconomic status tiers. Angran (2018; p. 5) argues that “the promised fairness of meritocracy does not exist in school systems because emissaries of elite classes can intervene in schooling and maintain greater capability to align with school reward systems and mobilise a variety of resources to transmit advantages to their children.” School success through meritocracy is not only questioned in the Ugandan education system. Alozie (2021; p.3) explains the meritocracy conundrum in Sub-Saharan Africa, arguing that ‘anti-meritocracy forces are contending powerfully and chipping away at the very foundations of meritocracy.’ In Europe, Daniel Briggs reported that ‘despite European initiatives and "commitments" to eliminate inequality in education and improve social inclusion, millions of young Europeans continue to find it difficult to access education channels at different levels.’ Similarly, "The Unfulfilled Promise of Meritocracy" was described in the American context by Mijs (2016). All of these assertions appear to portray meritocracy as a myth in a similar manner (McNamee & Miller, 2009).

A critical examination of societies reveals that meritocracy advocates are optimists. They believe that socially disadvantaged student groups can benefit proportionately from government equity programmes designed to provide merit-based opportunities to talented and diligent students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Alozie, 2021; Angran, 2018; Nshemereirwe, 2016). In contrast, based on social science research, Angran (2018) discovered that individual ability partially reflects non-merit-based factors. This is due to the fact that social environments, families, schools and peers primarily influence the availability of socio-economic and cultural capital which supports merit. In addition, Lucas (2001), as cited by Angran (2018, p. 6), observed that advantaged groups in societies have the ability to reproduce their wealth by "obtaining quantitatively comparable but qualitatively superior higher educations". This suggests that disadvantaged groups may have to rely on their positive instincts in order to disrupt social structures.

Studies on the inequity of opportunities in a meritocracy in education have revealed glaring flaws and uncovered non-meritocratic elements in the practice of meritocracy in education (Mijs, 2016; p.7). Mijs described it as "unfulfilled meritocratic promise". Evidently, meritocratic principles view each student as significant and equal, and as such, they deserve equal opportunities and recognition for their natural abilities. On the contrary, how meritocracy systems recognise students differs from how they treat them in practice. It should be noted that meritocracy in educational policy prioritises “need and equality” over “equality of opportunity” as principles of justice (Mijs, 2016; Lamont et al., 2014).

Since time immemorial, societies have a tendency to overestimate the effects of merit while underestimating the effects of non-merit factors on individuals, according to McNamee and Miller (2009).

The conflict theory can help us lower our meritocracy expectations. This theory contends that a person's life chances are largely determined by their position within the existing social structure. This theory strongly corroborates the functional theory, which posits that we are all members of social orders that are not necessarily of our own making, but that we are nonetheless profoundly influenced by such social orders.

According to conflict theorists, inequality in societies is a result of competition over the surplus of societal resources. After everyone's basic needs have been met, the surplus is up for grabs, and there will be winners and losers. In his book, *The Tyranny of Merit*, Sandel (2020) argues that meritocracy not only legitimises inequality, but also polarises society into winners and losers. Winners will receive a larger share of the surplus resources because they are "the strongest, smartest, most cunning, most unscrupulous or most ruthless, or have used other available means" (McNamee & Miller, 2009; p. 11). This results in the formation of classes based on the amount of societal surplus resources acquired. The winners constitute the society's elite class. Once the winners have amassed wealth and established social classes, they use the acquired surplus to create, protect and acquire additional surplus resources. The elite social class develops a sense of ownership and tends to associate meritocracy with deservingness. Thus, meritocracy, a principle intended to reduce inequality, becomes a justification for inequality (Sandel, 2021).

According to the conflict theory, the social elite never promote meritocracy over the surplus in society. Thus, merit remains a fundamental principle of survival. It is therefore not surprising that in Ugandan national merit-based admission, some popular courses are available for a fee, but the same course is unavailable to the same candidate with the same points for national merit sponsorship. The national merit-based financing policies inform students that, based on their A' level scores, they must pay if they wish to enrol in a popular Programme A; otherwise, the government will pay for them to enrol in a less popular Programme B. Although it is assumed that admission is based on national merit, the process is competitive, based on restricted merit. In order to gain access to HE, students whose A-level scores fall below the merit-based cut-off points are required to pay a fee (Amutuhaire, 2022). Therefore, meritocracy may help students gain access to HE, but not essentially to the programmes they wish to pursue. This will have economic repercussions in the future. Students who wish to dismantle the social order should think beyond meritocracy because it's a matter of survival. Key barriers to the major higher education access schemes are examined in the sections below.

The National Merit Scholarship

Uganda's method for awarding national merit scholarships seems to exclude the most vulnerable children, (Namalefe, 2015). Meritocratic admissions practices corroborate achievement gaps between advantaged and underprivileged pupils. National merit-based HE admission may be lacking in multiple ways.

Standardised exams, like Uganda Advanced Certificate Examination (UACE), penalise studentsfrom low-income families. Despite the examinations being standardised and having fair selection standards, the education system and schools are not standardised. Low-income pupils attend less-equipped high schools, which affects their performance (Zwick &Himelfarb, 2011). Standardised tests may not accurately measure such students' talents. Selection into HE based on such assessments ceases to be meritocratic. Nshemereirwe (2016) found that admitting students based on A' level scores promoted socioeconomic inequality, as students from better elementary and secondary schools do well at A' level and join government institutions for better programmes.

Merit is an individual trait, while meritocracy is societal. Meritocracy and social structure are intertwined. Oketch (2016) said it's hard to differentiate intellectual elitism from socioeconomic class in elementary school. Merit-based university admissions meld meritocracy with social standing. Merit-based university funding is de facto reserved for elite parents whose children attend top primary and secondary institutions. A' level results aren't a good way to choose students for HE because they are not treated equitably while preparing for the exams. Uganda's secondary school system is rural-urban, regional and socioeconomically diverse. Batruch et al. (2019; p. 17) discuss the problem using assessment scores for university admissions:

“For merit to be accurately detected, everyone has to start with the same opportunities. Even if equality of opportunity is a necessary pre-requisite for a meritocracy to be functional, equality of initial resources is also necessary to fairly identify individual merit. As long as initial differences of resources between social groups remain influential on performance in the school system, schools must acknowledge that they possess limited means to accurately assess inherent merit.”

Similarly, McNamee and Miller (2009; p.118) explained that “meritocracy requires equality of educational opportunity, yet the schooling system provides the most privileged in society with greater opportunities to succeed and fewer chances to fail than it does for those from less privileged backgrounds.” If A' level scores are to be used as a measure of merit-based admission into HEIs, it requires that all students should have been given equal education opportunities throughout the primary and secondary schools. All candidates should have had their primary and secondary education in academically identical schools in terms of resources and staff facilitations.

However, since this is not the case in Uganda, it therefore means the observed national merit-based admission to HEIs based on A' level results remainsa subjective merit, that is, merit for some. Students who benefit from the partially measured merit are those who have the opportunities to study in elite schools in the country.

The other vice that mars meritocracy in the national merit-based admission policy is corruption tendencies exhibited during the admission process. Corruption is the global ghost that haunts, not only Ugandan systems, but other nations as well. Corruption during admission of students intoHEIs is one of the many forms of academic corruptions. Kasozi (2014) defines academic corruption as “all selfish acts that are contrary to the just and equitable delivery of higher education”. Kasozi attributes the rise in academic corruption to “increased demand for HE, the vital role of HE in accessing good jobs, unethical entrepreneurship and corruption as national social values”. ‘It is naïve for us to expect our universities to be clean when our society is perceived to be corrupt’ (Kasozi, 2014). It has been noted that the problem with “academic corruption”, is that it is both difficult to detect and prove.

Apart from corrupt tendencies and the inequality inherited from the secondary and primary schools, the funding policies so far do not support students hoping to study Arts and Humanities. In this case, there is no merit for such students. The national merit policy which is based on the philosophy of promoting STEM for national development, treats Ugandan Arts students the same way as non-Ugandans. It should further be noted that even within the designated STEM programmes, merit-based admission is reserved for a specific number of students beyond which students will be required to pay if the students must pursue those particular programmes. That is, a student can fail to qualify for a particular STEM programme on government national merit but can qualify for the same programme if he or she is able to pay. This scenario entrenches socioeconomic disparities in accessing HE.

In general, the national merit-based admission is highly limited. For example, only 4,000 students out of a possible 97,440 students (4.1%) who sat the 2020 A' level examinations were sponsored by government (UNEB, 2021). It is limited by programmes because only students seeking to do STEM-based programmes are considered. The other limitation is gender-based because it is known that in Uganda, STEM-based programmes are dominated by males. In addition, there is limitation caused by settlement because urban schools perform better than the rural schools. Lastly, there is limitation due to region, because it is known that majority students who perform well in Uganda go to schools mainly in the central and western part of the country. These limitations challenge the concept of merit in these national merit-based admission criteria.

The Diploma Entry Scheme and Mature Age Entries

The Diploma scheme allows diploma holders to enrol in Bachelor's degree programmes. Candidates must be at least 25 years and have a second class or credit diploma or the equivalent in their selected field. The candidate must also score 60% or above in an aptitude test (Olwoch, 2010). Although the system is open to Ugandans and non-Ugandans, only a few Ugandans can be funded to study in public colleges. Tusiime (2017) described diploma and advanced age admittance into university as restrictive and discriminatory. Diploma and older age entry candidates are the university's sole non-traditional applicants. The candidate must buy more application forms if they want to apply for more programmes. Direct admittance from A' level is different.

In 2014, the parliament of Uganda debated and recommended the review of the diploma and mature age schemes. It was noted that:

"Whereas in 1990 the Government of Uganda developed a deliberate policy which introduced a weighted points system awarding female students an additional 1.5 points thus enabling more female students to gain access to public universities, in the implementation of this policy, universities discriminate against the older females who attempt to join the university through mature entry scheme and the diploma holders' scheme as they do not benefit from this policy."

This scenario highlights not only the inequity in the 1.5 points of affirmative action but also the inconsistency in application of meritocracy principles to diploma and mature age entry schemes. It was then resolved that all female students joining university should benefit form the 1.5 affirmative action point irrespective of their age or programme of study.

The District Quota System

The purpose of the district quota system is to help students across Uganda's geographical and socioeconomic divides who fail to get admission into HEIs through national merit. The competition for national merit-based admission is normally stiff and gets more stiff every year because the number of scholarships is constant yet the secondary school enrolment keeps increasing annually.

In its current form, the district quota system is unfair to students who get better A' level grades yet come from districts where candidates normally pass highly. Students from Uganda's central and western districts perform better than those in East, North and West Nile in A' level examinations. The district quota system admits students from low-performing districts with lower grades. In this situation, the district quota system disadvantages high-achieving pupils from Uganda's central and western regions. Such a system prioritises representativeness over quality.

Opara (2017) notes that it sacrifices merit and competence to satisfy ethnic, religious, majority-minority, advantaged-disadvantaged colourations. The quota method approaches education democratically. The method compromises merit and quality by putting "square pegs in round holes and vice versa" (Opara, 2017).

According to Zivony (2019), academia isn't always a meritocracy. While the district quota and other affirmative initiatives have boosted access to HEIs, they can also lead to a deterioration in academic standards. Degrees, diplomas and certificates are devalued. Reduced academic credential worth has led to "credentials inflation" (McNamee & Miller, 2009, p. 125). In this case, graduates will be paid less for their work, and HE may fail to be the vehicle of socioeconomic development (Hyuha, 2017; Kasozi, 2014). Because non-meritocratic variables in cultures are sustained by socioeconomic position, credentials inflation signifies a stagnated socioeconomic standing. With credentials inflation, low-income people may not ascend social ladders through education.

Whereas Kaahwa et al. (2019) conclude that the district quota system has increased equity of opportunity to students previously disadvantaged by the merit-based system, the study also found significant unmeritocratic practices surrounding the quota system. The district quota system has not achieved its purpose to a desired extent. Kaahwaet al. (2019; p.125) reports that '…some students who are not the intended beneficiaries end up exploiting the loopholes in the scheme to benefit from it. This is seen from the fact that 9% of the beneficiaries of the quota system are students from middle income families…'Apparently, there are corruption tendencies and political interference with the implementation of the policy in such a way to defy merit. This is similar to what Ike et al. (2019) described as "political interference in the management of institutions that frustrates meritocracy and rewards political loyalty in leadership, thereby derailing the quest for excellence" in the management of the Quota system in Nigeria.

Like the diploma scheme, the Thursday, April 17,2014 sitting of parliament acknowledged some pitfalls surrounding the district quota system. The parliament noted that "though the district quota system was well intentioned, it has not been beneficial to rural students wishing to offer traditional science courses like human medicine, veterinary medicine, agriculture and engineering." The main challenge to the meritocracy in the district quota scheme and other forms of affirmative actions seem to arise from the urban–rural divide. This division is occasioned by the differences in the socioeconomic status of the citizens in the urban and rural communities. The resultant academic gap between rural and urban settings is so wide that even after considering the affirmative actions, the division is still visible. Parliament was informed that in 2013 selection, Kampala (urban) District got 22 students admitted on the district quota while Butambala (rural) District got only six. This raises the question of who actually benefits from the district quota scheme.

For the case of the 1.5 points addition to female students, the same sitting of parliament noted that 'even that additional 1.5 points addition to female students has been noted to benefit girls in urban schools.' Parliament was further informed that 'the schools in the rural areas get that 1.5 but because of their circumstances and conditions, they cannot access university education.' The district quota system therefore seems to present a more confusing state of merit in a meritocracy. At one point, it appears to be compromising quality in favour of a democratic access to HE, measuring merit from the rural end of societies. On the other hand, the existing evidence shows that majority of the beneficiaries are urban-based students whose parents' socioeconomic status gives them an added advantage over individual merit.

The Loan Scheme

When a student fails to be admitted into HEIs on national merit, the district quota and the diploma entry schemes, the government has provided a loan scheme to support students who are financially constrained. One good aspect of the loan scheme is that students have the opportunity to apply for the programmes of their choices within the STEM programmes. On the other hand, it has a number of limitations which challenge the meritocracy principles. The loan scheme caters for only students pursuing the STEM programmes. This means Arts and Humanities students will have to look elsewhere even when they have better grades.

The loan scheme is accused of "unfairness". It has been noted that the majority of the beneficiaries of the loan scheme scholarships are students from the "well-to-do schools". The well-to-do schools are well equipped with resources and staff. Parents in such schools pay a lot of money in school fees compared to less equipped free education schools. These are mostly students who went to good primary and secondary schools. Therefore, because their primary and secondary education was well facilitated by resources and teachers, such students score better grades inA' level examinations compared to their counterparts in rural schools (Kyaligonza, 2017).

It should also be noted that the loan scheme currently supports a limited number of students who wishto pursue HE. Mukhaye (2021) explains that 'whereas the number of students who apply for Bachelor's degree studies keeps increasing since 2014, the number of beneficiaries remain low. For instance, in 2020, more than 5,000 students applied for the loans but only 1,146 benefitted.' This is equivalent to 22.9% absorption rate. Given that the loan scheme is meant for students in STEM programmes, that leaves 77.08% unsuccessful applicantsin the STEM domain. In addition, there is another unknown number of students who would have applied but because they intend to study Arts and Humanities, they don't apply. Therefore, since the loan scheme seems to be the last option for financially disabled students, these statistics point to fact that majority of the students from the lower socioeconomic strata of Ugandan population are unable to join university education.

Using the statistics of 2020 Uganda National Examination Board (UNEB) A' level results, if the government sponsorship catered for the 4000 students and the students loans were awarded to another 1,146, that is a total of about 5,146 students who got supported to access HE out of the possible 97,440 students who sat for the 2020 A' level examinations. This is approximately 5.3%. Therefore, those relying on the meritocracy of government HE financing models should be aware that it caters for less than 10% of the total HE demand and estimate merit in the merit-based schemes.

Because of the stiff competition to access the loan scheme, some unscrupulous practices come into play. It is not known who perpetuates these practices, but at least cases of falsification of information by applicants have been confirmed. These are acts that defy the principles of meritocracy. In a press statement released by Higher Education Students Financing Board (HESFB) on 27th September 2021, it was explained as follows:

"Following the release of the 7th cohort of the students' loan beneficiaries in January 2021 for the year 2020/21, a verification exercise was conducted to ascertain the integrity of the information provided by the beneficiaries at the point of application, as established in Section 21 of the Higher Education Students Financing Act, 2014, and the exercise established that 47 student loan scheme beneficiaries, all in their first year of study at different higher education institutions, had falsified information regarding their background (orphanageand disability status) while others had doctored academic documents."

These revelations do not only show the tough task demanded of the HESFB staff to ensure the exercise of merit in the awarding of the loans, it also shows how desperate Ugandan loan applicants are willing to apply illegal strategies to access the loans. The ultimate motivation for students to falsify information about themselves is to beat the competition. It is increasingly difficult to exercise merit in the face of increased competition and struggle for limited loan scheme slots. Some of the observed ills surrounding the loan scheme currently were the worry of Kyaligonza (2017) who observes that 'without a good strategy, the student loan scheme may not help Uganda to implement a good policy in a society staggering under the heavy weight of corruption and incompetence, and sectarianism is a tall order.'

The loan scheme currently is applicable to Ugandan students who have got admissions into STEM programmes in accredited Ugandan universities. However, even within these programmes and universities, it has been noted that some universities will have more students compared to others; some programmes will have more males than female students and some programmes (courses) do get more loan students that others (Kyalingonza, 2017). These are all symptoms of inequities or the failure of meritocratic system.

The Call for Resilience Building

The American Psychologist, Edward Lee Thorndike, argued that if psychology had to be real, it had to do away with matters of the heart and mind and concentrate on observable human behaviour. A group of contemporary psychologists seems to be supporting this argument by suggesting that if a person has to realise their full potential, then they must put the positive aspect of their mental energy to observable positive experience (Wang et al., 2021). The rationale behind this argument is that the use of positive mental energy helps a person to go beyond life obstacles through problem solving. In education, this translates to a determination to access and progress in the academia. The one characteristic that describes this aspect of humans is individual resilience. Resilience can be conceptualised in many dimensions such as academic, emotional, behavioural and many more facets (Jowkar, 2013). This paper concerns itself with the academic resilience among students. Academic resilience is what Wang et al. (1994) described as the likelihood of success in the education system in spite of the environmental adversities associated with one's natural traits, and social and economic situations.

That is, students who are academically resilient are able to motivate themselves to work towards academic success in spite of the negative socioeconomic odds against them. This seems to suggest that self-motivation is the most important differentiating factor between resilience and meritocracy. Without much probing into the two concepts, it can be seen that that resilience is meritocracy plus one's self-drive, stamina, focus, self-motivation and a no-giving-up attitude. In other words, when meritocracy fails, resilient students are still able to achieve academic success.

The self-drive, stamina, focus, self-motivation and a positive attitude in resilient students are the factors that naturally take them past the pitfalls and gimmicks of meritocracy. These manifests themselves inform of positive adaptive behaviours which are strong enough to swing the odds of success in favour of resilient students. It could be viewed as the ability to overcome adversity (Windle et al., 2011). Such behaviours include maintaining positive relationships, having a good self-image and a positive attitude (Riope, 2019). Robbin et al. (2018) attributed these to four overlapping characteristics: levels of self-esteem, exposure to stressful events, attachment avoidance and anxiety in parental relationships. Unlike meritocracy, academic resilience cuts across race, ethnicity, socioeconomics, age, international borders and gender (Banatao, 2011; p.4).

We wish to distinguish three types of beliefs here. The belief in meritocracy, the belief in resilience; these two are different from the third belief which is the belief that success comes through favouritism, bribery, and fraud (Chapman, 2002). The latter belief is pure corruption which this paper recognises as one of the traitors of meritocracy but can be overcome through personal resilience.

From the social constructionist point of view, academic certificates certify knowledge, skills and competencies. Since these are awarded after assessments, it is viewed as evidence of individual merit. However, it should be noted that the opportunity to acquire or demonstrate such competences are socially constructed in line with the socioeconomic strata (McNamee & Miller, 2009). It takes resilience and individual planning to get to higher echelons of social structures where one has better opportunities to compete in merit-based systems.

The concepts of meritocracy and equity among students get enhanced when students have a resilient attitude. Studies have confirmed that resilient students have the ability to overcome stressful conditions related to their backgrounds and school-related conditions to maximise their performance and therefore the chances of success in a merit-based system (Martin & Marsh, 2006; Romano etal., 2021). It is possible to minimise the effect of students' backgrounds on their school outcomes by supporting them to adapt to a resilientmindset. It has been noted that 'students' potential to succeed in life is enhanced through fostering their academic resilience.' (Banatao, 2011; p. 6). This is the role of educators and policy makers (Novotný, 2011; Ye et al., 2021).

Students from poor socioeconomic backgrounds can be helped to be resilient through emotional support given by the teachers or any successful adult. We adopt the Cherian et al. (2021) model of academic resilience (see Figure1) to identify predictor factors of academic resilience.

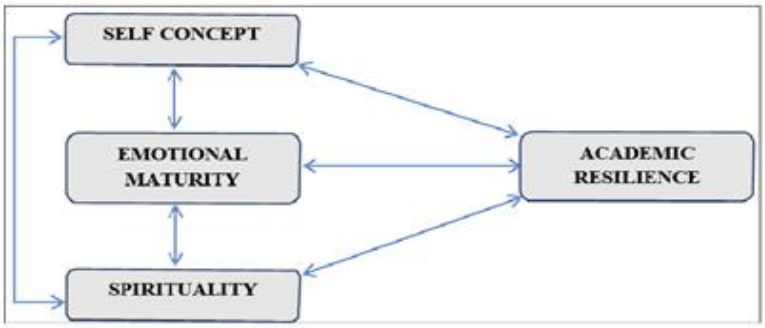


Figure 1: Academic resilience model (Cherian et al., 2021)

Different authors have interpreted self-concept differently, yet they all relate to personal identity. Self-concept is "how we perceive our behaviours, abilities and unique features", according to Cherry and Goldman (2022). Self-concept influences the way we think about the person we are, including our competence and self-worth, what we can do and what we can not do. Self-concept inspires people to create self-evaluations. Depending on the attitudes, people may be resilient or hesitant to face life adversities. Once a student develops a good self-concept, he/she can overcome life problems that would hinder academic advancement. Self-concept includes a person's individual and social identities, according to the social identity theory.

Recognising these two identities prepares students' emotions for winning or losing, boosting their resilience. Unpacking students' personal and social identities leads to a six-trait multidimensional theory of self-concept (Cherry & Goldman, 2022) as shown below.

i. *Academic: Success or failure in school*
ii. *Affection: Awareness of one's emotional status*
iii. *Competence: Ability to meet basic needs*
iv. *Family: How well you work in your family unit*
v. *Physical: How you feel about your looks, health, physical condition and overall appearance*
vi. *Social: Ability to interact with others*

It is undoubtedly clear that students' self-concept is a very significant contributor to their academic resilience. Preparing learners for academic success therefore involves helping them identify the positive facet of their self-concepts. Emotional maturity as a predictor of academic resilience has been defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) as "a high and appropriate level of emotional control and expression", as opposed to its counterpart, the emotional immaturity, which relates to "a tendency to express emotions without restraint or disproportionately to the situation" (APA, 2022). Draghici (2020) identifies major characteristics of emotional maturity to include an understanding that failed attempts are part of the lifelong journeys. Emotional maturity involves "learning how to navigate ones emotional spectrum taking responsibility for how aperson feel about self, others, and the world around". To emotionally mature persons, it's them who need to adapt to the environment but not vice versa. Unlike other human traits such as personality and temperament, emotional maturity can be develop as people grow. Therefore, schools can help students to develop their sense of emotional maturity through such practices as mentorship and coaching in order for high school learners to be academically resilient.

The scholars who have studied the concept of spirituality, though it does not have a universal definition, have at least development operational definitions in the context of their studies. These definitions, when thematically analysed, identify spirituality as a concept relating to a form of belief, a relationship and attitude. Abadi et al. (2013; p. 3441) defined spirituality as a "state of health that reflects feelings, behaviours and positive recognitions towards the relationship with oneself, others, nature and the superior creature.

This is consistent with (Fisher, 2002) who describe spiritual well-being as a person's life in relationship with one's self, society, environment and the supernatural being. Abadi et al.(2013; p. 3441) study of the relationship between spiritual well-being and academic achievement confirmed a "significant and positive relation between the spiritual meaning" with "hope for the future" and "purpose in life of students". Hope and purpose are part of the psychosomatic thrusts that push individual students to work hard, thus becoming academically resilient.

Other scholars who studied and found a close connection between spirituality and positive academic outcome of students include Atibuni (2022), Cherian et al. (2021), Cherry and Goldman (2022), Cooper et al. (2020), and Okunlola et al. (2021). All these studies showed that there is a strong positive relationship between spirituality and students' academic performance. This particularly comes through hope fora good positive image of the future through education. Positive spirituality strengthens students' mental health to withstand environmental adversaries, hence contributing to their academic resilience.

Looking at all the three predictors of academic resilience, we find that they all prepare the mind of the student to soar above environmental limitations. Self-concept, emotional maturity and individuals' spirituality are all aspects of human beings that can be developed. Through the development of these aspects, students can be inspired to overcome environmental adversaries irrespective of dysfunctional meritocracy. This is the essence of academic resilience. Garcı´a-Crespo et al. (2021; p.16) advised that we can increase academic resilience of our students by increasing student confidence, providing safe academic environment that boost a sense of human belonging, and pursuit for academic progress.

Unlike meritocracy which waits to reward students when they excel, resilience building attempts to prepare students to excel. The concept of resilience building is highly supported by the Achievement Goal Theory (Chazan et al., 2021). Students need to be mentored to adapt under challenging conditions. This includes preparing students' minds for the tight merit-based competitive meritocratic opportunities under meritocracy. However, when meritocracy fails, resilient students will maintain a positive focus towards academic success. In terms of school system and particularly access to HE, academic resilience is the promotion of thinking positively and legally outside the box of our social structures. Nobre et al. (2018; p. 38) affirmed that 'resilience thinking has been used as an organising principle by communities to challenge the status quo and to design and shape alternative futures.' Therefore, schools and their students need to promote resilient mindsets. Meritocracy and other forms of affirmatives action which are purely democratic in nature get enhanced when students seeking to befit from them are resilient.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The concept of meritocracy is an illusion to individual merit because it is so attached to social structure. It actually tends to follow the socioeconomic and political patterns of societies. Meritocracy is a system that promises you one thing but in reality treats you differently. The system puts every student in one box for selection; few get meritoriously selected while some get out of that box due to their individual academic resilience. Majority remain in their inherited social classes. Therefore, in terms of access and progression through HE, we do advocate for individual resilience building. Students who are resilient can as well prepare themselves for meritocratic opportunities but when that fails, they are able to adopt an individualised plan to pursue education.

The nature of the available schemes for financing HE in Uganda poses two fundamental questions. First, is national development purely or largely a function of STEM so that we can promote STEM and suppress Arts and Humanities? There is need to revisit all the funding options in view of the role of Art and Humanities in national income. Areas such leadership and management, values and human socialisation, and national philosophy of living, among others, may all need to be considered.

The second question is about the population of youth who seek HE access. A critical analysis of the exclusion criteria in all the merit-based funding policies show that a smaller percentage (less than 10%) of the students is supported. It should be noted that free secondary education has boosted the number of students who qualify to join HE. This is further boosted by the ever-growing Ugandan population. Putting all the formal government funding schemes together, we find that the proportion of Ugandan youth supported to access HE is small compared to those who seek to be supported. This may have a long-term effect on the economy. Government needs to review the proportion of the students it supports to join HE in all government financing schemes. That is national merit, District Quota system, Diploma entry scheme and the loan scheme. This is because the population has grown yet the proportion of students who can pay for HE privately in the growing population is very low. Basing on the Charian (2021) academic resilience model, secondary schools should not only emphasise the academic subject content but also focus on building the academic resilience of students. Academic resilience is a lifelong process that enhances students' gains in a meritocratic environment by helping them to overcome life adversaries.

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EXPLORING THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF STUDENT AFFAIRS PRACTITIONERS: TOWARDS PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE STUDENT AFFAIRS DOMAIN IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper focusses on the professional development needs of Student Affairs and Services practitioners in South African Higher Education Institutions. A survey (N=362) exploring the training and development needs of Student Affairs and Services staff across 26 public universities in South Africa was conducted and the results are described and clustered into five themes. The training needs focus on 1) leadership and management competencies, 2) communication, including digital, 3) acceleration of transformation, gender equality and social justice, 4) contextual and institutional understanding, and 5) theoretical frameworks and functional areas of Student Affairs and services. The sector's needs for development and training are discussed in reference to the internationally accepted competencies for this domain. This paper contributes towards the knowledge gap on the professional development and training needs of Student Affairs practitioners in South Africa and highlights the importance of the capacitation of this domain in relations to student and institutional success. The findings of this study assist the South African higher education sector to shape a staff training and professional development programme that capacitates this domain, so that it is emboldened to contribute to and shape contextual living and learning spaces that are conducive to student success. The paper concludes with recommendations to explore the kinds of competencies, attitudes and understandings that are required for the SAS domain to impact boldly on the complex and challenging context not only within institutions but beyond the higher education sector into which the students and staff are embedded.

Keywords: Student Affairs; Training Needs Analysis; Professional Development; Staff Development; Student Success; Institutional Success, Living and Learning Context, Staff Competencies.

Introduction

Student Affairs and Services (SAS) constitute a critical part of Higher Education in South African universities and they play a vital role in advancing student and institutional success (Herdlein et al., 2013; Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Mandew, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This paper explores the training needs of the Student Affairs and Services domain and explores the kind of competencies needed to embolden this domain in ways that improve its impact on student persistence, on institutional success and on the living and learning context into which students and institutions are embedded.

Firstly, the paper explores SAS competency frameworks from across the globe and seeks to highlight the competencies, skills and knowledges, which speak to enhancing this domain's impact on students' resilience and contextual factors that influence living and learning spaces.

Secondly, this paper reports on the outcomes of a national research project that explored the training and development needs of the SAS sector across 26 South African universities. The data (N=362) was collected during November 2021 using a self-report survey instrument. The respondents represent a broad spectrum of SAS professionals, administrative, leadership and management staff in universities who provide services and support to students with a view to enhance contextual and institutional factors that promote student persistence and student success.

The paper discusses the findings and recommendations are generated. This study contributes towards our knowledge and scholarship in the Global South on strengthening the impact of Student Affairs and Services by way of staff development and training that is specifically tailored for this domain. The focus is on the capacitation of professionals, management, staff and leadership in the SAS higher education sector so as to equip this domain to cogently contribute to and shape the context into which student and institutions are embedded and which promote student persistence and success.

Context

Notions of student success involve a holistic understanding of the student life cycle, from enrolment to graduation, including how one provides relevant support and services, shape the living and learning context, and how one engages students in the transformation of the tertiary experience (Griesel & Parker, 2009; Mandew, 2003; Schreiber et al., 2021; Scott, 2018). In addition, student success includes the promotion of graduate attributes to advance employability, preparation of students for the world of work and the promotion of an engaged and responsive citizenry for the advancement of South Africa (Green, 2021; Griesel & Parker, 2009; Scott, 2018; Tembe, 2021). This has necessitated a wider focus on student centred universities which includes a wide range of services, functions and processes that impact the living and learning context for students and factors that promote student success (Green, 2021; Speckman & Mandew, 2014; Tembe, 2021).

South African universities have a division that focusses on student services, support and development in a variety of forms, shapes, and sizes, underpinned by a range of theories and practices (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Mandew, 2003; Speckman & Mandew, 2014; Torres, et al., 2019). This division is usually referred to as Student Affairs and Services, but also Student Development and Support, Student Life and variations of these and related terms.

These divisions focus on advancing factors that promote student persistence, resilience, and student success. Some events-based and conference style professional development takes place; however, little structured or systematic professional staff development takes place in South Africa that would shape and impact the performance, theory or practice of this domain (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013).

At least two questions emerge, around which this research is structured. First, what kind of competencies and capabilities are essential to support the staff and professional development in this domain; and second, what are the training and development needs of the staff and professionals working in this domain. Underpinning these questions is the assertion that students and institutions benefit from intentional and capacitated SAS to promote persistence, improve contextual factors and advance success (Aiken-Wisniewski, 2021; Copper, 2016; Herdlein et al., 2013; Mandew, 2003; Speckman & Mandew, 2014).

Student Affairs and Services

The shape, size, structure, praxis and underpinning theories of Student Affairs and Services (SAS) in higher education have developed in a variety of ways across institutions, countries, and the globe (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Schreiber, 2014b; Mandew, 2003; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). This is as a result of historical, political, social, and other factors, including different levels of university development, dissimilarities in the historical trajectories and traditions of institutions, and differences in the purpose of universities, in student profile and degree and faculty offering (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Schreiber, 2014b; Mandew, 2003). The theory and practice in the Student Affairs domains (SAS) have developed unevenly across institutions and the globe because of a myriad of reasons (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Torres et al., 2019). Not only are the Student Affairs and Services (SAS) models and practices highly diverse across institutions, but also the discourse, scholarship, and the underpinning assumptions, reflecting a wide range of praxis and theory, with a degree of lack of consensus, not only in South Africa, but also across the globe (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Torres et al., 2019).

Student Affairs and Services (SAS) usually include a wide range of services, support departments, offices, programmes, and units that are positioned on a continuum from in-curricular, to co-curricular or non-academic in nature (Broido & Schreiber, 2016; Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Lumadi & Mampuru, 2010; Morrison, Brand & Cilliers, 2006; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). These student services and student development opportunities and student support functions, collectively called Student Affairs and Services (SAS) typically comprise academic development and support; career advancement and counselling services; psychological and personal counselling; community, residential and catering services; health and wellness services; student governance and leadership and student societies; sport; orientation and First Year Experience programmes; services for students with disabilities;

and many more that focus on the living and learning spaces for students, shaping a context that is conducive to success, from entry to exit (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020).

According to Mandew (2003) the "nomenclature, definition, scope, configuration and modus operandi of these services and functions differ from institution to institution depending on a variety of factors, not least the availability of resources (human and financial), facilities and infrastructure" (p. 90). Usually, SAS divisions and departments are managed by an executive director, director, or dean of students, who reports to the vice rector or deputy vice chancellor. Staffing levels range from entry, middle, senior and executive, and appointments are administrative, academic or professionals. The divisions or departments are guided by a range of principles, professional guidelines, and theories, which inform practice. Divisions and departments are centrally managed or de-centralised into faculties (Botha et al., 2005; Morrison, Brand & Cilliers, 2006; Schreiber & Lewis, 2016; Schreiber, 2012).

According to Carpenter and Stimpson (2007) this variety of disciplines, conceptual underpinnings and praxis complicates the development and capacitation of the domain. In addition, given the hegemony and import of professional development models from the Global North, it appears that little research has been conducted on the training and development needs of SAS staff in the Global South. Despite the variety of models of SAS in the universities, professional development can enhance competencies of this domain and thus contribute towards student and institutional success (Burgoyne et al., 2009; Seale & Cross, 2015; Seale et al., 2020).

Competencies for SAS

Student success is at the centre of higher education and SAS in all regions of the world and to impact meaningfully, SAS requires competency frameworks that spell out the kinds of skills, competencies, attitudes knowledges that are required to deliver the best kind of SAS, aligned to theory and to best praxis (Aiken-Wisniewski, 2021; Copper, 2016; Herdlein et al., 2013). Explicit SAS competencies, skills and knowledges inform professional development programmes in the Global North, particularly the USA and Canada (Aiken-Wisniewski, 2021; Copper, 2016; Herdlein et al., 2013). In the Global South, well defined Norms and Standards as described in, for instance, Botswana higher education (HRDC, 2017) and in the strategic objective of the South African Federation of Student Affairs Practitioners (SAFSAS, n.d.) inform best practices for SAS. The distinction of competencies and standards are discussed at length by the Council of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), where it is highlighted, that competencies describe a performance and attitude whereas standards are about the type and level of a functional area in Student Affairs.

To develop a professional development programme for South African SAS staff to enable their impactful support of students' persistence and resilience, it is useful to map the professional competencies that do exist across the globe. The discussion that follows focusses on the existing competency frameworks in the USA, Canada, Botswana and elsewhere. These offer one aspect upon which a South African professional development programme may want to be premised, however, require critical examination to explore how and which of these are relevant for the South African context (this is, however, not the focus of this paper).

Africa

South Africa: The South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP.com) states in its 2020-2024 Strategic Plan that its goal is "the professionalisation of the Student Affairs profession and practices so as to provide growth opportunities for the membership and to achieve unique competitive advantages for students" (p. 5). The Association contributes towards the development of SAS by offering conferences and staff development events. Competencies around which staff development and capacitation can be structured are not explicit.

Botswana: Botswana's Human Resource Development Council is the first in Africa to develop a comprehensive set of Norms and Standards for the functional domain of SAS (HRDC, 2017). The Botswana Norms and Standards for SAS is a "proactive and decisive step by the Botswana Government to ensure that there is a guiding framework for Tertiary Education Institutions regarding the provision of student services" (HRDC, 2017, p. 4). The overall aim is to "enhance student learning experiences" (HRDC, 2017, p. 5), and aims to support staff to support student persistence, resilience, and success. Success is "understood in terms of a wider conceptualisation and includes academic, personal and social success in terms of the attainment of academic outcomes and personal-social competencies by students" (HRDC, 2017, p. 5). The functional areas for which Norms and Standards are explicitly formulated include academic advising and support; personal counselling and support; health and wellness; residence life; sports and recreation; student leadership and governance; welcoming and orientation; career services; special needs services; HIV and Aids services. The Botswana Norms and Standards for these functional areas state that staff "must be supported, capacitated" and "development and professionalization opportunities must be supported and encouraged" (HRDC, 2017, p. 13).

North America

USA: The competencies listed in the USA for the domain of SAS are extracted from the Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education (NASPA, www.naspa.org), American College Personnel Association (ACPA, myacpa.org) and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS, cas.edu).

According to ACPA and NASPA ten competencies at foundational, intermediate and advance level are outlined and focus on personal and ethical foundations; values, philosophy, and history of SAS; assessment, evaluation, and research; law, policy, and governance; organizational and human resources; leadership; social justice and inclusion; student learning and development; technology; and advising and supporting (myacpa.org). The CAS standards are based on student learning and development outcomes and recommend that six broad categories are considered when developing staff in SAS. Staff support and development should enable staff to meaningfully and impactfully contribute towards students' knowledge acquisition, construction, integration, and application; cognitive complexity; intrapersonal development; interpersonal competence; humanitarianism and civic engagement; and practical competences (CAS, n.d.; Herdlein et al., 2013).

The USA has several competencies to support the services and provisions in specialised functional areas within SAS, for instance the competencies for university residences, community, and student housing. The American College and University Housing Association (ACUHO-I, acuho-i.org) is a professional association with a specific focus on university community and residences and defines its professional competencies for this specific domain within SAS. The competencies are clustered around direct service functions, management functions and strategy and policy function (http://www.acuho-i.org/resources/core-competencies).

Canada: The Canadian Association of College and University Student Services (CACUSS, cacuss.ca) has explicitly listed its competencies, described in three levels (core, intermediate and advanced) and includes a focus on communication; emotional and interpersonal intelligence; intercultural fluency; indigenous cultural awareness; equity, diversity, and inclusion; leadership, management; and administration; strategic planning, research, and assessment; student advising, support, and advocacy; student learning and development; and technology and digital engagement (www.cacuss.ca/Student_Affairs_and_Services_Competency_Model.html).
Like the USA, competencies are listed for specific functional areas within SAS.

Europe

United Kingdom: The Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education in the UK (AMOSSHE, amosshe.org.uk) states as its goals to promote the development and best practices related to the provision of student services and support in the UK higher education. As such, the UK does not have an explicit list of competencies associated with professional performance of SAS. Student Affairs Ireland (saireland.ie) focusses on professional development in the form of conference, scholarship and publications and held the recent International Association for Student Affairs and Services (IASAS.global) Global Summit.

One of their strategic goals is to develop a competency framework for SAS, but this is not yet explicitly formulated.

Germany and France: The German and French Student Services, Studentenwerke (studentenwerke.de) and Crous (crous.fr) have a well-defined set of competencies for the professions within and allied with SAS, such as competencies for student counsellors and psychologists, nurses, social workers, administration.

Oceania

The Asia Pacific Student Services Organization (APSSA) is an organization across the region for SAS professionals with a focus on professional development and networking (apssa.info). It promotes professional development via conferences and events but has no specific set of competencies for the SAS profession.

China

A document entitled “Regulations on the Construction of Counsellor Teams in Ordinary Colleges and Universities” was adopted by the Higher Education Ministerial Office in 2017 and spells out how to establish a SAS division (Li & Fang, 2017). In China, due to the recent focus on student persistence, resilience and success, SAS administration in Chinese universities have been established and are supported in a variety of ways, but not along explicit competencies frameworks (Li & Fang, 2017).

India

India, with over 900 higher education institutions, has started the formulation of a competency framework and recently published a discussion on the necessary competencies to provide an impactful orientation programme for Indian higher education. The “Guide to Student Induction Programme” (2019) spells out practices for SAS in higher education, competencies for SAS staff are implied but not explicit.

In reviewing the explicit competency frameworks for SAS from across the world (Botswana, USA, Canada) and the implicit competencies from China and India, it emerges that there is considerable similarities of essential competencies for SAS staff to support students’ persistence, resilience, and success (Aiken-Wisniewski, et al., 2021; Herdlein et al., 2013). The competency frameworks mentioned above would need to be critically examined to explore their relevance for the South African context.

To explore the nature and relevance of competencies for South African SAS, the development and training needs of South African SAS across the 26 higher education institutions were explored and results are reported in the next section.

Professional Development of SAS

Student success, at the centre of higher education, is the key focus for SAS in South African higher education. Many factors, such as access and massification, changes to online and the impact of the 4th Industrial Revolution, urgency around social justice, gender and equity, increasing contextual complexity and importance of UN's Sustainable Development Goals, and various other influences impact on SAS in Higher Education, not only in South Africa but across the world (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020).

To respond more meaningfully and impactfully to the challenges around student success one approach has been to professionalise SAS and advance capacity, competencies, skills, knowledge, scholarship and developing relevant theories and coherent practices that advance student-centred higher education spaces (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Schreiber, 2014; UNESCO, 2004).

Current conceptions of capacitation and professional development are associated with the postmodern era and are premised on complementarity of relevant and appropriate knowledge and skills, knowledge and understandings, applied in specific organisational contexts (Johnson 2002; Seale, 2021). As such, the interplay between individual and organisational components is fundamental in building an understanding of professional development. Underpinning this conception of capacitation and professional development is the interdependence between appropriate competencies, contextual relevance, and individual and organisation alignment, in respect of achievement of performance goals.

In response to the current complex global and national contexts into which universities are embedded, authors advocate for capacitation and professional development as a means to improved individual and ultimately institutional performance (Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013; Seale, 2021). It is well documented that capacitation and competency development in this domain enhances this domain's impact on student success (Aiken-Wisniewski, et al., 2021; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013; Herdlein et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

But cautions Myatt (2012), simply training staff is not the answer, a more structured staff development is required. Capacity development is the process by which individuals, groups, organisations, and institutions strengthen their ability to carry out their functions and achieve the desired results over time (Morgan, 1997; Myatt, 2012). Such capacity development involves strengthening the competencies of individuals. In the university, staff capacity development is a complex process that includes an understanding of what structures exist and function in the organisation and the wider context, the capacity to learn and change as leader and manager, and the ability to respond in particular situations (Seale, 2021).

Supporting and developing SAS to equip the domain to intentionally advance student persistence, resilience, and success, has taken on different trajectories in different regions across the globe. Europe, for instance, with Germany and France as strong social welfare states, provides a lot of the SAS services and functions as part of the welfare and caring state, and thus equip SAS, not internal to universities, with different professional and academic development opportunities, often linked to 'Bildungswissenschaften' and management disciplines (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020). A very different approach is followed in the USA, where the SAS space is professionalised and developed in MA and PhD programmes, via research and scholarship and professional associations (Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020).

The South African SAS domain is nationally organised into a number of associations, some with SAS overall focus and some with a focus on specific functional areas. These organisations offer a range of informal and quasi-formal initiatives and events that aim to provide opportunity to develop competencies, skills, and knowledge. Overall, the initiatives and programmes aim to advance disciplinary and scholarly knowledge, along with capacity building. In addition, some of the programmes to advance competencies related to SAS are located within academic disciplinary fields, offering MA and PhD in Higher Education Leadership, usually in education or management faculties.

Furthermore, specific functional area and thematic capacitation is offered by the Association of College and University Housing Officers (ACUHO) Student Housing Training Institute in South Africa, which offers an immersive 2-week long staff development programme. Professional Associations that regulate the professional service providers, like social workers, psychotherapists, doctors, and nurses, offer professional training for registered professionals via Continuous Professional Development as required by the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA).

However, in South Africa there is no informal, formal or un- or structured professional development programme that offers comprehensive, in-depth staff capacitation for the domain of SAS (Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013; Ludeman & Schreiber, 2020; Mandew, 2003). This might be related to the absence of a normative national framework that defines requirements, norms, and standards for SAS, or because, in essence, the legislative or regulatory framework is unclear on the scope and responsibility of SAS (Schreiber, 2012).

The next step for USAf HELM is to shape a relevant and meaningful response to the needs discussed in this paper and map the competencies associated with such a programme. Professional and staff development, in the context of this paper, are not defined as a static finite event, or as a training process leading to an accreditation with set norms and standards, or a process concluding with exclusionary criteria (Schreiber & Lewis, 2020).

Rather, a process is proposed of shaping staff development for the SAS domain in the form of a national capacitation programme which continuously re-imagines, re-constructs and re-examines itself to ensure relevance and impact in an evolving, pluralist and complex higher education context that promotes student success (Lumadi & Mampuru, 2010; Schreiber & Lewis, 2020).

Training Needs Analysis

Training Needs Analysis (TNA) are useful mechanisms to collect and understand data on training and development needs, how staff think about development needs and how this might improve performance, who would need training and development, and possible content of training and development interventions (Clark, 2003). TNAs can assist to explore not only specific development needs but offer ways to explore the domains' understanding of scope of agency and purpose of work (Zahid Iqbal & Khan, 2011).

Universities South Africa (USAf) Higher Education Leadership and Management (HELM) (a national umbrella body mandated to capacitate the sector) is ideally placed to research the national training needs of this domain. Hence, HELM undertook to develop a Training Needs Analysis and sought to illuminate the needs of this domain. The HELM's TNA explored training priorities, gaps, and needs, and enabled a view on the SAS staff's understanding of their scope and role, and on the internal and external contextual factors that SAS staff perceived as relevant to their work, their knowledge, and their competencies.

The TNA was developed focussing on 4 areas: 1) identify training and development needs and gaps; 2) derive information on the participants' understanding of their role and scope of their work, including their understanding of relevance of contextual factors internal and external to their work; 3) collect information on the priority of development needs; and 4) get information on demographics of participants to understand where and at which level of seniority the need is most pronounced.

Methodology

Research Setting

For the South African Higher Education sectoral development, USAf, HELM has adopted a three-pronged approach to capacitation and professional development of staff that includes formal/non-formal academic programmes, structured in-service activities, and personal development tailored to the needs and interests of the individual.

HELM, in collaboration with the South African Association of Senior Student Affairs Professionals (SAASSAP) developed a Training Needs Analysis (TNA) survey which aimed to explore the training needs and how best to support those who work directly and indirectly with student services, student support and development. These include staff who work in the following areas: Student Affairs, Student Support, Student Services, Transformation and Equity, Health and Wellness, Residences, Communications and Marketing, Bursary and Financial Aid (NSFAS), Finance, Student Leadership (SRCs), Human Resources and Staff Wellness, Faculty Administration, Library, Research Office, Postgraduate Office, Registrar, International Office, ICT, Infrastructure and Operations, Legal and Procurement, Sports, Community Engagement, Orientation.

Quantitative Approach

An online survey was used in the form of an online questionnaire, designed in SurveyMonkey, with closed response questions on Likert scales.

Sampling

Survey respondents for our research were sourced by virtual snowball sampling, also called referral sampling (Creswell, 2013), which is a nonprobability sampling technique where the request to take part in the survey is sent via social and online networks, peers, and colleagues, via associations, organisations and interest groups and acquaintance pathways. The sample is a non-random, non-representative but stratified convenience sample, and does not represent a statistically representative group. This kind of sampling enables hypothesis development rather than hypothesis testing. Given this was explorative research we did not perform statistical analysis on the data to verify existing theories but used the data from the results to explore the needs of respondents. This method facilitated rapid responses that reached a level deemed adequate for meaningful interpretation (Goodman, 2011; Salganik & Heckathorn, 2004).

The sample generated included staff from a range of departments, including Student Affairs, Student Support, Student Services, Transformation and Equity, Health and Wellness, Residences, Communications and Marketing, Registrars and Administration and many more (see table 1 below).

Sample

The achieved sample were 362 SAS staff and practitioners from South African universities who responded, either in full or in parts, to the online questionnaire, completed the consent form, and closed their responses, thus consenting and including themselves in the survey. The valid set of 362 responses included responses from 26 universities, all university types were represented (traditional [73,6%], comprehensive [15,3%], universities of technology [11,1%]).

Respondents were recruited at all levels of practice, with entry level practitioners making up 19,5% of the sample; those who identified themselves as occupying a mid-level role were 46.5% and senior management constituting 25.5%, and executives at 8,5% of our sample. The female-to-male ratio of the survey respondents was 68:29 (3% chose not to disclose). Of the participants, 33.33% were 40 years or younger, 27.31% were 41-50 years of age and 39.36% were 51 or older. Of the participants 35.85% described themselves as being in their current role 10 years or more, and 36.32% indicated that they occupy their position 3-10 years and 27,83% indicated they have been in their position less than 3 years.

Not only 'traditional' or 'typical' SAS staff responded to our survey but staff from a diverse and wide range of SAS domains, self-identifying as working in the domain of student development and support, see table 1.

Table 1: Respondents from a range of SAS domains

SDSS/SAS domain (self-identified)	% Of total sample	Number of persons who identified from this domain (33 respondents did not complete this item)
Student support	21,70%	46
Student Affairs	15,57%	33
Faculty administration	12,26%	26
Student services	11,32%	24
Library	10,38%	22
ICT	8,49%	18
Orientation	8,02%	17
Research office	7,55%	16
Postgraduate office	6,60%	14
Sports	6,60%	14
Health, wellness including counselling & HIV-Aids	6,13%	13
Residences	5,19%	11
Human resources and staff wellness	4,72%	10
Registrar	4,72%	10
Transformation and equity	4,25%	9
Communications and marketing	3,30%	7
International office	3,30%	7
Infrastructure and operations	3,30%	7
Community engagement	3,30%	7
Student leadership & SRC	2,83%	6
Student societies	2,83%	6
Legal and procurement	1,89%	4
Bursary, financial aid and NSFAS	0,94%	2

The data reveal that 33 persons did not complete this item, suggesting that they might work within a domain that is not listed here, and yet considered themselves as within the domain of student development and student support.

Survey Tool, Data Collection and Analysis

The TNA questions aimed to explore a wide spectrum of training and development needs and after discussion with researchers' colleagues and peers, the TNA contained 17 questions exploring demographics, generic leadership and management capacitation needs, content and thematically specific needs, higher education and institutional related skills, student lifecycle from entry to exit, and exploring needs around transformation, governance and regulated frameworks and digitalisation training needs. Not all questions needed answering and Likert scale questions, ranking, and graded questions were asked. The online survey was open in October and November 2021.

The data results were summarised and analysed using SurveyMonkey tools, which enabled frequency and percentage tables.

Limitations

Online surveys have certain limitations (Creswell, 2013). These kinds of surveys, obviously, only include those who have online access which may bias the sample. Although this method increases participation, bias might be towards participants who comfortably use online media, neglecting responses from subjects who are either not using online media readily or do not have access to online media as might be the case in some areas where internet access is fragile or only intermittently available.

Results of Training Needs Analysis

The results presented here emanate from the TNA survey done with SAS staff and professionals across the 26 public universities in South Africa. The data were summarised using percentages, rankings and Likert scale answers. The results are grouped into 5 themes that emerged from the data:

1. Leadership and management competencies
2. Communication with diverse others, IT and digital communication
3. Knowledge and skills of how to accelerate transformation and social justice
4. Contextual, institutional and organisations understanding
5. Knowledge of theoretical frameworks and functional areas of SAS

Table 2: How important do you believe are each of the following competencies, skills and knowledges in your current role, work and context?

Skill, competency, understanding and knowledge	% respondents who indicated high (4) or very high (5)
1. Having adequate administrative and resource management skills for my current position	89.42
2. Being able to use IT to communicate and perform work functions effectively	87.44
3. Being able to manage my work and life balance effectively	86.89
4. Being able to engage and communicate with diverse internal and external groups	85.50
5. Being able to manage my own leadership/professional development	85.02
6. Being able to manage my team's leadership/professional development	84.13
7. Understanding, applying and accelerating online engagement, support and advise	81.25
8. Understanding how universities plan strategically and operationally	80.58
9. Understanding, applying or accelerating diversity and equality	78.85
10. Understanding, applying or accelerating transformation notions, processes and imperatives	75.85
11. Understanding the higher education policy and regulatory environment	72.56
12. Understanding the performance management system and how to implement it	69.90
13. Understanding the regulatory and institutional requirements of academic planning for teaching and learning	66.50
14. Understanding how universities are funded and financed	64.25
15. Understanding the labour relations legislation and process	63.91
16. Understanding the role of risk management and business continuity in universities	63.60
17. Understanding the regulatory and institutional requirements for community engagement	60.39
18. Understanding the regulatory and institutional requirements for research development and management	60.20

Respondents were asked to indicate, how important they believe each of the competencies, skills and knowledges appear in their current role, work and context. Respondents could indicate 1-5 on a Likert scale, from low (1) somewhat (2), medium (3), high (4), and very high (5).

Table 2 indicates the results of the sum of score 4 and 5 on the Likert scale. The table is read as follows: for the first item, for instance: having adequate administrative and resource management skills was given score 4 or 5 by 89,42% of respondents. In other words, 89.42% of the respondents rated this competency as high or very high in their current role.

The following 5 themes are not mutually exclusive and represent a tentative grouping of competencies which appeared as important to the participants.

Leadership and Management Competencies

Needs around leadership and management competencies are reflected in item 1, 3, 5, 6,12, 14 and 15 in table 2 above. These reveal that generic leadership and management competencies are rated very highly by the participants.

Communication with Diverse Others, It and Digital Communication

As table 2 above shows, competencies around communication, using IT, being able to communicate with diverse internal and external groups, employing online engagement for support and advice were rated as high (4) or very high (5), see item 2, 4, and 7 in table 2 above.

Knowledge and Skills of How to Accelerate Transition and Social Justice

As table 2 above reveals, the competency around how to accelerate transformation, gender justice, equality and diversity were rated as highly important with item 9 and 10 speaking to these competencies.

Contextual, Institutional and Organisational Understanding

Understanding universities, the sector and context, and the overall regulatory frameworks, organisational processes, institutional planning and financial processes, and various other such issues in the context into which universities are embedded were also rated as important competencies. This is reflected in item 8, and 11 – 18 in table 2 above.

Knowledge Around Theoretical Frameworks and Functional Areas of SAS

Respondents were asked to rate their knowledge of theory and practice in SAS. They could rate on a 4-point Likert scale (1=not really, 2=low, 3=medium and high=4) knowledge of theory and practice of SAS. Almost a quarter (22.6%) indicated that they felt they are ‘not really’ familiar with theoretical and functional areas of SAS, and almost a quarter assessed themselves to have ‘low’ (25.42%) knowledge. A larger group (37.85%) indicated that they felt they have a medium level knowledge and 14.12% indicated a high level of knowledge of theoretical frameworks of SAS.

Table 3: Do you know theoretical framework and functional areas of SAS

Not really	Low	Medium	High
22.60%	25.42%	37.85%	14.12%

Respondents were asked to rate their experience with research and scholarship in SAS. They could rate themselves on a 3-point Likert scale (1=I'm fairly new, 2=I have working knowledge, 3=I'm experienced). A third (32.95) indicated that they feel they are fairly new to the area of SAS research and scholarship, half of the respondents (51.71%) said they have working knowledge and 15.34% felt they are experienced in this area.

Table 5: Rate your interest in research and scholarship in the area of SDSS/SAS

Fairly new	Working knowledge	Experienced
32.95%	51.71%	15.34%

Discussion

The staff and professional development of skills, competencies, attitudes and knowledges plays a significant role in making the Student Affairs and Services domain more impactful to support of student persistence and to support the context to enable an environment in which students can thrive (Aiken-Wisniewski, et al., 2021; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013; Herdlein et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Ciobanau (2013, p. 169) asserts about students that "supporting and enhancing the student experience (academic, social, welfare and support) from first contact through to becoming alumni is critical to success in higher education today for both the student and the institution".

Hence, to improve the South Africa SAS's performance requires the development and capacitation of the SAS domain within universities. For the capacitation of this domain, it is essential to understand the domain's needs for training and development (CAS, n.d.; Herdlein et al., 2013).

It emerges from the data that the sector's need for capacitation, development and training is wide spread, explicit and compelling. The training needs range from general leadership competencies and management capacitation to digital communication and online engagement, as well as training needs to accelerate the sector's goals of transformation, access, equity and diversity. Needs also include capacitation to understand and respond to higher education and university specific issues, such as financing and funding, risk management, research and knowledge management, and labour relations, while understanding the contextual factors that impact on higher education and into which the sector is embedded.

The training and development needs and priorities emerging from this survey correspond largely to Student Affairs and Services competencies discussed elsewhere across the globe. The similarities are specifically with the USA, where the competencies identified in this study are similar to the ten professional competency areas against which the Student Affairs and Services domain is measured in the USA (ACPA, CAS, NASPA) and in Canada where the competency model is slightly more focussed on personal leadership competencies (Cacuss, 2017; Carpenter & Stimpson, 2007; Carpenter & Haber-Curran, 2013; Herdlein et al., 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

The competencies that the South African SAS staff and professionals raised that are dissimilar or less pronounced in the international competency frameworks, focus on the need to understand and accelerate diversity, equality, gender issues and transformation. Over three quarter (78.85%) of respondents in our study indicated that competencies on and understanding of acceleration of diversity and equality ranked as high and very high. Competencies around transformation ranked equally high by three quarter of respondents (75.85%). The importance of supporting and accelerating transformation mirrors the overall sectorial strategy of seeking to promote social justice values. The competencies required to accelerate transformation of the context and sector are not discreet and performative, but include knowledge, understanding, stance and attitude towards the work with students and in the institutions. As one deepens the study of training needs of this sector it might emerge that social justice and Frazer's 'parity of participation' become critical themes. So, too, might it emerge that issues of de-coloniality of SAS theory and practice, student-centeredness and participatory governance might emerge. Further research would reveal such more nuanced needs, which are essential for professional development of this sector.

The other competency that stood out as contextually relevant and possibly uniquely South African focussed on community engagement, unlike any of the international competency frameworks discussed above. The need to understand the regulatory and institutional requirement for community engagement emerged as a significant need and relevant competence for almost two thirds (60.39%) of respondents (see item 17 in table 2 above). Community Engagement is one of the three core functions of universities in South Africa and the need to develop competencies to be more impactful in this domain emerged as significant.

According to Seale et al. (2021) the need to have leadership and management competencies is evident across the university sector in South Africa (Seale et al., 2021) and emerges here, too, clearly as a priority.

Overall, participants indicated that in their current work leadership and management skills and competencies take on a highly important role, including having adequate resource management skills (89.42%), being able to communicate effectively, either via IT (87.44%) or with diverse internal and external groups (85.50%). This is aligned to Herdlein et al.'s (2013) findings, who highlight the increased need for administrative and managerial competency needs of SAS staff. Leading self and others also emerged as an important aspect of the work of our participants (85.02% and 84.13%) and addressing work-life balance (86.89%) emerged as a very high priority, perhaps as a result of Covid-19 related changes to blurring work-life distinctions.

Competencies and skills that are related to the specific higher education and university context also emerged as uniquely important, as is echoed in a study done by Cooper et al., (2016). This includes understanding university strategic planning (80.85%), understanding the higher education regulatory environment (72.56%), having knowledge of university funding (64.25%) and understanding higher education aspects around research (60.20%). These aspects are related to the entire higher education sector.

In a study done on the impact of Covid-19 on the scope of Student Affairs and Services across the globe it emerged that SAS has widened its impact to also address issues in the wider, macro, context into which the students and institutions are embedded (Schreiber et al., 2021). The understanding of and impacting on the contextual factors, beyond university, including social, economic as well as discursive and conceptual may well emerge as an important competence for this sector.

This Training Needs Analysis of the South African Student Affairs and Services practitioners, leaders and managers reveal a wide spread need for a professional development programme that offers capacitation and competency building. This includes a programme that continuously and critically examines itself to evaluate relevance and consequence and to explore how such a capacity building programme can advance social justice and interrupt the reproduction of inequality so often found in the higher education space (Lumadi & Mampuru, 2010; Schreiber, 2012, 2014a).

Conclusion

The Student Affairs and Services domain in South Africa is a key contributor towards student persistence, student and institutional success. Staff who deliver in this space and towards these goals require support, development and training. This paper explored the needs of staff and professionals in this domain across the 26 public universities and mapped the need for competencies against the internationally listed competencies.

What emerged is that South African SAS staff have a compelling need and desire to develop and deepen relevant competencies and understandings.

While many of the named competencies for South African SAS staff are mirrored in the internationally listed competencies, two unique areas emerged as important additional competencies: diversity, equality, transformation and community engagement.

The needs intersect and include leadership and management competencies, understanding of sectoral context and institutional processes, competencies in communication particularly around digital engagement, and understanding of specific student support and development theories and practices. Overall, the need for development reflects this domain's desire to contribute effectively and boldly towards the development of a socially just and impactful South African higher education sector.

This paper highlights the sector wide need for a comprehensive, structured and in-depth approach to staff development and capacitation that foregrounds the specific needs identified by SAS staff. In addition, it is recommended that the SAS domain engages collectively and critically to shape a staff development agenda that not only advances the sector but also interrupts the processes that re-produce the inequalities that SAS seeks to challenge.

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STUDENTS AND TRANSITION FROM FACE-TO-FACE TO ONLINE LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: LESSONS FROM COVID-19

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Abstract

Many nations have been alerted to the need to improve their capacity to provide widespread online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. As a developing country, South Africa faced difficulties to resort in online education since most of its public higher education institutions have been for a long time conducted face to face lessons. During the hard lockdown which was experienced since March 2020, higher education institutions (HEIs) closed their campuses, ending decades of in-person instruction. To save the academic year, South African higher education institutions had to adopt the online learning system and digitally transform. Reputable universities such as the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the University of Cape Town (UCT) led this digital transformation as they were already accustomed to offering lessons online and strongly support distance learning. This paper applies a qualitative document analysis (QDA) whereby existing literature was used to collate existing data. The study finds that the transition from face-to-face learning to digital learning platforms brought some positive prospects in the world of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). However, there have been challenges associated with this transition which in most were faced by African students coming from economically challenged backgrounds. Problems such as acquiring laptops, data for connectivity, and siblings and parents disturbing the time for online learning at home. It is concluded that the move to a blended learning form is vital for the educational landscape in South Africa. This would ensure that the HEIs in the country move with the digital transformation and embraces the notion of artificial intelligence in the 4IR era.

Keywords: Academics; Adaptation; COVID-19, Digital; Face to face; Online; Resilience; Students; Transition, Transformation; Technologies

1.1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic's entrenchment in the daily lives of billions of people worldwide has significantly impacted how activities involving human-to-human interactions are carried out. Bryson and Andres (2020) stated that Activities that pre-COVID rarely required a second thought now require careful pre-planning before they can be carried out. The new way of social interaction has also impacted higher education institutions (HEIs). Traditional face-to-face (F2F) educational contexts provide them with substantially greater difficulties, thus they have had to quickly adapt to this new environment.

Blended learning's significance in South Africa and around the world was unexpectedly increased by the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown laws.

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, higher education institutions were working to increase access to possibilities for lifelong learning as a result of ongoing globalization, changing demographics, and the rapid speed of technological innovation.

According to Muftahu (2020), the change to online learning often produced uncertainties that appeared to have an impact on a variety of student populations. These uncertainties include having to leave the university and study in home environments that would likely differ greatly, with less wealthy students more likely to live in cramped housing conditions, possibly without adequate access to the technology needed to complete their work or trying to work while dealing with challenging financial circumstances at home (Sălceanu, 2020).

Online learning meant that students were to receive distance education that is all-encompassing but also that there has been an increasing reliance on technology as a means of communicating with and distributing specialized knowledge to students throughout time (Rodríguez & Pulido-Montes, 2022). During the COVID-19 period, South African higher education institutions had to undergo a significant transformation (Khoza & Mpungose, 2022) to keep up the pace of learning and the learning environment. The contact activities that were a part of the curriculum at the majority of South African universities have been eliminated due to the requirement for social distance. To ensure that education continues, online learning was introduced. It can be characterized as instruction given through a digital medium with the goal of promoting learning. The expansion of knowledge and the facilitation of access to high-quality higher education were predicted benefits of online teaching and learning platforms. But according to research by Mpungose (2020), very few students had access to the online learning environment. This made it more difficult for them to switch to remote learning from contact learning.

The pandemic has brought attention to South Africa's terrible digital literacy gap. In higher education, digital literacy is a crucial ability that students must demonstrate and use to consume digital content on a variety of digital devices (Mhlaba, 2020). Due to the significantly wide digital gap experienced within SA, Le Grange (2020) recommends that newer technologies that foster demonstrable growth and results inside online teaching and learning be utilized. Students' life were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways, including being forced to leave their campuses, facing financial difficulties, losing out on internship opportunities, and having to acquire new technologies in addition to the subject matter they were studying. It is such identified gaps that this study discussed students’ transition from face-to-face to online learning in South African higher education institutions during COVID-19 and the lessons that have been learned.

The are various scholars who have investigated this transition brought by Covid 19, its impact on higher education and students.

However, few of these scholars have researched how this all impacts on African students coming from economically challenged backgrounds within the HEIs of South Africa. According to Reddy et al., (2020), and Semenya (2022), there are no subjective personal teaching and learning experiences of students studying different courses under Covid19 lockdown or pandemic of which upcoming students can learn from and expand their knowledge. This thus brings about a gap in knowledge articulating how the transition affected students.

1.2 COVID-19 and higher education in South Africa

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant detrimental effect on higher education institutions since closing colleges and universities slows student instruction and causes numerous tests to be postponed.

Some universities are substituting online evaluation tools for traditional exams as a coping strategy (Mncube et al., 2021). All campuses were closed to both students and staff when the national lockdown went into effect in March 2020, and universities were only allowed to start reopening after the announcement of Alert Level 3 on June 2020, in a very controlled manner (Mafolo, 2020). Some universities decided to suspend all academic activities during the week of 16 March following the declaration of a national state of disaster, while others only did so later (Mafolo, 2020).

Higher education institutions used social distance as a pandemic precaution to reduce the type of community transmission that could quickly occur in dense social networks like the university campus. In an effort to lessen human contact, this was achieved (Weeden & Benjamin, 2020). Higher education institutions reportedly had trouble finishing the semester on time and holding exams, according to (Mncube et al., 2021). Similar to this, among the biggest worries caused by the COVID-19 pandemic were the planning for the upcoming academic session while dealing with financial constraints caused by reduced tuition fee payment, school safety, partially due to a potential drop in student enrolment and placements, and the abrupt shift to online pedagogy (Jafar et al., 2022).

Some universities, such as the University of South Africa (UNISA) and the University of Cape Town (UCT), among others, have had wildly offered successful online courses that were mostly unaffected by the shift during COVID-19. In contrast to others who were learning about these types of education for the first time, the online way of delivery was not new (Ntombela, 2022). The change happened quickly, leaving little time to carefully analyse how the new forms should be organized, with the understanding that the standard of teaching and learning in these new conditions requires due attention. Students from underdeveloped, rural, and isolated places, on the other hand, frequently experienced inadequate Internet connectivity or even a shortage of electricity, which was occasionally brought on by load shedding, a nationwide power outage crisis (Alex, 2022).

Sundani and Mangaka (2023) argued that data had to be made available to students and other learning devices as a result of the implementation of distance learning in universities. Universities that were unfamiliar with the concept initially found it challenging to completely implement online/distance learning and data delivery, but with time, things got easier. Reddy-Moonasamy and Naidoo (2022) added that DHET and the Department of Communication and Digital Technologies entered into cooperation agreements with mobile network providers to make zero-rated websites available to students in response to the cost of data acting as a barrier to online learning for some students. Students would be able to use the designated university websites, services, and online learning tools without paying any data expenses if this were the case (Landa et al., 2021).

The national department in charge of higher education in South Africa, according to van Schalkwyk (2021), allowed universities to pick their own strategies as long as they submitted COVID-19 strategic response plans to the department. This led to a variety of responses from the university system to the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities' responses have mostly been ones of business as usual, with the exception of needing to reevaluate how they teach students and, as is the case for most firms, adapting their management and administrative functions to operate on a work-from-home basis (Ramrathan, 2021).

According to the study, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the flaws in higher education institutions' current systems and the need for more teachers to receive digital technology training in order to keep up with the fast-evolving global education system. The usage of virtual education and eLearning may become a crucial component of the higher education system in the post-pandemic era (Rashid & Yadav, 2020; Paudel, 2021). At the same time, COVID-19 has shown that the university as a whole is able to react to outside demands. In accordance with Capano et al. (2020), COVID-19 offered a global case study demonstrating national-level variation in institutional responses based on various contextual conditions based on system-level variations as well as the fact that the pandemic spread at various rates around the world, leading to various policies being implemented.

1.3 Students and Resilience in higher education during COVID-19

Appolloni et al. (2021) argued that in order to meet the extraordinary challenge posed by the COVID-19 epidemic, higher education institutions and students have been compelled to swiftly transition from traditional face-to-face instruction to remote learning formats using virtual classrooms. Less care has been given to educating students, who also struggle to adjust to this abrupt change in the manner the curriculum is presented. The majority of campuses have trained teachers to ensure the quality and upkeep of the content through virtual classrooms. Based on Padmanabhanunni and Pretorius (2021), students are under pressure to be adaptable and flexible or risk failing the academic year.

Bozkurt and Sharma (2021) claimed that the COVID-19 pandemic caused a profound and widespread rupture in human history, inspiring scholars from a wide range of disciplines to analyse the crisis from their own points of view. Aristovnik et al.'s (2020) analysis of how the COVID-19 pandemic affects higher education institution students globally was one of the earliest studies on the impact of COVID-19 on higher education institutions. They claimed that the dramatic adjustments brought about by the measures put in place to solve COVID-19 had the greatest negative impact on the emotional health of students in higher education institutions and that this impact on their wellbeing had a detrimental effect on their academic performance.

Reyes et al. (2015), Howe et al. (2012), and Beltman et al. (2011) all underlined how important resilience is in helping students manage their well-being, overcome obstacles, and finish their studies. Universities have reacted to this rising resilience interest. In the health professional education literature, for instance, a recent assessment of the literature (Sanderson & Brewer, 2017) found a movement toward the proactive promotion of resilience interventions. However, this study also emphasized the lack of consensus regarding the conceptualization of resilience and the paucity of research on how to improve student resilience. Resilience was identified as an emerging area in the Beltman et al. (2011) evaluation of teacher education that lacked conceptual rigour and methodological rigour. Globally, COVID-19 has changed how people learn and teach in higher education. International tertiary students must learn to adjust to this paradigm shift in the way that education is delivered, which presents both opportunities and problems. It is yet unclear how students are adjusting to these changes in digital learning during and after COVID-19 in multinational contexts.

1.4 Understanding the Praxis of Online Learning in the Higher Education Landscape

The phrase "online learning" was originally used in 1995 when WebCT, the first Learning Management System (LMS), subsequently known as Blackboard, was created. Online learning in that setting consisted of using the LMS or uploading text and PDF files (Bates, 2014). Since then, there have been numerous separate and overlapping names associated with online learning, including e-learning, blended learning, online education, online courses, etc. Online learning, often known as web-based learning, is a subset of e-learning, as stated (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Its defining feature is the utilization of digital learning tools like computers and other gadgets. From this, it is clear that e-learning encompasses all educational activities that involve the use of electronic media.

Online learning cannot, however, be applied to all forms of e-learning. If you connect to the internet, you can learn online. Distance learning and online learning are closely related. However, direct communication between teachers and students is possible (Kang & Im, 2013). The shift from in-person instruction to online instruction creates new issues in the learning process. Furthermore, it was performed under pressure. In distant learning, gaining independence is crucial.

According to Barnard-Brak et al. (2010), students who have excellent learning independence also tend to have good learning outcomes.

Other authors (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005) emphasize not only the accessibility of online learning but also its connection, adaptability, and capacity to foster a variety of interactions. Hiltz & Turoff (2005) make a point of not only hinting at the similarities between online learning and traditional delivery methods and distance learning but also explicitly stating that online learning is a more advanced kind of distance learning. These authors, like many others, believe that online learning and distance learning are related, although they don't seem to be sure of it in their own descriptive accounts.

In the 21st century, technology is an essential part of both teaching and learning. The growing application of technology in education has transformed traditional teaching techniques into the most adaptable ones (Sun & Chen, 2016; Onyema & Deborah, 2019). Remote learning, virtual learning, distance learning, mobile learning, cooperative learning, and machine learning are all impacted by technology. Students and education stakeholders are challenged by the move to online learning as every area of education adopts digital technology. In order to address the need for distance learning, technologies are being applied in education to expand access to learning materials like online courses and many other programs (Onyema, 2019).

The use of these technologies in education has an impact on online learning and the accessibility of learning and teaching resources online. The internet has made teaching and learning possible, and many academics and educators are interested in online learning to increase the accessibility of learning resources and improve students' learning, particularly in higher education institutions (Dumford & Miller, 2018). Higher education institutions' decision to offer online teaching and learning is influenced by several key aspects. These include accommodating students' requests for flexible programs, the need for more students to enrol, and the teacher shortage (Sun & Chen, 2016).

In a different sense, war, economic hardship, and the spread of infectious illnesses can also be seen as major drivers of the growth of online learning in higher education institutions around the globe.

1.5 Praxis of Traditional Face-To-Face Method of Learning

In a face-to-face learning environment, a group of students receive in-person teaching on course material and other learning materials. Marchand and Gutierrez (2012) claimed that this enables real-time communication between a learner and a teacher. It is the oldest style of educational instruction. Additionally, learners gain from increased interactivity with other students. In face-to-face instruction, students are responsible for their development during the scheduled meeting time for the class (Díaz & Entonado, 2009). Face-to-face instruction ensures a better grasp and retention of lesson material and provides an opportunity for students to form relationships with one another. Paechter and Maier (2010) claimed that Face-to-face learning, which varies greatly between cultures, is primarily a teacher-centred approach to education.

Many contemporary educational systems have mostly moved away from conventional face-to-face educational instruction in favour of meeting the requirements of individual pupils.

Face-to-face instruction, according to Julien and Dookwah (2020) improves the teaching and learning process through interpersonal interaction. Students and teachers may develop a support system as a result of these encounters. In a familiar, traditional classroom context, students may feel more at ease and learn more quickly. Through these exchanges, they may also gain access to more information and improve their comprehension of the course topics. In a face-to-face learning setting, Daymont (2011) presented a similar viewpoint and asserted that it was quite possible to develop this sense of camaraderie between students and teachers.

This viewpoint was backed up by Bandara and Wijekularathna (2017) who added that interactions helped students not only evaluate their own learning but also foster a true feeling of community among themselves. Additionally, this community and brotherhood can occasionally boost students' intelligence, confidence, and ability to cope with the difficulties commonly connected with studying alone. Thus, face-to-face instruction gives students a wider range of learning opportunities. Face-to-face education is a more conventional method of learning, and it entails the professor imparting knowledge to the pupils (Bandara & Wijekularathna, 2017). It typically takes place in a physically contained classroom.

In face-to-face instruction, also referred to as traditional instruction, the teacher manages the learning environment and serves as the instructor. With this kind of training, students are seen as having “understanding gaps" that need to be filled. This argument suggests that in order for students to actively participate in face-to-face instruction, teachers must actively involve them in the teaching and learning process. This will allow students to independently develop their knowledge without the teacher's interference (Soffer & Nachmias, 2018).

1.6 Theoretical Framework Underpinning the Study

The theory underpinning this paper is the theory of change. The theory of change was developed by German and American social psychologist Kurt Lewin in 1947.

This theory is a practice or a principle for preparation, contribution, adaptable organization, and valuation that is utilized in firms, benevolence, worldwide study growth, research, and organizational district to endorse community choices. The theory of change describes the method of alteration by drawing informal links in an idea, for instance, its short period, in-between, lengthier period results. The recognized adjustment is represented as a “results path” displaying every result in rational correlation to the entirety of others, along with sequential movement and response. The linkages among results are described by “underlying principle” or assertions of why some result is imagined to be essential for another. Timothy (2020) points out that the theory of change is a concept of a change in procedure.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, there had to be drastic changes in the higher education landscape whereby the traditional methods of teaching and learning had to be abandoned, thus, migrating to an online method of teaching and learning. This sudden change was met with several challenges and some ranging from resistance by academics to embracing the new digital era. The theory of change thus influences this study to unearth in-depth data about the transition by HEIs and how this transition was received and implemented by universities in South Africa.

1.6 Methodology

This study investigates the lessons learned by higher education institutions when they were subjected to online learning and had to adapt to digital transformation which was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this objective, secondary data acquired from the literature review sourced from existing academic works were utilized. Multiple studies have investigated the shift from the traditional way of learning which is face-to-face to online learning (Turnbull et al., 2021; Kohnke & Moorhouse, 2020; Heng & Sol, 2021; Hosen, Uddin, Hossain, Islam & Ahmad, 2022), hence these studies will provide insightful information to assist achieve the objective of this paper.

A comprehensive literature search was conducted on multiple databases for relevant studies published from the year 2019 to 2023. The researchers also retrieved relevant studies from the list of references of the studies identified from the initial search. Moreover, the researchers also utilized published newsletters and government documents. The researchers employed the below search terms: online learning, academics; adaptation; COVID-19, digital; face to face; resilience; transition, transformation; technologies; online; students.

1.6.1 Digital Transformation in Higher Education Institutions

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in an unforeseen digital transformation in the higher education sector (Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). As a result, higher education institutions had to transition from face-to-face learning to online learning which was a new normal (Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). Verawardina and Jama (2018), posit that the application of online learning is evidence of the fourth industrial revolution which enables the implementation of distance or online learning where access to technology is not limited. According to Olawale and Mutongoza (2021), higher learning institutions were forced to make use of the fourth industrial revolution tools to ensure the smooth running of the teaching and learning process.

The findings from previous studies on COVID-19 in higher education institutions have revealed that, although online learning was considered as an option given that is an alternative to face-to-face learning due to COVID-19, it has since become a crucial element for maintaining the activities in higher education institutions (Coman, Tîru, MesesanSchmitz, Stanciu, & Bularca, 2020; Rospigliosi, 2020; Olawale and Mutongoza, 2021).

As a result, after the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of higher education institutions introduced blended learning, where some of the classes are face-to-face and some are taken online (Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic did not only accelerate the digital transformation in higher education institutions only, other aspects of life including socialization, banking and shopping were also affected (Rospigliosi, 2020). Although digital transformation was causing change in these various sectors, higher education institutions were encouraged to take advantage of new technologies in order to develop strategies and actions to embark on the digital transformation process (Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021).

1.6.2 Emergency Remote Online Teaching in Higher Education Institutions

The COVID-19 pandemic forced higher education institutions in South Africa to move from face-to-face learning to online learning, this has had a major impact on the interaction between both students and teachers (Coman et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in most higher education institutions being restricted to mainly interacting with students online (Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). The platforms that were employed by higher education institutions to ensure the smooth running of the online teaching and learning process were unified collaborations and communication platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Google Classrooms, and Blackboard; these platforms allowed educators to create educational courses, skills development programmes and training (Petrie, 2020; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). These identified platforms are inclusive of options of video meetings and file storage that ensure that the class is kept organized (Petrie, 2020; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). These platforms also support sharing of various content such as Conference Proceedings documents, Excel files, PDFs, videos, as well as audio files, and many more which also allow the tracking of students learning and assessments (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021).

The findings from a study conducted by Olawale & Mutongoza (2021), revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic forced institutions to make use of the fourth industrial revolution tools in their teaching and learning processes; these tools include videoconferencing (Google Hangouts Meet, Zoom, Slack, Cisco, WebEx) and customizable cloud-based learning management platforms such as Elias, Moodle, BigBlueButton and Skypeǁ.

1.6.3 Institutional Responses to Online Teaching and Learning

The emergence of COVID-19 brought about emergency changes in the education sector. Therefore, universities had to rapidly transition from physical contact teaching and learning to remote, training educators on how remote teaching must be conducted to students and ensuring that students have access to online resources at an affordable price because of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rashid & Yadav, 2020; Farnell et al. 2021).

Van Staden and Naidoo (2022) note that the abrupt disruption by COVID-19 made the university devise strategies which would enable them to foster meaningful teaching and learning. This transformation had to be achievable even beyond the pandemic as there have been many hurdles experienced by the higher education sector previously. Therefore, many universities developed what is termed by van Staden and Naidoo (2022) as "student-centred teaching and learning". In this approach, the authors argue that there becomes a significant shift from the teacher/lecturer-centred approach which was in the past focused on what the teacher does to impart knowledge to students.

This means that the student-centred approach saw the HEIs focus on what the student does or needs, which is deemed more important in determining what is learned as compared to what the teacher does (UNSW 2016, van Staden & Naidoo, 2022). This paradigmatic shift by HEIs in South Africa brought forth a means for universities to develop approaches and means of delivering quality education to many students in a more accessible and socially friendly manner. However, this was not only the means with which universities had to investigate. Universities had to consider the psychosocial aspects of the paradigm shift within the teaching and learning (T&L) sphere. Therefore, the provision of student counselling facilities had to be strengthened and made available to many. Student support services had to be reinforced thereby making sure that there is always technological support for students.

1.6.4 Response From Students to Online Teaching and Learning

The untimely change from the face-to-face mode of teaching and learning to an online mode of fostering T&L brought about various factors that changed the landscape of learning for many students in general and those regarded as the middle-class student. Middle class students who fall within the missing middle spectrum in society are students who hail from economically challenged backgrounds. These students like any other need to acquire and receive proper quality higher education. However, the change in pedagogy enforced by COVID-19 was a game-changer for many. This era saw many students starting to learn and acclimatize to an e-learning mode which on its own brings forth several societal factors that affect the learning process of the missing middle students. Banda (2022) outlines these factors as follows:

i) Location factors- these saw many students who are in the Global South struggling to grapple with this transition from face-to-face to online mode of T&L;
ii) socioeconomic factors- where the students coming from economically challenged backgrounds struggle with this mode of teaching as costs associated with data/Wi-Fi provision were experienced by many; and
iii) Prior exposure to digital technology- the transition from face-to-face to an online mode became a challenge for many students who had to rely on others to help them navigate through the use of these technological devices and also software's used for T&L.

Despite the provision of online learning as an alternative resource to learning, freedoms that would afford students access to such a resource were perceived to have been restricted. Part of the limitation of freedoms was in the lockdown measures that restricted what students could do.

Furthermore, the existence of inequalities in the access to online teaching alternatives was another constraining factor that affected students' opportunities to realise their capabilities. On the other hand, the COVID-19 disruption revealed opportunities for students' learning experiences. Although admittedly forced unprepared into the technologically led learning, they were able to gain new skills, especially in digital technology.

Cicha (2021) posits that the academic performance of many students dropped since the transition of pedagogy at higher education institutions. It is argued that this may have been due to a lack of a proper study environment, lack of adequate study materials, lack of remote skills and poor network connections among others. The above-mentioned factors therefore drove the performance to a negative stance as students had to quickly readjust and adapt to new pedagogy which also resulted in a burden to many. Marler et al (2021) investigated the "impact of COVID-19 on university students" and the study found that there where Covid-19 pandemic and the pedagogy transition did not only bring forth physical and environmental challenges, but rather, psychological distress which many students suffered from, many in silence. This psychological and social distress, termed psychosocial distress saw the motivation of students on the aspect of T&L decrease.

In contrast to students who had become accustomed to attending/using online learning, many students who were typically used to the traditional face-to-face T&L and dealt well with this teaching method dramatically lost motivation during the change (Stevanovic, 2021). The impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector of South Africa caused distress and damage to students who are from economically challenged households. This is because of many financial and social problems that they had to cope with during the transition and that had a negative bearing on their studies and performance output (Tesar, 2020).

Studies conducted in China, the United States of America and Swaziland have revealed that there has been a high level of anxiety, fear, and anger from students, and this came with the pedagogical change and transition with which students had to adapt to (Browning et al., 2021). A study done in South Africa by Semenya (2021) also revealed that students within the Bachelor of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (BIKS) programme at the North-West University bared similar findings as those conducted in the above-mentioned countries. Semenya (2021) illustrated that students within the BIKS programme were anxious and in constant fear about the transition as much of the T&L within the programme infused physical classes with observations, field works and engagement with indigenous knowledge holders. This had to change due to the online pedagogy which was not inclusive of the whole package known and adapted by students before the advent of COVID-19.

Semenya's sentiments and results are corroborated by Bao (2020) who provides that during physical contact classes, students used to learn from facial expressions, body language and tone of voice whilst, during online classes, it became difficult for students to learn from the above-mentioned.

The lack of social interaction also affected students as this avenue of socialization helped them build relations and form communities of practice with which collective learning took place. Hofer et al (2021) argue that during the pedagogical transition, students reported a higher need for social interactions and in-person collaboration with their fellow students and teachers. This further reflected that those students had a preference of face-to-face lectures over online pedagogy.

The same sentiments are pointed out by Coman et al (2020) who stated that that during the transition, students were struggling to adapt to e-learning due to signal loss, delays of sent messages and connecting to online or virtual T&L platforms.

1.6.5 Challenges Experienced During the Implementation of Online Learning

Winter et al. (2021) argued that COVID-19 brought about the transformation of pedagogies making sure that higher education institutions start recalibrating their teaching methods. This was mainly because of the hardships they experienced during the pandemic and discovering the benefits of using information communication technologies (ICTs) to drive and implement their teaching and learning (T&L). Researchers such as Al-Maskari et al. (2021), Schreiber (2022), Rashid and Yadav (2020), Marinoni et al. (2020), Jena (2020), Makafane and Chere-Masopha (2021), Mthethwa and Luthuli (2021), Alex (2022) and others who have done related studies found that students and lecturers experienced load-shedding of electricity, poor network connectivity, lack of technological devices and knowledge to use them for online teaching and learning. The location where students were based played a fundamental role in their access to e-learning and many who were affected by loadshedding, and network loss missed a lot of valuable classes and thus performed badly in their classes. It is known that many students who fall within the missing middle stay in geographically isolated rural areas, and within those areas, connectivity and electricity are a huge challenge.

Access to network data for online T&L was therefore a prominent challenge to many students. However, some students indicated that the university provided them with data and devices, but, because of loadshedding and loss of network within the areas, they continued to suffer and miss lectures. According to Bouchey et al. (2021), students had access to support services provided by their leaderships. All universities in South Africa provided support to students with laptops, health support by vaccination sites and testing sites, academic support of access to the online library, student counselling sessions, website, and provision of data. Van Wyk (2020) stated that Open Distance Learning (ODeL) course students were satisfied with academic support provided in an online environment.

Some courses need physical contact classes and other students from poor family backgrounds could not afford devices such as laptops, smartphones and Wi-fi rooters (Heng & Sol, 2020).

Dhawan (2020) is of the view that most students find online platforms unengaging and boring. This is because students just logged into the platform, and one could not tell if they were in attendance or not. The silence in many of the lessons was enough for lecturers to know that students were highly uninterested in the online pedagogy. According to Mishra et al. (2020), a majority of students responded that they need excellent network connections and the availability of electricity that is not interrupted. However, access to the internet regularly is expensive (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Problems that are involved in online pedagogy regarding devices are not new to students who used distance learning as a way of teaching and learning before the COVID-19 lockdown influenced the decisions of altering from physical contact to online teaching and learning. Khumalo (2018) argues that technical errors, bugs, and slowness is important to note if there is use of technology for e-learning. Garbe et al. (2021) stated that the majority of parents who lived at home with their students noticed how their children were overwhelmed with the online teaching and learning demands. Students hardly had any time for themselves to refresh, recoup and relax as opposed to the time prior to the transition.

1.6.6 Opportunities and Lessons Learned by Higher Education Institutions From COVID-19

There is no grey area when looking into issues and aspects of T&L. This means that universities always must be ready to devise new and innovative pedagogies which will enable them to always cope. Thaheem et al. (2021) reviewed that both teachers and students benefited from online education. Semenya (2021)’s study revealed that participants (students) were partly satisfied with online pedagogy since their academic performance improved, their financial budget became stable, and they managed to adapt to the pedagogy due to help provided by the university, parents, and lecturers.

Oyedotum (2020) argues that university students and lecturers were able to use technological tools for online pedagogy while the university management was able to discover prospects for the improvement of assorted learning. The study found that students who stayed in sub-urban areas had more benefits from online teaching and learning more than those who stay in rural areas. This is due to the perspectives of participants that in rural areas there are many challenges such as poor network connectivity and lack of electricity that contributes to unsuccessful online teaching and learning.

Information Communication Technology (ICT) is used to store, share, manipulate, find, restore, delete, and use the information for a particular purpose. Furthermore, ICTs improve education quality by facilitating learning in relation to distributing information, seeking information, and using it for academic success. Information Communication Technology promotes innovation in education because teachers gain technology-based skills to teach the content to students (Peeraer & Van Petegem, 2012).

Boloran (2020) recommends that higher education institutions should improve ICT facilities and train staff and students on how to carry out teaching to learners' post-COVID-19 pandemic. Korter and Olubusoye (2014) indicated that ICT is important for allowing communication between two or more people. Students and lecturers interact using ICTs by video conferencing, chatting and phone calling to exchange information. Information Communication Technology improves the productivity of students in the classroom and outside the educational institution (Harris & Harris, 2011). For instance, students can be able to access online information anytime and anywhere they need it for the purpose of learning. Therefore, access to both tacit and codified knowledge provides diverse solutions to a problem.

Endeavours to Move the HEIs Landscape Forward

Teaching and learning is at the heart of the university, meaning that it is the core business of the university. Therefore, since universities are known to be transformative and always strive to capacitate students to deal with real-life issues, it is imperative that they move along with the ever-changing T&L landscape. The traditional mode of T&L has been fruitful in the past and provided a more personal avenue for students to engage with lecturers, however, with the ever-growing technological advances, there needs to be a change and adjustment in the pedagogy applied or used by the same universities.

ICT provides an avenue to utilize artificial intelligence to foster meaningful T&L and this avenue should be explored to its fullest. The change in pedagogy however requires more in-depth understanding by both academics and students alike. This form of T&L should be explored to its full potential thereby making sure that all technological avenues are utilized to foster learning. This form of transition can also be viewed as a good and positive one. The daily use of technology and software by society currently makes it easy for students to adapt to this transition and have a sense of belonging within the use of ICTs.

Conclusion

COVID-19 has changed the traditional ways of teaching and learning which higher education institutions have used for a long time. Higher education underwent a change as a result of COVID-19, with online learning, frequently referred to as distant learning, serving as the primary method to stop the pandemic from spreading among students and university personnel. Campus closures in higher education institutions marked the abrupt end of long-established face-to-face teaching and learning. This immediately prompted the fastest paradigm shift in this field that has ever been seen to keep teaching and learning. Online learning, which is primarily reliant on digital technologies, has suddenly become increasingly common at the same time providing long existing gaps that exist in higher education institutions. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate and pinpoint the most important digital transformation lessons from COVID-19 for South African higher education institutions. To accomplish the study's goal, secondary data from the literature review were used.

The study additionally shows the need for higher education institutions to constantly develop their online learning strategies and be flexible enough to respond to emerging issues like COVID-19. Universities were reminded by COVID-19 to investigate various forms of education, put plans in place for online learning, and be prepared to aid staff and students as needed.

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ACADEMIC LITERACY SUPPORT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: PEER TUTORS' RESILIENCE AT THE WITS SCHOOL OF EDUCATION WRITING CENTRE

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic forced universities, the world over, to shut down and adopt Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) where all academic activities were moved online. Likewise, student support services within the universities such writing canters moved all academic literacy support services online. The transition to the online mode, however, had several operational implications for writing centres. This paper explores how the role of peer tutors in the academic intervention programme Write Up Read Up (WURU) offered to first year students at the Wits School of Education (WSoE) Writing Centre (WC) was implicated by the Covid-19 imposed move from face-to-face to online tutoring. The paper further explores how peer tutors navigated and negotiated their new online tutoring role given the increased student enrollment in the WURU programme. We conducted a focus group discussion with 13 peer tutors to elicit experiences and drew on Bahadur et al.'s (2015) explanatory conceptual framework of the 3As of resilience (the capacity to adapt, anticipate and absorb) to explain the elicited experiences. Findings show that peer tutors were resilient in sustaining their core function of providing academic support to students despite the varying complexities.

Keywords: Academic Support, Peer Tutors, Wuru Programme, COVID-19, Resilience.

Introduction and Research Context

When Covid-19 pandemic was announced, it changed everything from how we do our daily activities such as shopping to how we socialize and conduct businesses (Mpungose, 2020). These unprecedented changes were also felt in the education sector. For example, all schools and universities around the world had to temporarily shut down as a response to the directive from the governments. This was done to contain the spread of Covid-19 as little was known about the virus at the time. In view of this crisis, all face-to-face teaching and learning from pre-primary to higher education were suspended to safeguard people and contain the spread of the Covid-19 virus. This greatly affected the operations of universities, especially teaching and learning including academic support structures such as the Writing Centres.

The closure of higher institutions of learning due to Covid-19 also marked the beginning of widespread uncertainty over how the academic year could or should continue.

Institutions of higher learning needed a solution to salvage the academic year. The best solution, at the time, to deal with those unprecedented disruptions was to shift to e-learning (Mpungose, 2020). This meant that teaching and learning, including student academic support, had to be conducted online. The University of the Witwatersrand, on which this paper is based, was among the first universities in South Africa to move all teaching and learning online as a response to the country's Covid-19 mandate.

According to Weidlich and Kalz (2021), the switch to online teaching and learning abruptly exposed technological deficiencies and lack of preparedness on the part of lecturers and universities. Problems associated with technological pedagogical content knowledge were highlighted as many lecturers were not technologically proficient or lacked digital skills (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2021; Yundayani, 2021). These challenges generally made it difficult for effective teaching and learning online (Weidlich & Kalz, 2021, Yundayani, 2021; Gumede & Badriparsad, 2021).

Being part of the larger university community, the WSoE WC had to align and begin offering its services online. This meant a shift away from the traditional face-to-face and one-on-one consultations that characterise Writing Centre's *modus operandi*. These changes in the business as usual of the Writing Centre due to the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent migration online had several implications for the peer tutors. As key players in the Writing Centre, they had to adjust to the new realities of offering academic literacy support online. However, the transition to online teaching and learning for peer tutors and lecturers at large, had been difficult especially given the pressure to quickly master the designing of online learning material as well as its instruction (Rapanta et al., 2020).

Some Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) arranged immediate training and development for their staff in order to usher them into the new online pedagogical mode. Training and development ranged from guidance on how to develop teaching and learning materials, how to conduct asynchronous and synchronous classes, how to assess students' work and general technical support to navigate online teaching and learning (Rapanta et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2022). Likewise, peer tutors received training on how to work synchronously with student groups but the training was abrupt and insubstantial, thus, the impetus to devise new strategies to effectively assist students with academic needs and demands. Whilst there is substantial literature (Rapanta et al., 2020; Gumede & Badriparsad, 2021; Weidlich & Kalz, 2021; Yundayani, 2021; Lee et al., 2022) to go by to understand the impact of the virus on university students and lecturers, as far as we know, studies on the impact of the pandemic on writing centres and peer tutors are scant. This study, thus, investigates the experiences of peer tutors working within the context of dramatic changes in WURU enrolments and the shift to a new online mode. The view is to explicate the unique and important capacity of peer tutor resilience as they devised strategies to cope throughout the crisis.

The aim of this paper is to offer insight into how peer tutors dealt with the transition from face-to-face to online consultations during the Covid-19 pandemic and how they navigated this new terrain to effectively provide necessary academic literacy support to first-year students. Essentially, this paper asks the question: How do peer tutors at the WSoE WC navigate their roles in the context of the covid-19 imposed migration to online consultations and with bigger student groups? This paper contributes to the ongoing conversation about resilience in higher education, particularly in academic support structures such as Writing Centres. With a specific focus on WSoE WC peer tutors, we provide aspects of their practice during the Covid-19 pandemic that contribute to the overall understanding of the university's resilience. We believe peer tutors' experiences are important to acknowledge because they occupy a unique position in the university and thus offer insight into how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected student support structures such as Writing Centres. Through this study, we highlight and magnifying how they resiliently managed to work through the adverse Covid-19 conditions for a larger Higher Education (HE) audience.

The WSoE WC and the Write Up Read Up (WURU) Programme

Situated in the main library at the Wits School of Education, the Wits School of Education (WSoE) Writing Center (WC) is one of the main pillars of student support in the School of Education specialising in supporting students' academic literacy development. The WSoE WC trains and employs senior students to work as peer tutors and through these peer tutors, Education students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, have access to academic writing support. While working with students' writing, the WSoE WC subscribes to a dialogic approach that encourages students to "reflect critically on their writing processes as active participants in conversation with consultants" (Kadenge et al., 2019, p. 170). Some of the work that characterises peer tutors work includes guiding students with conventions of academic writing such as referencing, paraphrasing, developing academic argument and issues of academic structure and coherence.

Project Write Up Read Up (WURU) is an intervention programme couched within the WSoE WC. It was initially launched in 2014 to support first-year education students. Originally, the programme was offered exclusively to first-year students 'at risk' of academic exclusion. However, this changed in 2018 as the programme was extended to all first-year education students. The programme is embedded in a compulsory theoretical first-year course, Education 1. The WURU programme is organised around the pairing of a peer tutor to a group of students. Historically, WURU groups have been most effective with a peer tutor working with small groups of about 6 to 10 students in which they meet for an hour to discuss various course tasks and more generic academic literacy issues. At the time of writing this paper, WURU groups had grown exponentially seeing one peer tutor with an allocation of about 34 first-year students, primarily due to the high enrolment of first-years at the beginning of the academic year.

Research Method and Data Generation

The target population was 25 peer tutors but only 13 responded to the invitation to participate. This paper presents experiences and views of the 13 peer tutors that were willing to participate in the study. Purposive sampling was used to select peer tutors who were working on the WURU programme and were allocated a group as of the beginning of the year 2020. Hence, in this paper we draw on the experiences of a sample of peer tutors who run the WURU academic support programme tailored specifically for first-year B Ed students.

This study primarily used a focus group discussion, a qualitative research method where we obtained data through direct conversational communication with participants (Lichtman, 2012). We developed three questions to steer and stimulate the group discussion: (i) What worked during your consultations in the Covid-19 period given the migration to online consultations? (ii) What did not work? and (iii) What strategies did you employ to ensure meaningful interactions with your WURU students? Using a social constructivist approach where social phenomena is collectively formulated by participants in interaction, we encouraged peer tutors to share their individual experiences and actively engage with each other. Our purpose was to bring peer tutors into a discussion and elicit individual experiences with a view to see them co-construct perceptions through an exchange of their individual experiences (Barbour, 2018). In addition to the focus group discussions, we asked peer tutors to relay how they managed to cope with the challenges in reflective narrative reports. These responses were subjected to a process of constant comparison where we moved, iteratively, between the data sets to identify themes that we discuss in view of peer tutors' capacity to adapt, anticipate and absorb their practices in the face of adverse Covid-19 conditions (Bahadur et al., 2015).

Literature Review

The contribution of Writing Centres as academic support structures to student access and success in South Africa Higher education is well documented (see Archer & Richards, 2011; Zuma, Popoola & Makondo, 2016; Clarence & Dison, 2017; Dison & Mendelowitz, 2017; Nichols, 2017; Munje, Nanima & Clarence, 2018; Kadenge et al., 2019; Namakula & Prozesky, 2019; Arbee, 2020; Manjeya, 2020). As an academic support structure, Writing Centres have been known to positively influence students' academic performance (Arbee, 2021) by enabling students access to dominant powerful discourses that are considered vital for academic success (Namakula & Prozesky, 2019; Namakula, 2021). By making these dominant discourses accessible, Writing Centres enable students to gain 'epistemological access', which is access to the socio-culturally situated ways of knowing and being which sustain the academy (Morrow 1994).

Namakula and Prozesky (2019) argue that such academic support structures empower students by giving them access to academic practices that are valued (Council on Higher Education 2016, as cited in Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). In this regard, once students are empowered, they are able to navigate and negotiate these often challenging and complex spaces they find themselves in (Namakula & Prozesky, 2019).

Given their relevance and contribution in higher education, Writing Centres are known as transformative spaces (Clarence & Dison, 2017; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). They are transformative in a sense that they work with diverse groups of students with differing preparedness and needs and their agenda is to ensure, that students are equipped with the appropriate or academically accepted literacy practices. Thus, this warrants Writing Centres as "academically respected organisations within the academy" (Kadenge et al., 2019, p.173-174). Further, their positionality in the higher education space, afford them the responsibility to question and challenge disciplinary academic practices and conventions (Kadenge et al, 2019, p.174).

Part of what makes Writing Centres successful in what they do is the use of peer tutors or writing consultants as they are often referred to. Peer tutors occupy a unique position because they are students themselves which makes them relatable and accessible to students they tutor (Clarence, 2016, 2017; Dison & Mendelowitz, 2017). Hence, they are in a position to understand what students are going through, are knowledgeable about the content because they have encountered it before (Dison & Mendelowitz, 2017). Dison and Mendelowitz's (2017, p.196) argue that peer tutors "have more social and cultural capital than the students that they support" hence they are able to guide students well. Additionally, peer tutors are known to create safe spaces for students they tutor to be themselves (Nichols, 2017; Wilmot & McKenna, 2018). It is this set up that makes them worth researching about. Our aim in this paper is to offer insights into peer tutor experiences of offering academic support online and in the process foregrounding their resilience.

Role of Peer Tutors

Peer tutoring as a support structure at any educational level is known to yield benefits both academic and nonacademic (Baleni et al., 2016; Clarence, 2016; Dison & Mendelowitz, 2017; Yomtov et al., 2017; Munje et al., 2018; Namakula & Prozesky, 2019; Roberts & Spangenberg, 2020). Studies show that peer tutoring programmes help students develop confidence and actively participate more in learning (Archer, 2011; Archer & Richards, 2011; Munje et al., 2018; Roberts & Spangenberg, 2020;). Wilmot and Lotz-Sisitka (2015, p.9) argue that "working with peers… can provide additional support and intellectual stimulation for scholars". For example, peer tutors are known to help students develop confidence, increase more participation and engage in learning hence improving their academic performance (Archer & Richards, 2011; Baleni et al 2016; Munje et al, 2018; Roberts & Spangenberg, 2020).

This is because, as Clarence (2016) argues, peer tutors are relatable and approachable to students.

According to Roberts and Spangenberg (2020), peer tutoring has immense benefits for students who are experiencing challenges of learning and can lead to enhanced participation and engagement. In the context of higher education, the use of peer tutoring can help those struggling with transitioning from high school to university navigate and understand how universities work (Baleni et al., 2016). There are also non-academic benefits such as emotional support and guidance (Yomtov et al., 2017, Namakula, 2021). Thus, as Clarence (2018) asserts, peer tutoring is an academic necessity that can be useful when dealing with unforeseen situations similar to the current Covid-19 circumstance. In this case, the role of peer tutors, whether in a traditional face-to-face space or online, becomes critical and imperative as we go through these radical changes.

Theoretical Perspective: Notion of Resilience

The key theoretical construct underpinning this study is resilience. The notion of resilience carries many meanings depending on the context, discipline, and the purpose it is used or applied to (Bahadur, Wilkinson & Tanner, 2015; Tanner, Bahadur & Moench, 2017). Hence, it is grounded in different academic disciplines such as psychology, humanistic psychology, social science, genetics, engineering science, ecology etc (Jones & D'Errico, 2019). Its popularity is also exhibited in policy frameworks of international organisations such as the UN's Agenda 2030 and Paris Agreement on climate change (Jones & D'Errico, 2019). In this paper, we take cognisant and acknowledge the multiple but contrasting and competing views on what resilience means and represents depending on the context, disciplines, experience and focus. This is because historically, the term has been associated with systems or organisations bouncing back in the face of adversities, such as natural disasters and environmental hardships (Bahadur et al., 2015).

Broadly, the term resilience has been defined as the ability for an organisation or an individual to overcome or bounce back from adversities (Bahadur et al., 2015; Jones & D'Errico, 2019). In this paper, we concede resilience as the ability to "respond productively to significant change that disrupts the expected pattern of events without engaging in an extended period of regressive behaviour" (Horne & Orr, 1997, p. 31). We believe, this definition speaks to how peer tutors in this study responded to the sudden changes and challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The notion of resilience has been further explored and deconstructed into "resilience capacities – the capacity to adapt, to anticipate and absorb (the 3As) (Bahadur, et al., 2015, p.7)". The capacity to adapt entails the ability to adjust to new changes or modify existing strategies to manage the new situation encountered (Jeans et al., 2017).

This capacity requires flexibility to learn and work in new circumstances. The capacity to anticipate has to do with the forecasting an undesirable outcome and thus taking action in advance to avoid or minimise the adverse outcomes or results. Finally, the capacity to absorb is the ability to make use of existing capabilities and resources to cope with difficult situations and circumstances. In the context of this study, these 3As are useful in analysing how peer tutors embodied resilience to thrive in the challenging circumstances (Chiramba, 2021; Chiramba & Maringe, 2022).

Therefore, we chose this frame because it offered us two things 1) analytical tool, 2) explanatory tools to explain how peer tutors' embodied resilience as they offered academic literacy support to first year B.Ed. students online.

Findings

Here, we present the key findings on peer tutors' experiences and perceptions of how they have managed their roles during the changes of migrating to online student support and working with bigger student groups as well as the challenges brought about by these imposed changes.

Challenges Encountered in Online WURU Sessions

Our concern with peer tutors' work is two-fold. Firstly, during the emergency remote teaching period where all contact classes and support sessions were suspended, they were required to conduct synchronous WURU group consultation sessions using various online platforms such as WhatsApp, Zoom, Ms Teams and the Wits Learning Management System, uLwazi. Peer tutors reflected on their experiences of this move and there was, generally, consistency amongst them that they found working online a huge challenge, for both peer tutors and first-year students. They indicated that the major challenge was poor attendance as very few students showed up for the online sessions. One of the peer tutors said:

"Some students were not attending and would message those who did and ask them what we did. On my Thursday groups out of 10 only 4 were consistent" (PT11).

An enduring challenge that surfaces here is the digital divide challenge where the majority of students in South African universities could not access online learning despite gadgets and data allocation from the universities (Mpungose, 2020). PT8 indicated that:

"S*ome students were absent and only showed up when an essay due date was approaching"* suggesting a lack of commitment on the part of the first-year students.

In the event that students attended, peer tutors struggled with poor interaction/engagement in the sessions as the first-year students were generally complacent:

"*Hiding behind the screens and not eager to participate"* (PT2).

PT9 raised the concern that:

"S*tudents were not engaging at all and I was the only one doing the talking. They were sponges, soaking out all the information I had".*

Some students even expressed that they were disinterested in the WURU sessions as indicated by PT5 who said:

"*In certain groups, students simply did not attend. Some students even stated that if they had known there would be classes, they would not have signed up regardless of whether classes were held online or face-to-face".*

In addition, peer tutors highlighted challenges in co-ordinating those sessions using recommended Writing Centre practice dialogic approaches. The Socratic dialogue approach, for example, underpins the WSoE WC practice and it involves peer tutors utilising "a type of questioning that deeply probes or explores the meaning, justification or logical strength of a claim, and position or line of reasoning" (Makhene, 2019, p.1). Here, students are encouraged to think deeply about their writing and explain their reasoning. Instead, peer tutors found themselves 'teaching' as was noted by PT12 who found that:

"*Face-to-face works better than online. Online can easily become teaching".*

PT8 also found that students:

"Did not interact on the WhatsApp group when you ask important questions".

This was a challenge especially on Ms Teams or the BigBlueButton classroom on uLwazi as many of the students:

"Had poor digital literacy hence getting through one task was difficult, so I found myself explaining over and over again" (PT4). PT5 was also concerned that: "*The online sessions were not effective. Many students simply did not attend and those who attended paid no attention".*

Lack of interaction during the sessions had a ripple effect on poor time management and peer tutors found their sessions torpid and unproductive as they were failing to complete set objectives. PT1 mentioned that they:

"Had training but it was sort of a quick-fix and honestly I went online not feeling very confident", thus alluding to how this could have been as a result of the inadequate training to facilitate online group consultations.

Strategies Implemented to Improve Online WURU Sessions

While peer tutors were grappling with how to establish meaningful engagement with their individual WURU groups, it is of paramount importance to note that they were also in the process of learning the various online platforms for their own studies as all of them are still enrolled for their own studies. Despite the weighing pressure from their own work, peer tutors showed determination and creativity in responding to the presented changes and resultant challenges in their line of work. One of the strategies that was common amongst the peer tutors was the setting of ground rules on how to engage on an online group consultation. For example, PT1 said that:
"We agreed that everyone joins in early and always with a muted mic and camera so that there was order".

PT4, in agreement, mentioned that he:

"*Explained how important it was for everyone to talk and give feedback to others"*.

It is important to establish rules because the new online platform was particularly difficult to navigate and manage a group of a minimum of 15 students per session.

Peer tutors were innovative in learning and understanding the new online working space and they had to device new strategies to ensure that online sessions were fruitful. This meant that they had to invest time in exploring different digital tools for use in WURU sessions. PT13 for example shared that:

"*I had to learn how to share resource materials using the digital spaces. I would share videos to illustrate writing skills, share writing ideas and drafts via google documents".*

This is consistent with PT3 who noted that:

"*Teaching referencing without visual aids is very difficult for students to appreciate, therefore, PowerPoint presentation is a must in this regard. Also, one can email the presentation to all students as an assistance to memory and as a resource".*

What is immediately clear from these reflections is that peer tutors were open to learning new skills in order to be effective in their new role as online instructors.

The new online environment required peer tutors to rethink ways of engaging with students. PT10 said;

"*I have come up with ways to co-ordinate a group, research for information that will effectively ensure that students maximise their learning through resources offered by the programme".*

This is after the observation that managing a group online is different and certainly more challenging that a face-to-face one. PT10 continued to explain that:

"*We have established pedagogical structures that ensure progress in every meeting, and these include time management, resource toolkit (referencing, writing assignments, reading and writing skills"* and this is telling of how peer tutors needed to rethink a more appropriate pedagogy for the online environment. A significant shift is noted by PT2 who resorted to ensuring that students focus and:
"Learn one skill per week, for example paraphrasing, until all students were comfortable".

What underscores these reflections of experiences of working online is the ability of peer tutors to draw from the repertoire of skills and resources that they had and customize them for the new and challenging online sessions. P6 further illustrated this by explaining:

"I introduced some writing techniques such as dividing the question into parts and then analysing each section of the question separately and then teaching them how to link the ideas/parts together. This helped in that although the environment was new they brought something that they knew and actually used".

While peer tutors undoubtedly had the experience from working with students face-to-face and drew on some of that that experience for online sessions, the findings have shown that online space presents unique challenges (Lee et al., 2022; Yundayani et al., 2021). These online platform dilemmas coupled with the large number of students caused some level of strain for the peer tutors. Nevertheless, they persisted. This, we believe required some resilience because the online environment as a new space and working with large groups of students added another dimension to their role. Despite this current climate set out by the Covid-19 pandemic and the large number of students, peer had a responsibility and obligation to continue offering support to students. Below is a discussion of the different ways in which peer tutors demonstrated resilience.

Discussion

The overall concern of this study was couched in the question: How do peer tutors at the WSoE WC navigate their roles in the context of the covid-19 imposed migration to online consultations and with bigger student groups? As indicated in the findings, there were significant aspects that peer tutors found challenging and had to device ways of ensuring sessions with students were always productive. While there was training provided, peer tutors displayed aspects of resilience as they tackled the two-fold challenge of working online and with bigger groups triple the size they had worked with during face-to-face consultations before the Covid-19 restrictions. Using Bahadur et al.'s (2015) 3As as organising principles of the resilience, we were able to foreground peer tutors' abilities, as individuals and collectively, to continue to progress in their roles despite the unprecedented changes and challenges.

Peer Tutor's Resilience: Adaptive Capacities

The migration to working online was generally abrupt for many universities and that posed a number of challenges especially the ill-preparedness of both students and instructors (Weidlich & Kalz, 2021; Yundayani et al., 2021).

Chiramba and Maringe (2022) make the observation that this new online pedagogical mode was introduced as a reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic thus marred by a number of complexities regarding the physical hardware and enabling software. Peer tutors, at the time they were required to conduct their WURU sessions online, were themselves in the process of getting acquainted with the new online teaching and learning. Their knowledge and understanding of the various online learning management systems such as uLwazi or Ms Teams was limited to their capacity as students. They had to assume a different and expanded role, that of being an online instructor. This new role required them to manage the sessions in terms of materials, setting up meetings, facilitating the online activities and ensuring that the engagements were meaningful and productive for the first-year students. These new challenges, according to Weidlich and Kalz (2021), brought about a nuanced understanding of technological and pedagogical deficiencies among faculty in the HE space, at the same time presented an opportunity for developing an understanding of resilience, and in this case they talk of 'instructional resilience'. Peer tutors, thus, in adapting to the new environment show a level of instructional resilience as they devised technologically based pedagogies to ensure effective online WURU engagements (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2021; Weidlich & Kalz, 2021, Yundayani, 2021).

While the WC coordinator organised training for online group consultations, the challenge was that it was abrupt like the many changes that came with emergency remote teaching. Normally, peer tutors undergo rigorous training where they even shadow a more experienced peer tutor and they gradually get into their roles of consulting with students.

Peer tutors "need more opportunities for in-depth professional development in order for them to fully realize that role" Clarence (2016, p.39). In this case, however, peer tutors were not fully prepared and had to use the little training they had to adjust to new demands. The findings have shown that peer tutors were able to redefine more productive ways of engaging with first-year students online. For example, they started to explore digital learning tools such as videos, google documents and PowerPoint as resources for their WURU sessions. According to Bahadur et al (2015), this ability to evaluate a situation and decisively come up with an alternative way of achieving the set objective characterizes adaptive resilience. In other words, peer tutors demonstrate adaptive capabilities as they were open to learn and adjust their approach to continuously provide meaningful academic literacy support to the first-year WURU students.

Peer Tutor's Resilience: Anticipative Capacities

An important observation in the literature about HEIs, broadly, is that they do not have "a strong tradition in imagining their own future" (Chiramba & Maringe, 2022, p.55) alluding to not having developed adequate anticipative capabilities. The Covid-19 situation has been instrumental in exposing universities' level of under preparedness for unforeseen circumstances. While this paints a general picture of the broad university context, the findings of this study demonstrate that there is some evidence of anticipative capacities within small student support structures such as the WSoE WC. Having encountered numerous challenges engaging with first-year students online, peer tutors showed resilience by drawing on their anticipative capacities. They were able to project the potential undesirable outcomes of poor online engagement and proactively planned and prepared activities for meaningful WURU sessions. For example, including free writing activities, re-organising the sessions to focus on specific activities and researching for more information and resources to ensure that online sessions were lively and productive. In this instance, peer tutors demonstrate their ability to anticipate problematic aspects with online engagements and took the initiative to device strategies to mitigate looming challenges. According to Bahadur et al. (2015), this anticipatory capacity is especially useful in avoiding and/or reducing the impending negative impact of an adverse situation.

Peer Tutor's Resilience: Absorptive Capacities

There is evidence of an ability within peer tutors to recognize what was familiar from their normal face-to-face interactions with students and use it in a different online environment. Peer tutors have a wide repertoire of skills and resources that include guiding students on essay writing, giving students feedback on writing drafts, facilitating group work and peer-to-peer engagement. The findings of this current study show that peer tutors exercised absorptive capacities by drawing on available skills and resources that they had and deployed them to cope with the adverse challenge of supporting first-year students online.

For Bahadur et al. (2015, p. 30), this is a form of "functional persistence" that is "most visible in the form of coping with the impacts of a disaster".

Conclusion

This study focuses on understanding how peer tutors at the WSoE WC navigated their roles in the context of the covid-19 imposed migration to online consultations and with bigger student groups. The major findings illustrate that peer tutors were confronted with immense challenges as they tried to create meaningful online WURU sessions with the first-year students. These challenges included poor digital literacy, time management, connectivity issues and generally struggling with coordinating the virtual sessions. The findings have also shown that peer tutors, as individuals and as a collective, demonstrated resilience as they adapted to the new larger student groups in an online setting by devising anticipatory and absorptive strategies to ensure that they continue offering academic literacy support to first-year students. Grounded in these findings, this study offers practical and empirical contributions to the important discussion of building resilience in the university and the HE space in South Africa during periods of disruption similar to the one imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Practically, it demonstrates how peer tutors' practices were sustained despite the Covid-19 challenging circumstances. By focusing on a smaller student support structure such as the Writing Centre, this study empirically extends the research conversation around building and developing resilience in HEIs in South Africa.

Writing Centres are integral pillars to the academy, hence demonstration of resilience within this university community contributes to the overall concern with the university resilience in the face of disruption and adverse challenges. Above all, the current study highlights an immediate need for universities to prioritise and support writing centres with enduring challenges such as funding, training and development of co-ordinators and peer tutors, and provision of modern physical resources for Writing Centres particularly at a time as this where peer tutors need to be better prepared to deal with increasing student population and the inevitable progression towards online university academic engagement. This suggests further research in line with the university's support obligations regarding Writing Centres and other student support services within the university. Thus, a bigger conversation involving students, the Writing Centre community, student services and university policy makers is warranted to establish ways in which small university communities can enhance overall university resilience in the face of adverse situations that threaten the key teaching and learning agenda of the university.

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ENHANCING STUDENTS' RESILIENCE THROUGH STUDENT-SUPPORT INITIATIVES: A CASE STUDY OF THREE AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES

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This study explores how students in three African universities ensured resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic and what support initiatives were put in place by these universities to ensure students' resilience during this pedagogical shift. A lack of student support results in a high dropout rate and a lack of academic throughput. This study was conducted to evaluate student-support initiatives to establish the extent to which they enhanced student resilience in three African universities. With regards to a theoretical framework, Kolb's learning theory was used. The study used a qualitative approach with a case-study design. The interpretive paradigm was used. Purposive sampling was used to select six lecturers and six student-support practitioners from each university to make a total sample of twelve participants per participating institution. The major findings revealed that student-support initiatives played a significant role in ensuring students were resilient during Covid-19. The study concluded that there was a misalignment of psychosocial and academic student support, which does not built student resilience. The study recommends that student-support initiatives be reviewed and aligned with the current trends in higher education and the actual challenges students face to help students build resilience with a view to adapting and growing academically, emotionally and socially.

Keywords: Student Support, Resilient, Teaching, Learning, COVID-19, Transition, Pedagogical Shift.

Background and Introduction

Academic success hinges on, among other things, student development, which results in resilience on the part of the student. Resilient students are likely to maintain high levels of achievement, motivation and performance despite stressful events and circumstances that put them at risk of poor academic performance and eventually dropping out of higher education (Kumaraswamy, 2013). The American Psychological Association (2014) defines resilience as the ability to adapt well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or severe causes of stress, such as family and relationship issues, serious health issues, or employment and financial stressors. Other studies define resilience as a process that grows in the face of adversity, while others define it as the result of the interaction of protective elements on traumatic experiences (Bozkurt, 2022). In addition, researchers such as Serrano, Sanz and González (2021) argue that resilience is a process, which is built on the abilities that individuals use to overcome trauma.

Serrano et al. (2021) further refer to resilience as the ability to cope with adversity based on the interplay of the person and their coping mechanisms. In the context of this study, resilience refers to a student's ability to overcome academic adversities that can influence their educational development (Ang, Shorey, Hoo, Chewa & Lau, 2021). Many students in higher education find that the academic environment is stressful (Durso, Afonso & Beltman, 2021). Mutalik, Moni, Choudhari and Bhogale (2016) argue that psychological distress such as stress, anxiety and depression are frequent among students, which can affect their academic performance, physical health and psychosocial well-being. In addition to the challenges students experience in higher education, the transition from high school to higher education may also be challenging. Some of the challenges may include: making new friends, moving to a new city, and leaving one's parent's home; pressure to achieve good grades in order to meet educational demands; financial problems experienced by students and/or their families, which can affect living standards; relationships within and outside the academic context; imposter syndrome related to study at a highly ranked institution (Durso et al. 2021).

Ang et al. (2021) argue that students in higher education face several challenges in their academic journey. Resilience has been documented as an essential component in managing stress (Ang et al., 2021). Students' stress may range from mild to severe, with causes ranging from academic demands to financial concerns to being in new environments. When students are accepted at a university, they are confronted with an abrupt adjustment because the academic environment is vastly different from their previous experience. Kumaraswamy (2013) identifies independence, increased workload, time pressure, and the fear of failing as causes of academic problems. When students face greater financial difficulties or demands to secure scholarships to pay for their education, their stress levels rise (Chopra, 2020). Furthermore, students struggle with their new social identities and finding their feet in a social context, which can lead to increased stress (Ang et al., 2021).

Additionally, the Covid-19 pandemic has wreaked havoc on most aspects of people's lives, causing stress, anxiety, and fear among students. In reaction to the global pandemic, higher education institutions have evolved (Sahu, 2020). The shift to online platforms has created a slew of challenges for students, ranging from increased workload to isolation, all of which are aggravated by lower concentration and productivity (Ang et al., 2021). The transition to online mode has raised questions for students about their capability to deal with the existing technology and for those who do not have access to laptops and internet facilities at home (Sahu, 2020). Most students have found it difficult to maintain interest and complete prescribed activities because online platforms exist in a variety of formats, features, time points, course durations, start dates and types of engagement (Durso et al., 2021). Furthermore, completing online courses necessitates varying levels of participation and motivation (Ang et al., 2021).

This study aimed to explore how students in three African universities (two South African and one Namibian university) built resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic and what support initiatives were put in place by these universities to ensure students' resilience during this pedagogical shift. The research questions pursued were:

- How did students in the three African universities build resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic through student support initiatives?

Literature Review

Covid-19 and Higher Education

Since the year 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a profound and extensive rupture in human history, forcing education institutions to close down their doors and shift all learning programmes online (Bozkurt, 2022). The health crisis and lockdowns have socioeconomic, humanitarian, psycho-emotional and educational consequences. In response to this situation, an online education system known as 'emergency remote teaching' was set up (Serrano et al., 2021). It was created to address the problem of school and university closures around the world. These sociopolitical and educational efforts attempted to provide distance learning that would ensure that all students had access to all information, with a particular focus on equity and inclusion. However, depending on certain circumstances, this endeavour resulted in three significant gaps among students. First, a socioeconomic disparity influences students' access to computers, sufficient study places and reliable internet connections. Second, there is a disparity between the number of hours students spend using these tools and the quality and appropriateness of the pages they view (Bozkurt, 2022). This disparity is also linked to the socioeconomic status of students' families, with research revealing that students from low-income homes spend more time online, but viewing content of a lesser quality. Finally, there is a pedagogical competence gap in terms of teaching staff's pedagogical skills, as well as the number and quality of educational resources and e-learning platforms available (Serrano et al., 2021).

Aristovnik, Keržič, Ravšelj, Tomaževič and Umek (2020) argue that the significant changes brought about by the Covid-19 measures had the greatest impact on learners in higher education and that this influence had a negative impact on their academic performance. According to Serrano et al. (2021), Covid-19 has forced 1.57 billion students worldwide, from all levels of schooling, out of school. This problem will have long-term ramifications for education systems in terms of access, quality, equity and management, which are likely to extend beyond the pandemic. Students from low-income homes and/or those with specific educational needs will be particularly affected. However, those students who are unable to cope emotionally with confinement will be most affected.

This learning crisis comprises both a reduction in the amount of content students are exposed to and the competencies they develop and also affects emotional and mental health depending on their ability to deal with the challenges posed by the pandemic.

Student Resilience in Higher Education

Higher education institutions have had a responsibility to help students build resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Therefore, higher education institutions must build assessment and evaluation procedures for online learning, increase instructors' and students' digital literacy, adjust quality assurance mechanisms, and identify at-risk pupils in order to reduce inequities. There are challenges in the social dimension of higher education related to studying conditions (access to a quiet place to study, access to equipment and a reliable internet connection, access to course study materials, and confidence in using online platforms), funding (loss of employment/income, difficulties meeting living costs, issues with receiving scholarships), and well-being (lack of supportive social networks and feelings of frustration, anxiety and boredom with academia) (Bozkurt, 2022). Higher education institutions also need to strengthen their academic and psychosocial student support to help students develop resilience and cope with the adverse effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Resilience in students and the higher education system is an important factor in the measures dealing with the effects of the pandemic (Serrano et al. 2021). Several studies have reported that remote teaching, the assessment of distance learning, emergency online teaching, virtual learning environments, and student readiness were trending topics in online distance learning during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ang et al., 2021; Durso et al., 2021; Sahu, 2020; Bozkurt, 2022). These studies also suggested that technologies for teaching and learning, as well as psychological difficulties, were significant challenges. The most prominent themes in the same studies were the transition from face-to-face education to online distance education, the impact of pandemic-related lockdowns and other imposed measures on students' academic and personal lives, as well as their experiences with online distance education. The same authors also noted that while the pandemic itself could be a catalyst for change, some potentially serious issues needed to be addressed, including inequality and inaccessibility, inadequacies, poor communication quality, technical difficulties, the need for technology literacy, the balance between professional and personal life, privacy concerns in online environments, difficulties in assessing student performance, and a lack of student motivation (Ang et al., 2021; Durso et al., 2021; Sahu, 2020; Bozkurt, 2022). Other issues include ill-health or depression due to the loss of loved ones as a result of Covid-19 infections.

Recent studies have reported on psychiatric morbidity/psychological problems among the student population (Ang et al., 2021; Durso et al., 2021; Sahu, 2020; Bozkurt, 2022).

Those with a low family income, students' attitude towards opting for a particular course, and those who described their home as unhappy positively correlated with mental morbidity. The dissatisfaction arising from living arrangements, poor participation in extracurricular activities, poor social relationships, and poor staff contact are all significantly related to high mental morbidity (Kumaraswamy, 2013).

These academic and emotional problems alongside the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the abrupt transition to the online learning platforms which contribute resilience, adaptability and sustainability of higher education students. Raghunathan, Singh and Sharma's (2022) study identifies types of factors that can be organised to build resilience in students as follows:

- Individual – positivity, motivation, self-belief, emotional ability, perseverance, self-reflection
- Interpersonal – social support, support system, peer support, stakeholder support
- Institution – leadership, organisational climate, community building

According to Raghunathan et al. (2022), building student resilience requires lecturers to engage with their students regularly and linking them to their peers, as well as communicating with parents and guardians. Lecturers are in charge of their students; therefore, they must help their students when they need it. This calls for lecturers to engage with their students in order to maintain their attention; communicate with students through positive or advice-based methods; use questioning strategies in class, and use interactive technologies. Building student resilience also requires strong institutional leadership, support for lectures, continuous professional development, communication with stakeholders, well-crafted policies, and a sense of community (Sahu, 2020; Bozkurt, 2022). Therefore, higher education institutions are called to have in place strong student-support systems to help students build resilience, adaptability and sustainability and ensure academic success against all odds.

Student Resilient Through Student Support Programs

Student support in higher education plays a critical role to ensure student resilience and success. In the three universities sampled, some of the student-support programmes include student mentorship, supplemental instruction (SI) and reading and writing centres.

Student Mentorship Programmes

Raghunathan et al.'s (2022) study brought out the challenges for educational systems, lecturers and students that require student support through programmes such as student mentorship.

The common factors that emerged in Raghunathan et al.'s (2022) study are lecturer-centric (motivation, the strong notion of backing and trust, support, moral, health & technical); training; student-centric (academic process communication, access, affordability, the presence of lecturers in terms of teaching and support, and support); and communication (all stakeholders on overall aspects and lecturers and students in a supportive manner).

Baleni, Malatji and Wadesango (2016) suggest that higher education institutions can assist students in overcoming academic challenges by improving mentor/mentee programmes and implementing them regularly. Institutions must examine the students' problems in detail to help them release the tension that has been placed on them and to urge them to put out a better effort in their studies. Students should be constantly monitored by mentors regarding the frequency and severity of examinations given to them so that they are not overworked, as this could physically and mentally weary them (Sahu, 2020). Chauke, Obadire and Malatji (2021) argue that these interventions are likely to assist students to build resilience, particularly during trying times such as the Covid-19 pandemic, which is a key to academic success. This is in line with Bozkurt (2022) who argues that the survival of students in higher education depends on their development of resilience, adaptability and sustainability skills in higher education institutions.

Furthermore, the importance of social contact as a protective factor against increased stress, anxiety, fear, loneliness and other bad sensations experienced by university students under forced confinement was proved in Serrano et al.'s (2021) study. Therefore, all parties involved in higher education leadership and management must reconsider educational policies and implement policies that promote resilience among students. Resilience, when coping with stress, can protect against serious negative life outcomes and lead to greater life satisfaction (Robbins, Kaye & Catlin, 2018).

Supplemental Instruction

Student-support structures within the university take centre stage to ensure that students are resilient in higher education. SI is one of the student-support initiatives that supports students to cope with academic work. According to Baleni et al. (2016), the concept of peer learning takes centre stage during SI sessions. Researchers such as Hurley and Gilbert (2008) are also of the view that, in the context of higher education, SI takes place in the form of collaborative learning and creates space for peer-to-peer instruction, which gives birth to the development of academic skills for a particular module. In most cases, SI is provided to those modules with a low success rate. In SI, a session is conducted by a student who has previously been successful in the course and will structure study sessions that allow students currently taking the course to learn how to study effectively (Wilcox & Jacobs, 2008).

As indicated above, SI is typically used for courses that are identified as high risk, rather than targeting students who are at risk of not being academically successful at the post-secondary level (Jacobs & Stone, 2008). With the existence of Covid-19, such modules became more difficult to cope with. Therefore, the SI sessions create space for students to engage one on one with their peers (in the case of senior students) to assist them to cope with the module. SI leaders are students who have previously been successful in the course and may have been recommended to be SI leaders by their course instructors or lecturers (McDaniel, 2008). The SI leaders also re-attend all the lectures for the course that they support and complete all required readings (McDaniel, 2008).

This enables them to further model the skills needed to be successful in the course for other students and to reinforce discipline-specific learning skills (Zerger, 2008). SI leaders also work with the course instructor to develop session plans, discuss challenges that students are facing and develop best practices to improve students' learning (Hurley & Gilbert, 2008).

Through peer-to-peer instruction, students have the opportunity to actively discuss and apply their understanding of the course material and construct their knowledge (Hurley & Gilbert, 2008). The SI leader engages students in an active conversation about the course content to learn about student preconceptions (Zerger, 2008). Through discussion and active engagement, students will come to recognise various misconceptions in their thinking, which leads to cognitive dissonance (Zerger, 2008). With facilitation by the SI leader and discussion with their peers, students will be able to accommodate new information into their schemas and co-construct new understandings by re-consolidating their understanding and forming logical connections (Zerger, 2008).

As a result, students in the sessions observe these behaviours and can replicate them in their own studying. Through observations and discussions, students can reinforce their learning and further develop their self-efficacy and independence as learners.

The goal of SI is to reduce the rates at which students earn D and F grades or withdraw from the course (Kamer & Ishitani, 2019). Research on the effects of SI often compares student marks for attendees versus non-attendees. Baleni et al. (2016) show that students who regularly attend SI sessions are more likely to earn higher marks in the course that the SI supports and in general as compared to students who do not use SI resources (Means & Neisler, 2020). In addition, students who do use SI resources are less likely to earn D or F grades or withdraw from the course (Burmeister, 2013). Research also demonstrates that there is no significant correlation between student motivation and the observed increase in grades in courses supported by SI (Burmeister, 2013).

Reading and Writing Centres

Writing centres may serve English-language students from across academic disciplines who are undergraduate or graduate students at the institution of higher learning. In most cases, a student who uses English as a second language receives one-on-one writing assistance from a tutor, who may be a peer or a writing specialist (Lane, 2020). The goal is to assist English-language students (mostly English second-language speakers) with language acquisition and to help them feel more confident in their ability to write effectively in the English language. Writing centres may develop resources and handouts for English-language learners on academic vocabulary and grammatical conventions.

Some English language learners may access a writing centre specifically for grammatical help and error revision from tutors. This may conflict with the philosophy of a writing centre to help students become better writers by discussing the overall flow and organisation of the paper, rather than focusing on sentence-level revisions (Kamer & Ishitani, 2019). Student tutors are generally taught not to edit papers during a session. Instead, they are taught to collaborate on higher-level issues in their peer's papers. Much research has been done on whether student tutors should take a more directive approach to teach writing to English language students (Collier, 2022; Ruthkosky & Castano, 2007). Ultimately, student tutors must receive training on how to effectively teach English as a second language at writing centres so that sessions are effective and meaningful for both English language learners and tutors.

The purpose of the writing centre is to help students strengthen their writing skills. The reading and writing centre (RWC) is one of the student-support programme in most universities that is introduced to help enhance writing, reading and speaking communications (Collier, 2022). RWCs build confidence in those that think they do not have academic writing abilities. RWCs can also help students when they need development in certain areas even when they are strong writers; they are assisted at any stage of their writing process. In this programme, senior students are recruited and trained as language consultants (LCs). Their work is to assist students in interpreting and writing their essays, assignments, discussions, etc. in line with the expectation of their lecturers (Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Students can do their assignments before submission and bring them to the centre for assistance. The centre does not aim to write the assignment on behalf of the students, but students are assisted to organise and present it in a better way (Hastie, 2001). The LCs also assist with the formal modules that are designed to assist first-entering students with reading and writing competencies.

Theoretical Framework

With regards to the theoretical framework, the study adopted the Social Realist Theory of Margaret Archer (Archer, 1995).

Archer's theory allowed researchers to interpret student resilience through student-support programmes using the theoretical lenses of structure, culture and agency. Structure, as a theoretical lens, consists of policies, resources and programmes that are available in the sampled university. In this case, three student-support programmes were scrutinised to establish their impact on student resilience during Covid-19. Archer (1995) is of the view that structural issues have a great impact on student resilience. In this case, structural issues such as the student-support programme set a precedent for the success and resilience of students. Dagada and Malatji (2020) are of the view that buildings also form part of the structural component as articulated in the Social Realist Theory. In the context of this study, student support should also have spaces that allow peer engagements in the form of mentorship, SI and a centre for reading and writing. Therefore, this theoretical lens becomes critical for student resilience because its key focus is on student support for academic success and resilience.

The second theoretical lens is on culture as presented by Archer in the Social Realist Theory (Archer, 1995). Culture, in the context of this, is that of peer learning and co-operative learning in the form of a student-support programme. If there is collaboration and working together of students through a student-support programme, there is a likelihood of success, which increases the chances of student resilience.

The last theoretical lens talks of agency. Malatji, Soundy, Kafidze and Moroesi (2022) argue that agency consists of powers that individuals have to change a situation. In the study, agency refers to powers that student-support practitioners, mentors, SI leaders and language consultants have to support students during Covid-19 and ensure student success and resilience. Archer (1995) in the Social Realist Theory argues that the agential role of individuals goes with commitment and responsibility to make the thing work. The Social Realist Theory gives this study strong theoretical grounds that allowed the researcher to interrogate the implication of student-support programmes through the theoretical lenses of structure, culture and agency to ensure student resilience. In this case, university structure should create a conducive environment for student support, which results in student resilience.

Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative research approach with case-study design. Developing an understanding of people and events in their natural condition while considering the pertinent context is the goal of qualitative research (De Vos, Strydom, Fouche & Delport, 2021). Qualitative approach allowed the researcher to engaged deeply with measures put in place to ensure student resilience in three universities. This was case study of three universities consisting of two previously disadvantaged universities, while one university was a previously advantaged university.

In this study, the daily activities of student development practitioners as well as measures for student support were examined in relation to how they complemented the academic agenda using an interpretive paradigm. The population consisted of lecturers and student development practitioners in three universities in Africa. The sample size consisted of six lecturers and six student development practitioners from three universities. From each of the three universities, one lecturer and one student development practitioner were sampled to make a total of six participants. Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews and analysed through thematic analysis. The thematic approach steps were adopted from Creswell (2009), namely that the researchers should transcribe the raw data, organise and prepare a data analysis, read through all the data, code the data, interrelate themes/description, and, finally, interpret the meaning of themes and generate the a discussion. Permission to conduct the study was granted by the institutions and other related ethical issues were attended to by ensuring the respect of participants, the right to withdraw, voluntary participation and the right to be anonymous.

Presentation and Discussion of Findings

The major findings have revealed that student-support initiatives have played a significant role in ensuring that students were resilient during the Covid-19 pandemic. The results are further discussed using Archer's (1995) Social Realist Theory of the three theoretical lenses of structure, culture and agency. Three main themes guided the discussion of the findings as follows: 1) The role of a mentorship programme in promoting student resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic; 2) The role of an SI programme in promoting student resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic; and 3) The role of language writing centres in promoting student resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Role of a Mentorship Programme in Promoting Student Resilience during the Covid-19 Pandemic

When it comes to the role of mentorship in promoting students' resilience, the study revealed that mentorship programmes in the universities under study were very helpful in assisting students to be resilient and to cope with their academic work. One participant indicated that:

"At our university, the mentorship programme assists students in becoming fully integrated into the academic environment and preparing them to handle the challenges of higher education. First-year students receive assistance and guidance from mentors, who are older and more seasoned students. The major responsibility of a mentor is to provide first-year students with information on how a university operates, where they can obtain the information they require, and guidance on how to study and live in a new setting at the beginning of the academic year.

They welcome first-year students and act as their initial point of contact for any questions they might have. Mentors are essential in directing students to other lecturers or study advisors as needed" (Data set: Lecturer 1).

Similarly, participants mentioned that:

"During the Covid-19 pandemic, mentoring is needed more than ever. Many of the students are frightened, concerned, and overburdened as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Students are being impacted in various ways by this. Mentors, however, weren't always available to help students in need and motivate them to put their studies first amid difficult circumstances. Therefore, higher education institutions must rethink how to mentor in the era of closed campuses in order to support anxious and depressed students who are experiencing social isolation" (Data set: Student Development Practitioner 2).

Reflecting on the above quotation, it is clear that it is through mentoring that learners can settle in better to academia, particularly in their first year of study.

In this study, student resilience was promoted through orientating first-year students on how academic space operate and how mentees should cope with academic demands and pressures.
Baleni et al. (2016) argue that peer tutoring creates space for peer learning, which promotes deep learning among students. In this study, peer learning was promoted through mentorship programmes. Malatji, Mavuso and Malatji (2018) also articulate the importance of partnership in promoting quality education. Archer (1995) in her Social Realist Theory talks of the importance of investing in resources for a successful mentorship programme. In this study, it transpired that, in the three African universities where the study took place, mentorship programmes were sound with all the resources (technological and human resources). Malatji, Makhanikhe, Marhaya and Wadesango (2017) argue that widening access to higher education has implications for teaching and learning. Therefore, programmes such as mentorship come in handy to assist students to cope with their academic work, especially in the first year of their studies. Collier (2022) argues that mentors encourage mentees by sharing their expertise in the form of already-tested university success strategies. Therefore, student mentorship is attributed to student resilience in this study, since the three universities managed to maintain their success rate as compared to the pre-Covid-19 season/academic year.

The other critical component that transpired from this study was that during Covid-19 the three universities moved from face-to-face to blended learning. Therefore, there was a huge demand for student support. In this context, the mentorship programme was re-configured to assist students with online teaching and subject content. For example, lecturer 3 indicated that:

"As universities use the online or blended learning model in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, they should consider how best to facilitate students to form study communities through mentorship programmes outside the physical space of the university campus. Through the use of a variety of strategies, such as involving students in online breakout rooms (virtual learning spaces that are similar to placing students in small groups around a table) or peer group work that is completed online outside of the formal learning environment, it is possible to replicate face-to-face environments where students can form study communities. One other approach is to have online peer mentoring" (Data set: Lecturer 3).

The quotation above shows that universities that participated in this study made rapid changes to accommodate distance education through online teaching. However, in this study, it emerged that most of the students recruited in first year were from disadvantaged communities without any technological knowledge. Therefore, students in their first year of studies experienced some anxiety and pressure when it came to the use of teaching for learning (Zaniewski & Reinholz, 2016). Through the mentorship programme, students were supported to ensure success in their studies and resilience. Malatji et al. (2022) argue that the integration of teaching and learning has many effective methodologies such as self-directed, independent and collaborative. In this study, collaboration was promoted through mentorship, which according to Malatji et al. (2018) promotes quality education since it creates space for peer learning and critical engagements. Archer (1995) argues that for successful integration of technology in higher education, issues of structure, culture and agency should be attended to.

With regards to structure, the university should ensure that there are technological resources such as computers, access to Wi-Fi, human resources and other technological tools such as routers and laptops for students and lectures. There should also be a culture of using technology in the universities, and both students and lecturers should unleash their agency to use technology for teaching and learning. The next theme talks about the role of SI in promoting students' resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Role of SI Programmes in Promoting Student Resilience During the Covid-19 Pandemic

SI was one of the programmes that was used to promote student resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. This study has revealed that out of the three universities that participated in this study only two were using SI as a student-support initiative. When participants were asked how SI contributed to student resilience, they responded as follows:

"Through additional exposure to and practice with the course material in a group context, [the] university's supplemental instruction programme helps students navigate traditionally challenging courses. The natural sciences and mathematics modules are where you'll mostly find this.

To give students more help, SI was frequently scheduled and carried out via online platforms" (Data set: Student Development Practitioner).

Similarly, other participants mentioned that:

"Supplementary instruction creates space for students to be given individual attention. In most cases, SI is used for those problematic subjects/courses such as Mathematics, Physical Science, Psychology and other at-risk courses that students experience a high failure rate. Therefore, through SI, students are paired with the most successful (previously) students in the module to support students in the lower levels (mostly first year) and ensure student success and resilience" (Data set: Student Development Practitioner 6).

Reflecting on the above quotation, SI has played an equal role to mentorship in ensuring maximum support of students, which resulted in student success and resilience in the two universities. The study revealed that SI created a space for students to work in pairs or threes, which allowed SI leaders to give individual attention to students in need of support. Archer (1995) argues that for the success of SI, there should be a culture of assisting one another (co-operative learning) in universities. Baleni et al. (2016) argue that peer learning has a positive implication for the academic performance of students. A similar argument was advanced by Malatji et al. (2018) that when there is good collaboration among students, it results in quality education. Archer (1995) is of the view that for the success of SI, there is a need for an SI leader to fulfil their agential role in assisting and supporting students in need. Therefore, there should be a caring culture among SI leaders, and, according to Social Realists, such culture should be built in the university. The next theme talks about the role of language and writing centres in promoting students' resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Role of Language Writing Centres in Promoting Student Resilience during the Covid-19 Pandemic

The results of this study revealed that out of the three universities that participated in this study, only one had a language writing centre. It emerged very strongly that the language writing centre played a critical role in preparing the student for their academic journey. When participants were asked how this centre assisted with students' resilience, they responded as follows:

"Our university attracts students from very disadvantaged communities, of which most of them English is used as a first additional language. Therefore, we cannot expect them to have language command or better literacy skills. Most students join the university with some challenges when it comes to academic writing and presentation skills. Unfortunately, assessment in the university is mostly through writing and presentations. Therefore, the centre comes in very handy to assist students to settle well and be resilient" (Data set: lecturer 5).

The quotation above indicates that the existence of a language writing centre in any university is a foundation for student success and resilience. Motlhaka et al. (2020) argue that students' willingness to communicate in English was high with friends but that they did not feel confident enough to initiate or continue to communicate in unfamiliar situations such as public speaking. Similar to Motlhaka et al's argument, Archer (1995) in her Social Realist Theory argues that any university should create a culture of writing, especially for first-year students to master the art of academic writing. Therefore, a language writing centre is created to assist students with academic writing, presentation skills and public speaking (Collier, 2017). In this case, students were allowed to submit their assignments to LCs for review before they made an actual submission to their lecturers. Through language writing centres, students were aware of the expectations when it came to assignment completion, presentation, etc., which resulted in their resilience and academic success.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has caused a great change in the world including in the educational systems. Most higher education institutions have shifted to a pure online teaching-based system due to the lockdowns and social-distancing requirements during the pandemic. This unexpected, abrupt and sudden change in the academic environment has exposed students to the risk of failure as they responded differently, with some students showing resilience in coping with difficulties while others did not. In the face of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is a need for higher education institutions to implement programmes that will build student resilience to enable them to be able to face stress caused by various difficulties and to become successful academically. This study concluded that mentorship programmes, SI and language writing centres played a significant role in promoting students' resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The study further concluded that peer learning such as student mentorship, SI and language and writing centres promote critical thinking among students. Therefore, student-support initiatives promoted quality education in the three universities investigated. It is, therefore, recommended that universities should introduce language writing centres to promote academic or scholarly writing in the early years of university. Universities should invest more in student-support initiatives to ensure the utmost resilience among students.

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ASSESSING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE NIGERIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS OF E-LEARNING

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Abstract

One of the sectors that have been significantly affected by the Covid-19 pandemic is education. In Nigeria, before the outbreak, the education system focused solely on face-to-face teaching and learning. Learners in both primary and secondary schools were not permitted to own or display any digital device, such as a phone or computer, in the school environment. Following the announcement of the country's lockdown and school closure owing to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, both teachers and learners were at a loss as to how to continue with teaching and learning. This paper assesses the challenges and effects of Covid-19 on education in Nigeria. The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on education are unusual and unprecedented in history, as school closures, for instance, affected over 1.5 billion learners worldwide. Equally, because the majority of educational institutions continue to use the traditional typologies of virtual learning in traditional classroom settings, learners from developing countries, such as Nigeria, were significantly disadvantaged. This paper, through extant literature reviewed from over 71 recent publications, emphasizes the significance of e-learning in the face of global pandemics and natural disasters, especially during school closures. In this study, Covid-19 was found to have harmed education in Nigeria. In this regard, the benefits and drawbacks of e-learning for policy and practice were discussed.

Keywords: Education, Covid-19, Teachers, Learners, E-learning

Introduction

The role of education as a catalyst for both national and human capital development has been well-documented as of utmost importance to human development (Kyari, Adiuku-Brown, Abechi & Adelakun, 2018). Education is a means of fostering personal growth through the transmission of knowledge, competence, and practices to future generations. It is impossible to overstate the significance of education for a nation's economic, sociocultural, and moral development. Since World War II, the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) has been the most significant to sweep the globe, posing a serious threat to access to education at all levels. Every aspect of society was significantly affected by the pandemic, which had a worldwide effect. With nearly 1.6 billion learners affected globally, the pandemic caused chaos in the educational systems of almost all nations (United Nations, 2020).

By April 2020, 94% of learners, who were enrolled in kindergarten, primary and secondary schools, technical and vocational training centers, adult education programs, and tertiary education systems in over 200 countries were significantly affected by the pandemic (AL-Samarrai, Gangwar & Gala, 2020).

In developing countries, different measures were used to enforce physical distance, including total economic and educational closure (Williamson, Eynon & Potter, 2020). The pandemic harmed education from preschool through to higher education (Viner, Russell, Croker, Packer, Ward, Stansfield & Booy, 2020). For instance, a five-week school closure in South Africa is estimated to have cost the country an estimated USD 504 billion (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2020). Wren-Lewis (2020) states that the twelve-week nationwide school closures cost countries approximately 1% of their GDP, while longer closures are about 3% (Zar, Dawa, Fischer & Castro-Rodriguez, 2020).

As a precaution to contain the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria, the Federal Government, through the Ministry of Education, ordered the closure of all schools on March 20, 2020 (Samuel, 2020). Alozie, Ideh, and Ifelunini (2020) assert that as of June 2020, all schools were shut down, keeping learners at home and impairing the educational progress of 46 billion learners globally. Academic sessions were disrupted as a result of the ripple effect of the pandemic, which negatively affected learners and teachers at all educational levels, including primary, secondary, and tertiary (Sambo, Oyelade & Ibrahim, 2020). The most common way in which the virus tended to spread was through contact with someone who had already been infected (Alozie et al., 2020). Transmission happened when infected people coughed or exhaled the tiny droplets containing the virus. These droplets could get into the mouth or nose of an uninfected person and spread the infection (Ogunode, 2020).

The Federal Ministry of Health in Nigeria reported the first case of the pandemic on February 27, 2020. On the 25th of February 2020, an infected Italian citizen who worked in Nigeria returned from Milan, Italy, to Lagos, Nigeria (The Nigeria Education Working Group 2020). Since then, both in Nigeria and around the world, the number of confirmed cases of infection continued to rise. According to Mahyoob (2020), the United States, United Kingdom, South Korea, Switzerland, Germany, France, Italy, China, Spain, the Netherlands, Norway, Japan, and Iran were all placed under a travel ban by Nigeria due to their high numbers of cases of infection. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization classified Covid-19 as a pandemic, which means that it was considered a disease that had spread over several continents or the entire world (Barbieri, Rodrigues, Dyson & Jordan, 2020).

Human civilization has fought against various global health plagues that have threatened to wipe out humanity off the face of the earth over the years.

It is crucial to note that, in contrast to famines and epidemics that have ravaged humanity throughout history, Covid-19 was exceptional in that no other event had had such a significant effect on education worldwide (Barbieri et al., 2020).

According to Agbele and Oyelade (2020), the Asian flu (1957-1958), which originated in China and resulted in the deaths of over 1 million people worldwide, was another global pandemic. The disease spread quickly, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), with cases reported in Singapore in February 1957, Hong Kong in April 1957, and coastal cities across the United States in the summer of 1957. Chaudhry and Dhawan (2020) also stated that the West African Ebola epidemic devastated West African nations from 2013 to 2016, with over 28,600 cases and 11,325 fatalities reported. Tadesse and Muluye (2020) opined that Guinea was the first country to report a case in December 2013, and Liberia and Sierra Leone were thereafter immediately infected. All of the aforementioned pandemics and plagues have decimated the world and disrupted educational processes in various ways. For instance, closing schools to contain the spread of Covid-19 had detrimental effects on learners, depriving them of their right to an education and placing them at risk in terms of their future (Ramij & Sultana, 2020).

As part of the efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19 in Nigeria, the Federal Ministry of Education, through its Permanent Secretary, ordered the immediate closure of tertiary institutions and secondary and primary schools across the country on 19 March 2020. Additionally, interstate travel was halted, markets were locked, gatherings of more than 10 people for religious purposes were forbidden, and social events such as celebrations, ceremonies, and club meetings were suspended (Obiakok & Adeniran, 2020). Following the government's directive, all public and private schools had to close their doors. The pandemic brought to light significant inequities in the educational system (Anyika, Anikelechi & Thobejane, 2021). In response, various state education agencies issued guidelines for e-learning and teaching in public primary and secondary schools. Based on what is known in developed countries, these efforts may be successful but may have a significantly negative impact on the educational systems of developing countries, such as Nigeria (Obiako & Adeniran, 2020). Learners in primary and secondary schools in rural and marginalized communities were disadvantaged owing to the inequitable access to the resources and skills required to transition to new learning modalities in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic, which fundamentally altered learning globally. Moreover, university students who could learn using e-learning applications, contend that internet infrastructure and electricity supply were often poor and unreliable (Agbele & Oyelade, 2020). Therefore, e-learning and teaching, such as online learning apps, TV schooling, for primary and secondary learners, and online university courses, was essentially impossible in learning institutions in many rural and marginalized communities in Nigeria.

Learning from home could also be a challenge, leaving a large portion of learners behind because of its dependence on educational levels and supervision by parents. In Nigeria and across the world, all parties involved in the education sector were concerned about these challenges, given the fact that a sizeable proportion of learners continued to experience challenges of access to education, despite the majority of states in Nigeria having transitioned to virtual learning and teaching platforms, such as radio and television (Obododike & Okekeokosisi, 2020). Deborah (2020) states that most schools often lack the infrastructure required to successfully implement e-learning and teaching. Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to assess the effects of school closures caused by Covid-19 on the education system in Nigeria. This paper also examines the benefits and drawbacks which resulted from the use of e-learning and teaching in Nigeria as a substitute for face-to-face learning and teaching.

In light of the complexities regarding the reopening of schools around the world, a study of this kind is both relevant and beneficial. The intention is to draw the government's and stakeholders' attention to the consequences of school closures and the responses required to ameliorate the losses. Policy development and planning for education during the post-pandemic period may thus benefit from this study.

Theoretical Framework

This paper is underpinned by the E-learning Theory, as proposed by Karthik et al. (2019). The e-learning theory, which comprises the notion of cognitive load, underpins the use of educational technology to enhance learning (Karthik, Chandrasekhar, David & Kumar, 2019). The principles of cognitive load are the foundation of the e-learning theory (Sweller, Van Merrinboer & Paas, 2019). Karthik et al. (2019) define cognitive load as the total amount of mental energy expended in performing a task, which could be divided into germane, intrinsic, and extraneous efforts. Because working memory has a limited capacity and the brain will experience overload if learners, for instance, are exposed to significant amounts of information, balancing these three types of the load is essential for promoting learning efficiency (Janelli, 2018). Based on this, Aparicio, Bacao, and Oliveira (2016) developed 11 design principles for appropriately managing germane and intrinsic loads and reducing extraneous cognitive load. E-learning theory includes these types of cognitive loads in addition to the design principles and techniques. E-learning Theory focuses on how technologies can be used and designed to create new learning opportunities and promote effective learning. Figure 1 below presents a model of E-Learning Theory in respect of its concepts, constructs, and presuppositions. E-learning theory is then proposed as a result of the combination of the two constructs, namely, cognitive load and design principles.

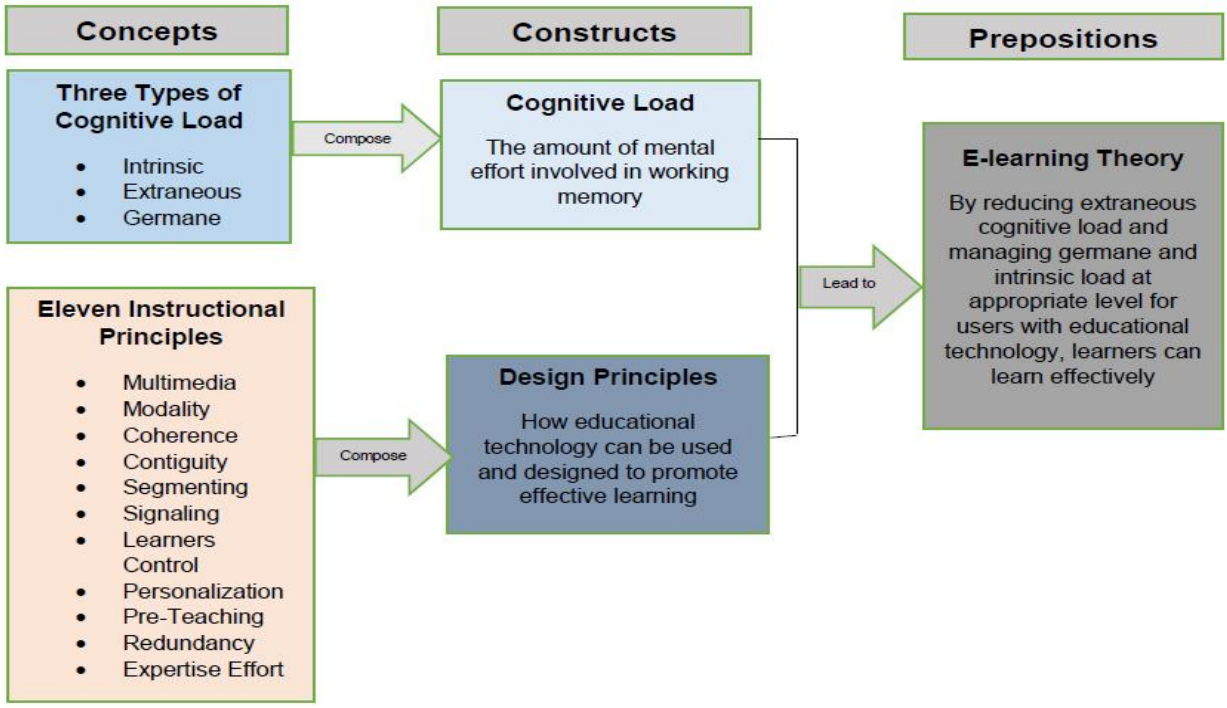


Figure 1: *A Model of E-learning Theory (Karthik et al., 2019)*

The three types of cognitive loads are intrinsic, germane, and extraneous, which can be determined according to the amount of mental effort required. Intrinsic load is the amount of mental effort required by the difficulty of the material in, for instance, lessons, which is largely determined by instructional goals (Karthik et al., 2019). On the other hand, germane load refers to the amount of mental effort required by instructional activities to advance instructional goals. Thirdly, extraneous load refers to mental work that is unrelated to the learning objective and thus wastes finite mental resources (Karthik et al., 2019). Collectively, these typologies constitute the notion of cognitive load (Karthik et al., 2019).

As indicated above, this paper uses E-learning Theory to understand the benefits and drawbacks of e-learning and teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. The e-learning theory model was implemented in many developing countries, including Nigeria, to promote teaching and learning within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. This model assisted teachers to break down the content of work so that learners could learn in stages. The literature argues that learners in self-paced e-learning environments can benefit from the intrinsic cognitive load (see, for instance, Karthik et al., 2019). Furthermore, the E-learning Theory can assist teachers to demonstrate lesson content using simple digital tools for text, audio, and visual communication to reduce learners' boundaries. In this regard, teachers can use compelling graphics, audio, and text to reduce redundant information, focus on critical information and provide performance support to help learners increase their external memory.

Methodology

This paper applies the existing e-learning theoretical frameworks suggested by how studies in developed nations differ, by highlighting gaps in taking into account the unique characteristics of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. The theoretical frameworks for e-learning currently in use and those suggested by studies in developed nations differ in this paper in that they do not elevate gaps such as failures to take into account the unique characteristics of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nigeria. For this paper, this is done with a clear and intentional focus on the benefits and drawbacks of e-learning and teaching. In addition to other Covid-19 pandemic factors that have already been studied, this paper discusses e-learning and teaching. This is based on the understanding that it is critical to comprehend the challenges and effects of Covid-19 as they played out in the education system in Nigeria. Thus, covered in this paper are the benefits of e-learning and the drawbacks of achieving using e-learning and teaching.

For this study, journal articles on e-learning/online education were sought, identified, and chosen. Two stages comprised the process of search and selecting the relevant articles. The first stage involved the identification of academic databases. Scopus, World Journal of Innovative Research (WJIR), Taylor and Francis, Creative Education Journal, and International Journal of Educational Research and Management Technology (IJERMT) were chosen for the literature search. The decision to choose these databases was based on the fact that they contain a wide range of high-quality peer-reviewed journals regarding research on the Covid-19 pandemic, especially in respect of e-learning and teaching. Stage two involved conducting a literature search using the following keywords: Covid-19 pandemic, education, challenges, teachers, e-learning, learners and benefits, and drawbacks. Only journal articles written in English were retrieved and used. One hundred and fifty (150) articles were retrieved during the preliminary search. Due to the overlaps between e-learning and online literature across the five databases, 103 patents and other invalid articles were removed. As a result, 70 articles directly relating to this paper and relevant to Nigeria as a case study, were retrieved. These articles served as a sample of the existing literature on the effects of Covid-19 on e-learning and teaching.

Findings

Effects of School Closures on Learners

One of the best public resources for enhancing a learner's skills, knowledge, and abilities is school attendance (Wellington & Clarence, 2021). Consequently, within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the prolonged period of closure of schools had a significantly negative effect on the learners' development and growth (Larsen, 2020).

Putra, Liriwati, Tahrim, Syafrudin, and Aslan (2020) have argued that it is important to note that while schooling provides adequate learning, academic growth, and development, learners are dispossessed of such opportunities when schools close. For vulnerable learners who have fewer or no educational opportunities outside of school, school closures have significantly negative consequences. For instance, Putra et al. (2020) reported that in many countries, examinations had to be postponed or canceled as a result of the outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent closure of schools, colleges, and institutions. This disrupted the education of learners globally. According to Larsen (2020), International Examinations, such as Cambridge O Level, Cambridge AICE Diploma, and Cambridge Pre-U May/June 2020 examinations were canceled. Although teachers may predict grades for candidates, this may not always accurately reflect the learners' performance, because some teachers may be biased and assign grades that are consistent with the actual performance (Miller & Donohue, 2020). The Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACTweare among the international examinations that were canceled as a result of Covid-19. Ahmed, Ahmed, Saeed, Alhumyani, Abdel-Khalek, and Abu-Zinadah (2021) observed that learners in West African countries, who were supposed to sit for the Senior Secondary Certificate in Examination (WAEC), had their exams postponed. In this regard, Edem, Adzovie, and Jibril (2022) conclude that the consequences for learners were that thousands were forced to postpone the start of their undergraduate studies to a later year, given the fact that the admissions processes for 2020/2021 would have concluded by the time their results were released.

Effects of School Closures on Teachers

Covid-19 has had a lasting effect on the lives of many teachers around the world (Mumtaz, Saqulain & Mumtaz, 2021). To finish the 2019-2020 school year, millions of teachers had to shift or transition from their traditional classroom routines to e-learning and teaching. Jacob, Abigeal, and Lydia (2020), for instance, have reported that many teachers experienced emotional distress as a result of inadequate guidance and unrealistic expectations, a lack of peer interaction, and stress caused by the global pandemic itself. When teachers returned to the classroom, their social-emotional needs had to be met, which did not happen in many cases. For instance, Olowo (2021) reported that many teachers, particularly those working in private schools, were not paid during the period when their schools were closed. As a result, some of them were unable to meet the basic needs of their families (Olowo, 2021). In this regard, the Covid-19 pandemic wreaked havoc on many teachers' lives, who had to deal with a variety of psychological problems, including anxiety, worry, fear, and stress, all of which contributed to challenges relating to teaching and learning (Agbele & Oyelade, 2020). In addition, the majority of teachers in public schools, although technically unemployed during school closures, continued to receive their wages, while their counterparts in the private sector did not receive such economic protection (Agbele & Oyelade, 2020).

In this respect, teachers employed in the private sector, as well as those who are not on the government payroll and rely on parental contributions, were particularly hit hard in most developing countries, including Nigeria. In addition to this economic disadvantage, the lack of professional development for teachers and training for learners in the use of e-learning was a major challenge (Anyika, Anikelechi & Thobejane, 2021). This made it difficult for teachers and learners to use the newly introduced technologies and learning systems that were supposed to assist them in transitioning to e-learning and teaching, resulting in severe learning losses.

Effects of School Closures on Families and Parents/Guardians

Onyema, Eucheria, Obafemi, Sen, Atonye, Sharma, and Alsayed (2020) contend that the Covid-19 pandemic, which has wreaked havoc on the lives of many people, has caused anxiety in many families. Only a few wealthy families and parents could arrange for their children to continue learning when school closures were introduced to contain the spread of the pandemic (Onyema et al., 2020). In many families, parents and guardians experienced significant stress because they had to provide childcare and monitor their children's learning (Oyediran, Omoare, Adejobi & Fasasi, 2020). For instance, in some instances, this increased the risk of losing their jobs, causing unnecessary stress and decreasing their productivity in the workplace (Oyediran et al., 2020). Some parents were compelled to leave their children at home alone because they could not leave their day jobs, which exposed them to a range of risks (Ogunbayo, Aigbavboa, Thwala, Akinradewo, Ikuabe & Adekunle, 2022). On the other hand, Mumtaz, Saqulain, and Mumtaz (2021) reported that during the long period of school closure, many less privileged families had to abandon their children's education, exposing them to significant risks, such as child slavery, child marriages or unwanted pregnancies and oppression, among others, emerging from the disruption of their education by the pandemic. In addition, as reported by Putra, Liriwati, Tahrim, Syafrudin, and Aslan (2020) dropout rates among learners tended to rise and many vulnerable learners did not return to schools when schools reopened.

Complexities in the Transition to e-learning and Teaching

The process of disseminating information or teaching through online platforms or modalities is known as e-learning. According to Maphosa (2021), in e-learning teaching and learning processes, digital technologies are often used to allow teachers and learners to collaborate virtually, that is, even if they are not in the same room. Celestine and Nonyelum (2018) contend that e-learning was one of the primary methods of instruction available for teaching learners at a time when social distance was essential to contain the spread of Covid-19. In general, digital technologies enabled many countries to move many facets of their service provisioning, including health, education, social and economic aspects, to online platforms, (Ogunbayo, 2021).

Within the context of education, e-learning, blended learning, web-based learning, computer-mediated learning, open learning, and other terms are frequently used to describe the modalities of teaching and learning virtually. As suggested by Ogunbayo and Mhlanga (2022), it is theoretically possible to teach and learn from anywhere, at any time, in any pattern, and through any form of media, such as a mobile device or computer with internet access or a radio or television set. That is, teachers and learners can continue to teach and learn, whether they are at home or in a learning environment.

According to Eli-Chukwu, Igbokwe, Ifebude, Nmadu, Iguodala, Uma, and Akudo (2022), there are two types of e-learning environments, namely, synchronous and asynchronous learning environments. A synchronous learning environment is designed so that learners can attend live lectures and interact with and receive immediate feedback from their teachers in real time (Ogunbayo & Mhlanga, 2021). This suggests that synchronous learning can potentially provide access to a range of opportunities for social interaction. On the other hand, asynchronous learning environments are often poorly structured because learning material is dispersed across numerous learning systems and forums, rather than available as live lectures or classes (Wang, Huang & Quek, (2018). In such an environment, instant feedback and response are often impossible (Chen & Wang, 2018). Previously, e-learning and teaching were important for assisting institutions to overcome the barrier of educational continuity during times of global crisis (Ajegbomogun, Okunlaya & Alawiye 2017). When an earthquake destroyed almost all of their infrastructure and face-to-face interactions were no longer possible, the University of Camerino turned to e-learning teaching (Amendola, Perali & Vitali, 2017). When the University of Canterbury was hit by a major earthquake in 2011, e-learning education helped the university stay open (Ayebi-Arthur, 2017). This catastrophe recently took the form of Covid-19, which compelled all educational establishments to close to contain the spread of the virus. As a result, many higher education institutions, entrepreneurs, and federal and state governments were utilizing e-learning to continue teaching and learning procedures (Mseleku, 2020). Several Nigerian state governments, including those in Lagos, Ogun, Enugu, Ibadan, Nasarawa, Ekiti, and Akwa Ibom have suggested e-learning as a potential remedy during times of disaster (Elzainy, El Sadik & Al Abdulmonem, 2020). A complete e-learning education, in general, necessitates a detailed lesson plan, teaching materials, such as audio and video content, and technical support teams (Elzainy et al., 2020).

In some parts of the world, some schools, especially private schools, used e-learning programs to engage their learners in education during school closures. A successful and effective learning environment requires the use of a variety of available e-learning tools. A combination of audio, videos, and text can be used by lecturers to connect with their learners and keep their lectures human (Liu, Glowatz, Zappatore, Gao, Jia & Bucciero, 2018).

This promotes the creation of a cooperative and interactive learning environment where learners can provide feedback, ask questions and receive engaging instruction (Ogunbayo & Aigbavboa 2019). However, there are some drawbacks to e-learning and teaching, as evidenced in the context of Nigeria, owing to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Benefits of e-learning Education in Nigeria

The shift from face-to-face to e-learning and teaching during the context of Covid-19 has resulted in significant benefits for education. In teacher-centered education, the teacher is the source of knowledge and learners are the recipients thereof. On the other hand, learner-centered education emphasizes the importance of the participation of learners in the creation of knowledge in a learning context. In a learner-centered approach, teachers act as assistants for learners, assisting them to set and achieve their standards. Igere (2020) postulates that e-learning is a learner-centered approach and allowed for a great deal of flexibility in terms of time and location, which was useful as a way of saving education from the abyss of the global pandemic. E-learning provided teachers and learners with the abilities that they are likely to require in the future. E-learning, according to Bubou and Job (2020), has been characterized as enhanced learning, blended learning, and an online approach. E-learning and teaching use technology to enhance learning quality, creativity, and active participation (Bubou & Job, 2020). On the other hand, blended learning often combines online and in-person instruction (Bubou & Job, 2020). The online approach implies that the course content must be provided electronically (Bubou & Job, 2020). The adoption of e-learning during the context of Covid-19 provided a convenient way of teaching and learning for teachers and learners as it allowed them to learn whenever and wherever they are (Obododike & Okekeokosisi, 2020). Abbasi, Ahmed, Sajjad, Alshahrani, Saeed, Sarfaraz, and Abduljabbar (2020) contend that e-learning potentially made education learner-centered and allowed learners to learn on their own, while teachers served as their supervisors.

Ejimonye, Eneogu, and Omaliko (2021) confirm that learners in e-learning can plan their schedules instead of having to make personal sacrifices to meet their teacher and traditional university attendance requirements. Literature suggests that self-paced learning can increase learner satisfaction and reduce stress, resulting in improved learning outcomes for learners. Effectiveness, reusability, convenience, and scalability were other benefits of the introduction of e-learning (Ejimonye, Eneogu & Omaliko, 2021). Uju and Olofu (2020) state that e-learning potentially reduced learning time by 25% to 60%. When combined with the benefits of self-paced e-learning, this potentially provided effective learning solutions for both learners and teachers. Changing school curriculums in traditional learning institutions is a long and complicated process that is often avoided due to its complexity. However, the outbreak of Covid-19 and the subsequent closure forced governments to switch from traditional to e-learning and teaching within a short space of time.

These changes to curricula and learning materials were not only based on theory but also on real evidence generated from real situations brought about by the outbreak of Covid-19 and subsequent school closures (Uju & Olofu, 2020).

Drawbacks of e-learning Education in Nigeria

Despite the numerous benefits of e-learning, learners faced several drawbacks that ultimately led to either limited or negative outcomes. In their study, Egielewa, Idogho, Iyalomhe, and Cirella (2022) argued that the remoteness that sometimes came with e-learning and teaching often led to ineffective interaction between teachers and learners. Due to the lack of in-person interactions with teachers, e-learning may be less effective than traditional educational methods (Egielewa et al., 2022).

Because e-learning assessments are frequently conducted online, it is much more difficult to prohibit unethical behaviors, such as plagiarism and cheating (Obododike & Cokekeokosisi, 2020). The most obvious drawback of e-learning during the context of Covid-19 was the lack of interpersonal interaction between teachers and learners (Nwagwu, 2020). Since learner-learner interaction is much less of a concern than learner-teacher interaction, communication during e-learning and teaching was inadequate.

Igbokwe, Okeke-James, Anyanwu, and Eli-Chukwu (2020) emphasized that the majority of learners prefer to work independently to avoid interaction with their classmates, while others require interaction. A cultural barrier was yet another significant drawback of e-learning and teaching (Igbokwe et al., 2020). Lawal, Haruna, Kurfi, and David (2020) in their study assessed the role of cultural traits, such as collectivism and individualism, in evaluating the success of e-learning. The study concluded that collectivism and individualism have a significant impact on organizations and people. Prince (2021) states that the absence of conducive environments, with fewer distractions that could divert learners' attention during e-learning and teaching, is a challenge in many contexts. Alalawi (2021) argues that a conducive learning environment is critical as the environment has an impact on the learners' capacity to learn and may determine whether or not learners learn and succeed.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for the introduction of e-learning and teaching in developing contexts, such as Nigeria, based on the findings presented in the above section:

- To effectively reduce inequality, post-pandemic curriculum reforms would be necessary and will require government assistance in the form of targeted investments as well as a complete overhaul of the educational sector.

- During the post-pandemic period, the government should recognize the importance of constructing excellent schools and furnishing them with cutting-edge technological solutions and infrastructure that can support e-learning and teaching during school closures.
- The government should integrate e-learning approaches into the school calendar and ensure that teachers and schools strictly implement the approaches.
- Both teachers and learners must be furnished with and allowed to use e-learning devices to support teaching and learning. Teachers must set aside time to plan and develop lessons that are creative, interactive, meaningful, learner-centered, and group-based.
- Parents must be empowered to supervise the use of e-learning approaches by their children to build the necessary capabilities.

Conclusion

The effects of Covid-19 on education in Nigeria have elevated the value of e-learning. The disruption of the education of the majority of learners in Nigeria because of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent school closures were major drawbacks to the country's economic and human development. In the coming years, economies and societies, including that of Nigeria, will continue to feel the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Disasters will still happen and technology will almost certainly continue to assist nations to ensure the continued provision of services, such as education. Therefore, countries have no choice but to adapt to the new realities and embrace change to continue to grow. The Covid-19 pandemic has had the benefit of forcing many schools in developing countries, which had previously been reluctant to adopt e-learning and teaching, to make the necessary modifications. In this day and age, the benefits of e-learning teaching cannot be overstated. If used wisely, the catastrophe, brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic, could have benefits for the education sector. For instance, the introduction of e-learning and teaching could assist to address issues of teacher demand, in which one teacher can instruct a large group of learners using an e-learning platform. However, e-learning pedagogy faces several challenges, including flexibility, pedagogy, affordability, insecure educational policies, accessibility, and lifelong learning. Following these, this paper explores some important issues regarding the introduction of e-learning solutions as a solution to the challenge of educational disruption caused by pandemics and crises in Nigeria. In a country such as Nigeria, education should be a top priority of the government, with an understanding of the importance of access to education for all learners to be educated, especially those from low-income families, as this will contribute to the country's economic and human development. The focus on education can be a crucial investment in the country’s productivity, human capital, and development.

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ZIMBABWEAN HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS' PSYCHOLOGICAL WELLBEING DURING COVID-19: A HOLISTIC AND CRITICAL REALIST ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Zimbabwean higher education was not spared by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. To avoid on-campus infections, Zimbabwean universities, like their global peers suspended classes and asked resident students to vacate their accommodation. Academics, parents and students alike, expressed concern over the possibility of the 2020 academic year being lost. However very little, if any attention was paid to students' psychological wellbeing despite the huge potential that there was of it being negatively affected by the pandemic. Using the holistic approach to wellbeing, this study investigated Zimbabwean higher education students' psychological wellbeing during COVID-19. A mixed methods approach which employed an online questionnaire was used to gather data from 36 students enrolled at universities both in Zimbabwe and internationally. In the light of the generally negative sentiments expressed against the support which the students received and based on the holistic approach to wellbeing, we argue that the students' psychological wellbeing should have been conceptualised as a function of interrelated dimensions such as the physical, social and spiritual. The paper concludes by suggesting a conceptual framework which would not only have been useful during the COVID-19 pandemic to enhance students' resilience but one from which insights could be drawn in dealing with any future disruptions to higher education in the country.

Keywords: COVID-19; Psychological Wellbeing; Institutions of Higher Learning; Students; Holistic Critical Realism.

Introduction: Problem Statement

The effects of the corona virus disease commonly known as COVID-19 pandemic which started in the Chinese city of Wuhan in 2019 were first felt in Zimbabwe when a prominent journalist, Zororo Makamba succumbed to the disease on the 23 of March, 2020 (www.timeslive.co.za). In a bid to curb the spread of the virus, the Zimbabwean government, taking a cue from global responses, put in a place a number of measures, epitomised by a national lockdown which, amongst other elements, entailed restrictions on movement by people and social gatherings of all types. The higher education sector in the country was not spared the effects of these restrictions. This saw universities and other institutions of higher education being forced to cancel all contact classes and students being asked to vacate on-campus accommodation.

At the time of writing this chapter, towards the end of June, 2020, three months after the national lockdown had been instituted, although there were reports of the government having asked institutions of higher learning to allow final year students to return to campuses, there was not clarity on how the rest of the students would complete the academic year (Mashininga, 2020).

At the end of June 2020 there were still a number of constraints to the suggested introduction of online learning as had been done by many other universities in Africa and the rest of the world. For example, student leaders complained about the non-viability of the option, citing the high costs of data and devices which are beyond the reach of the majority of students (universityworldnews.com). The Zimbabwean government had requested the telecommunications companies to zero-rate data for the university websites but they had been no response to this request, with fears being expressed that this would bankrupt the companies which even prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in the country were struggling under the effects of a severely constrained economic environment (www.inhea.orga./ahen /Zimbabwe).

Given the severity of the impact of the COVID-19 on other areas of human life, the possibility of it affecting the psychological wellbeing of students was realistic. This is confirmed by research carried out in China in this area by June 2020 which showed that as a result of the pandemic, a significant number of students experienced severe, moderate or mild anxiety (Cao, Guoqiang, Fang & Han, 2020). Attributable to this, according to the study, were factors such as worries arising from uncertain academic futures; the economic impact of the pandemic on family or students' incomes; the strain of living with parents; fear of being infected and, in some cases, the burden of caring for those infected or affected by the virus. Even under normal circumstances, university students generally experience psychological distress due to academic, institutional and other psycho-social factors all of which often result in demotivation to study; poor academic performance and high drop-out rates from institutions of higher learning, (American College Health Association, 2019; Kormi-Nouri, MacDonald, Farahani, Trost & Shokri, 2015; Wickens, 2011). The chances of the COVID-19 pandemic having a significant negative impact on their psychological wellbeing would therefore be very high.

In countries close to Zimbabwe such as South Africa, the few studies that have been carried out on psychological wellbeing of university students revealed that some students experience psychological problems as a result of challenges such as poverty and the attempts to hide it; financial insecurity which leads to shortage of food, inability to secure suitable accommodation on, or close to, campus and buy textbooks, stationery and toiletries. In addition, some of the students reported experiencing chronic depression and anxiety because of institutionalised racism, homophobia and poor epistemic access notwithstanding the physical access to universities (Munroe, Quayle, Simpson & Bansely, 2013).

Another problem reported in the studies was alcoholism and substance abuse both arising from, and leading to, a range of psychological challenges. Disabled students who took part in the studies also raised concerns around lack of sensitivity to their needs (Matshediso, 2010; Mutanga, 2017).

From the foregoing discussion, it can be concluded that the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated an already stressful situation for many university students globally, especially as it meant a switch to modes of independent learning which many of them might not have been used to (Grubic, Badovinac and Johri, 2020). However, Edwards and Fenwick (2017) argue that the use of digital technologies in higher education teaching and learning is often presented as the panacea to the challenges of pedagogical inefficiencies; restricted participation and inability by students to learn independently without due attention being paid to how these technologies are actually neither inherently part of the way in which students are ready to learn nor academics prepared to teach. As a result, they often perpetuate inequalities, isolation and frustration amongst both students and academics. In addition, a report based on a survey conducted by Youngminds (2020) also established that for 83% of the young participants, the COVID-19 pandemic aggravated pre-existing mental health conditions which were possibly attributable to the indefinite suspension of classes; forced changes to routine and social disconnectedness amongst other factors.

In the light of the variations in socio-economic conditions across different countries, there would be differences in the impact of the pandemic on students' psychological wellbeing across national boundaries. It was on this basis and, as far as we knew, the dearth of research on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' psychological wellbeing in Zimbabwe that we decided to conduct the present study. The study was premised on the mixed methods approach (Maxwell, & Loonus, 2003). Data were gathered using an online questionnaire which was targeted at Zimbabwean students enrolled at different universities in the country. Some of the responses to the questions in the questionnaire were analysed qualitatively while others were analysed quantitatively. Drawing insights from the holistic approach to wellbeing we argue that there was a need for the students' psychological wellbeing, during the COVID-19 pandemic, to be looked at from different perspectives. We, therefore, conclude by suggesting a framework on the basis of which Zimbabwean university students' psychological wellbeing could have been conceptualised in a bid to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their wellbeing. In times of crises which have the potential to disrupt higher education in the country, the framework can also be relied on to harness the agency of various structures such as university leadership, student representative councils and parents, not only for the collective good of Zimbabwean higher education, but for the enhancement of the country's efforts to rediscover a positive socio-economic development trajectory through higher education.

Students' Psychological Wellbeing- Crystalising the Concept

Arguably more than any other crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic put the spotlight on university students' psychological wellbeing globally.

This was because of the disruption caused by the pandemic to students' lives, for example, in terms of their academics, accommodation arrangements as well as co-curricular activities such as sports, cultural engagements and community service. Dodge, Daly, Huyton and Saunders (2012) define wellbeing as a state in which an individual experiences optimal equilibrium across the physical, social and psychological aspects of their existence, on one hand, and physical, social and psychological challenges which he or she faces from the environment in which they live. Three key implications can be derived from this definition. The first of these is that wellbeing is a multi-dimensional construct which interconnects one's body, mind and soul. Amos, Pearce, Rossouw and Rossouw (2019) identify dimensions such as the physical; mental or intellectual; psychological or emotional; social, spiritual, financial, environmental and occupational as collectively contributing to an individual's wellbeing. Secondly, wellbeing can be seen as an outcome of one's health which itself is achieved through wellness processes and programmes (Amos, *et al.,* 2019).

Burns (2016, p.1) defines psychological wellbeing as the "inter- and intra-individual levels of positive functioning that can include one's relatedness with others and self-referent attitudes that include one's sense of mastery and personal growth." Thus, the individual's inner emotions and how these manifests in relation to the environment around them is critical to the psychological state of an individual. Ryff (1989) views psychological well-being as the level of confidence that people possess in relation to meaningful control over their lives and activities. Students' psychological well-being can, therefore, be referred to as the intrinsic and extrinsic feelings of positive functioning the students feel as they relate to others and to the environment in which they study.

The concept of psychological well-being can be viewed from two facets. The first of these is subjective well-being which refers to the extent to which individuals experience positive feelings of happiness and satisfaction. Subjective well-being is "a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his life" (Diener, Lucas and Osili, 2005:63). The second facet of psychological well-being is related to feelings of meaningfulness and purpose with one's life (Diener, 2000).

With specific reference to students, Negovan (2010:89), argues that their psychological well-being cannot be measured solely from the psychological perspective.

Rather, it must also be linked to the social aspects of their lives, and provides four dimensions of students' psychosocial well-being, relevant to this study, which include "subjective well-being related to everyday events, subjective well-being related to faculty events, psychological well-being and social well-being." This is in keeping with the holistic approach to wellbeing which suggests that people's psychological well-being is a function of a good balance amongst various dimensions of wellbeing Amos *et al.,* 2019). University students, for example, can only experience psychological wellbeing if they are in good health in dimensions such as the physical, social, financial and spiritual.

The relationship between the dimensions of wellbeing explains why a student experiencing social problems can eventually experience emotional or psychological problems as well. This paper will, therefore, link the social environment of students to their psychological well-being as they are interlinked and interdependent dimensions of their lives.

Psychological well-being is grounded in two philosophical foundations, namely the Hedonic and Eudaimonic Philosophies. The underlying principles of the Hedonic philosophy focus on boosting an individual's life with positive elements such as joy, happiness, , satisfaction and reduction of and suffering (Ryan and Deci, 2001). The philosophy fits in well within the fundamentals of subjective well-being.The Eudaimonic philosophy is more concerned with the purposeful aspect of psychological well-being. Thus, Ryff (1989) posits that the focus of the Eudaimonic philosophy is living one's life to the fullest, self-actualisation through autonomy, purpose in life, self-acceptance, positive relations with others and environmental mastery. Ryff (1989) proposed a model that distinguishes between the two philosophies as shown in Figure 1.

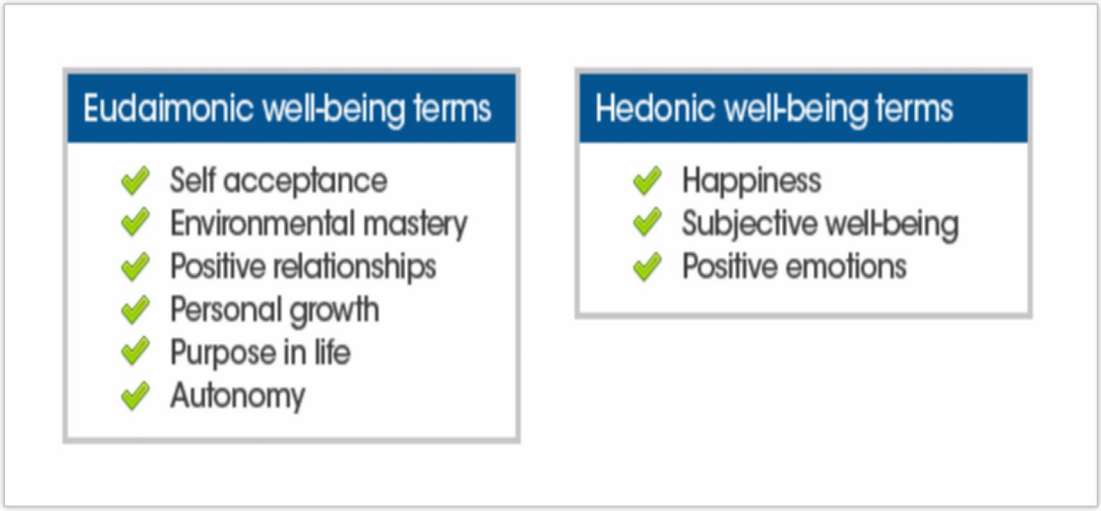


Figure 1: Eudaimonic-Hedonic Well-being. Adapted from (Ryff, 1989).

Other scholars also agree that psychological well-being is a multi-dimensional construct, complex in its facets, hence it cannot be measured from a single frontier (Armsteden &Greenberg, 1987; Brown & Ryan, 2003); Borgonon & Pal, 2016; Roslan, Ahmad, Nabila & Ghiam, 2017; Harding, Lopez Klanin-Yobas, 2019). The concept also shows a relationship between psychological well-being, satisfaction, physical activities, mindfulness and life-esteem (Biddle & Asare, 2011). Based on the various aspects discussed earlier, psychological well-being can therefore be looked at as a multidimensional construct encompassing the realms of subjective, psychological and social well-being. In this study, the psychological wellbeing of Zimbabwean students from institutions of higher learning was therefore analysed from the multidimensional perspective.

While hedonic elements of well-being appear simple and more relatable, it is important to unpack the eudaimonic elements.

Self-acceptance relates to thinking and feeling positively about oneself (Ryff, 1989). The implication is that when students have positive thoughts about themselves, they inherently feel good leading to a highly positive psychological well-being. Feelings of goodness about oneself directly influence how one relates to others hence positive relationships with others is an integral aspect of psychological well-being. The ability to interact with others in a warm and trusting manner is key to increased positive psychological well-being (Biddle & Asare, 2011). Furthermore, for positive psychological well-being to be fully developed, one must be driven towards a specific purpose in life and his can be augmented by having a set of goals and objectives as well as a plan to work towards achieving them (Tai& Karabulutlu, 2005). When students enrol at a university the aim is to complete and fulfil a set of life goals. It was therefore, in our view, necessary to seek an understanding of the psychological well-being of Zimbabwean university students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the face of disrupted goals and objectives.

Ryff (1989) in her model of eudaimonic elements of psychological well-being includes personal growth which points to continuous development of oneself. Personal growth is thus indicative of a quest for self-actualisation. Any challenges to the process of personal growth may then impede positive psychological well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Individuals are in constant engagement with their environment such that environmental mastery is important in the development of positive psychological mastery (Ryff, 1989). Roslan et a., l (2017:36) explain environmental mastery as “the ability to adapt, change or create one’s environment according to one’s needs through physical and mental activities.” The COVID-19 pandemic brought with sudden twists and changes to everyday needs and activities of students, implying a possible shift in their psychological well-being as well. Finally, autonomy as a eudaimonic element refers to one’s independence and ability to cope with various social pressures (Roslan *et al.*, 2017).

Thus, hedonic and eudaimonic elements play an integral role in developing psychological well-being in individuals. Students therefore require positive psychological well-being in order to operate at full capacity and to achieve their academic goals and objectives.

As pointed out earlier, the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic potentially had an effect on the psychological well-being of students just as it affected everyone globally. . Harding *et al.,* (2019) in a research on predictors of psychological well-being among higher education students discovered many factors that have an impact on psychological well-being with stress and lack of planning having the greatest impact on the students. From this research it emerged that psychological well-being is affected by two types of factors; internal resource protective factors and external resource protection factors (Harding *et al.,* 2019).

Internal resource protective factors include mindfulness (awareness and attention to current situations), resilience (the ability to cope with adversity effectively and self-efficacy (self-evaluation with regards to one's capability to complete tasks). External resource protection factors on the other hand include support from family, friends, significant others and institutions that the students engage with (Harding *et al.,* 2019; Bandura, 1977; Donovan & Macaskill, 2013).

In corporate contexts of psychological wellbeing, Cilliers and Flotman (2016) suggest that the individual brings psychological capital to the workspace. On the back of his or her psychological capital, the individual demonstrates capacities such as resilience, optimism, hope and self-efficacy. These capabilities can be used to account for factors linked to how individuals perform their duties in the workplace. Examples of such factors include commitment, motivation, goal-directed energy engagement, performance and resilience. The notion of psychological capital can be applied to university students in terms of how they relate to their academics and respond to institutional factors which affect their lives. For example, students might find a lot of meaning in their academic work if their self-efficacy and optimism are allowed to flourish. Self-efficacy, according to Stajkovic and Luthans (1998) is an individual's capacity to muster the requisite levels of motivation and cognitive resources for the successful performance of tasks in a particular context. Their academic performance and contribution to institutional life and activities can also flourish in situations where their motivation and creativity are supported, thus engendering both a sense of psychological wellbeing.

Celliers and Flotman (2016) add that in organisational contexts, psychological wellbeing can also be looked at through the lens of the job-demands-resource (JD-R) model. This model looks at different occupations as having two categories of ways in which employees relate to them. These are job demands and job resources (Bakketr and Demerouti, 2007).

Job demands are those dimensions of the job constituting a risk to employees' psychological well-being while job-resources are those resources that are part of the job and can be deployed to the achievement of organizational goals. Both job demands and job resources can be organizational, social, psychological and physical in nature. However, job resources are used as a buffer for effects of job-demands (Demerouti and Barker, 2011). The JD-R model can be extrapolated to the psychological relationship between students and their institutions. If we replace the 'J' with an 'L' which stands for 'learning' in its broadest sense, we come up with a learning-demands-resource (LD-R) model which can be used to explain the balance between the risks that certain aspects of the learning environment to which students are exposed, and the resources availed to them to achieve their learning goals, on one hand, and the influence which this has on their psychological wellbeing, on the other. Where students are supported with adequate learning resources to meet learning demands, their psychological wellbeing is likely to flourish. The reverse can be said to be generally true.

Insights from Positive Psychology

Positive psychology, as its name suggests, is a branch of psychology whose focus is on enhancing people's strengths and virtues and how these show themselves in their experiences (Snyder & Lopez, 2005). This is based on the view that pathologizing problems tends to perpetuate those (Amos *et al*., 2019). Zimbabwean university students' psychological wellbeing could have been conceptualised around a framework based on positive aspects of wellbeing such as care, responsiveness and continuity of learning and teaching. The value in adopting such a paradigm is that its foundation rests on the appreciation of the notion that, inherent in every human being is the agency for the realization of positive aspects such as pleasure, optimism, courage and skill (Petersen, Park & Seligman, 2006). An approach to wellbeing based on this notion enabled us to formulate a strategy for achieving it whose architecture is characterized by positivity and not negativity.

Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods design. Schoonenboom and Burke (2017) describe this design as being constituted by a combination of more than one quantitative and one qualitative component of research. Among the strengths of mixed methods research are the possibilities that it provides for the researcher to corroborate results; clarify results found in one approach through those from another approach; draw a wide range of insights from a data gathered using different approaches (Schoonenboom and Burke, 2017). This in turn helps to strengthen the conclusions drawn from the results and the recommendations thereof (Maxwell and Loonus, 2003).

In this study, the quantitative approach to data gathering was employed in the form of an online questionnaire which the students who participated in the study had to complete.

The first section of the questionnaire asked the students to provide biographical data such as the universities they were enrolled at as well as their year and programme of study. The questions in the second part of the questionnaire sought qualitative responses from the students. Examples of these included questions on how the students felt about the way in which they were asked to leave their residences as well as their overall evaluation of their universities' support of their psychological wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data analysis was also carried out both quantitatively and qualitatively. In terms of the former, pie charts and bar graphs, for example, were used to analyse the percentages of participants who held a particular view on the students' psychological wellbeing during the pandemic. The students' responses to the questions which yielded qualitative responses were analysed using the themes which emerged from these responses. In doing so we also relied on the holistic approach to wellbeing and Critical Realism (CR). This was based on Bogna, Raineri and Dell's (2020) view that the use of a combination of paradigms in the analysis of a set of research data is advantageous in that it provides greater insights into a research problem than reliance on only a single paradigm.

Results and Discussion

The 36 respondents were drawn from a wide range of universities across the world. The bulk of student respondents (61.1%) are from local universities, 36.1% are Zimbabwean students studying in the United States of America and 2.8% are Zimbabwean students studying in South Africa as shown in Figure 2.

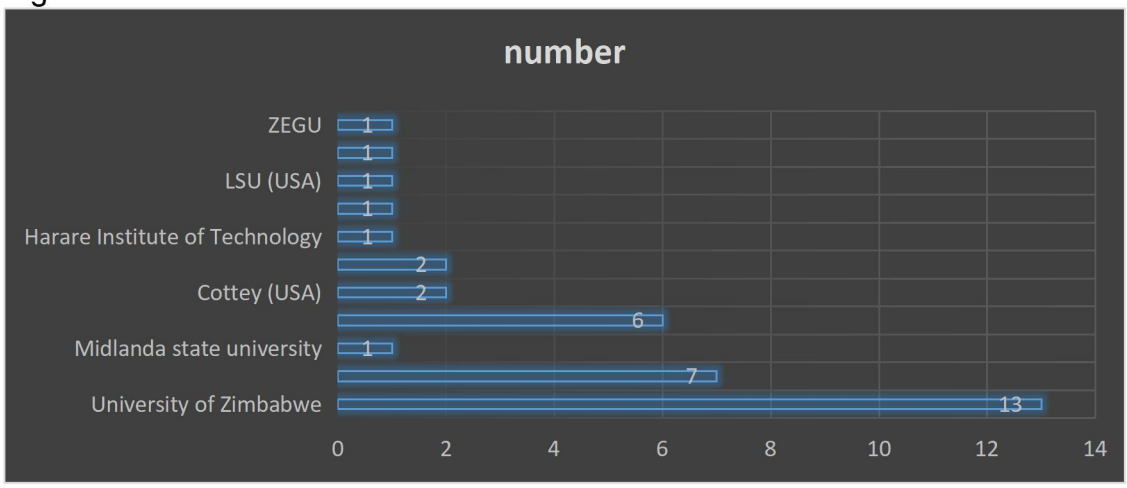


Figure 2: Universities Attended by Respondents

The results collected showed that the different contexts from which the students operate consequently affect their psychological well-being as policies, economic and social status differ. The responses by the various universities also differed based on the levels of reaction to the Covid-19 pandemic.

These different reactions are discussed under the analysis of the questionnaire responses. The respondents were also a mixture of males and females. Most responses were gathered from female students as shown in Figure 3 where 66.7% of the respondents were female and 33.3% were male with an age range of 20-27 years.

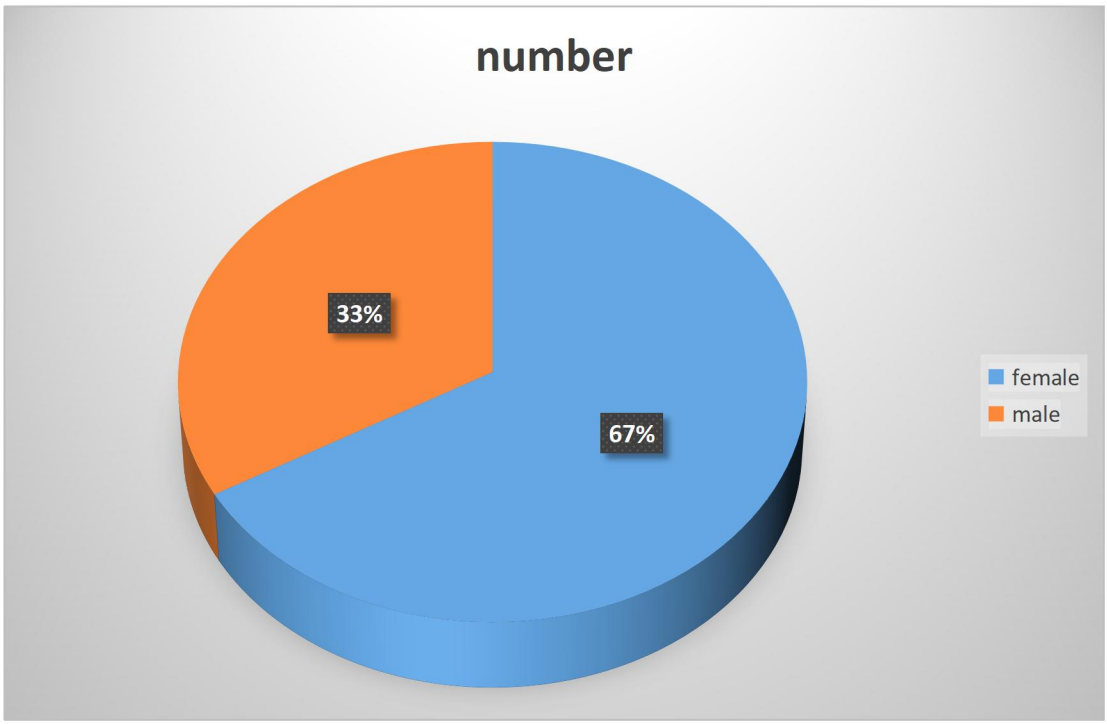


Figure 3: Gender Spread of Respondents

Data on gender were especially beneficial to this study as the psychological effects of Covid-19 seemed to have been felt differently between male and female students. . One female student, responding to a question on what their experiences of learning at home were, posited that learning at home was difficult because "*being a girl, learning at home has not been easy considering the fact that one is expected to do chores and other duties."* Responding to a similar question, a male student stated that there was no difference because he now had more time on his hands to study and relax. Thus, the effects of Covid-19 which saw many students being sent back home had different effects on male and female students because of the familial-cultural contexts in which many Zimbabwean students live. In analysing social phenomena such as university students' wellbeing consideration thus needs to be given to the influence of culture on such phenomena (Boughey, 2009). In this study, the gendered nature of students' psychological wellbeing during COVID-19wa demonstrated in the differences between responses by male and female students to the institutional and personal effects of the pandemic.

The data gathered showed that the students represented different year groups, ranging from first year to fourth year. The statistics for the different year groups is shown in table 1.

Table1: Data on respondents' year of study

Year of study	**First**	**Second**	**Third**	**Fourth**	**Other**
Percentage (%)	19.4	30.6	22.2	25	2.8

The year of study was a relevant question to this study as it was deemed to have an influence on one's responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and, consequently, one's psychological well-being. Most final year students (some complete in third year and others in fourth year depending on the program) were being asked to return to university at the time of this study. Those in third and fourth year reported having experienced a lot of stress and fear at the disruption to their final exams. They were, however, very excited about the prospect of completing their degree programs. Thus, responses by 47.7% of the respondents showed that they were experiencing positive psychological well-being in respect of their academic progress. This confirms Harding *et al*.'s (2019) assertion that the closer a student is to completing their studies, the more positive their psychological well-being is likely to be. The students who responded to the questionnaire were from a multiplicity of disciplines of study including, Accounting, Real Estate, Education, Development Studies, International Relations and Computer Sciences.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, students were asked what their universities' response was to the pandemic in terms of student accommodation. The most common response was that students were sent home in a bid to ensure that they were not affected by the pandemic. In the context of Zimbabwe, all the universities from which the respondents came asked the students to leave campus. From the universities in the USA, mixed responses were received, with some asking international students to leave university campuses and offering travel fares and fuel allowance for domestic students. Others were moved into alternative accommodation at a cost. Some were nearing the end of their final in most American colleges so they were divided into small examination groups to ensure that they would be no crowding during the writing of exams. At both Zimbabwean and USA universities, Zimbabwean students who had been requested to vacate be from the residences protested this decision but had to finally relent as there was no turning back.

The response by the universities induced a variety of emotions in students. For example, some students indicated that the responses by the various universities caused many emotions such as fear, anger, frustration, confusion, abandonment, panic, trauma, shock, disappointment, disgust, anxiety, depression, stress, pain, sadness and feelings of neglect.

This points to the students experiencing negative psychological well-being as a result of the unplanned move from the halls of residence and the consequent suspension of classes. Out of the thirty-six respondents, 83.3% were negatively impacted by such responses on the part of the universities to Covid- 19 due to the imminent challenges that they were going to face once off campus. Many pointed out that they had no finances to secure alternative accommodation, while others felt that a delay in completing the academic year also meant an additional financial burden to them and or their parents. For example, a student from one of the universities in South Africa pointed out that he was renting a room for R400 and his parents had no money to send to him once the expected duration of his program was over. However, 16.7% of the students felt that being sent home was a good move as it meant safety, so they felt happy and satisfied with the decision. The sentiment by 83.3% of the students point to negative psychological well-being resulting from structural and agential factors. For example, the students' indicated that the decision made by some of the universities to suspend lectures and evict them from halls of residence was unilaterally taken by the university authorities and there was no room for them to exercise their agency to challenge such decisions. In some cases, lease agreements which the students had signed at the beginning of the academic year which gave the institutions the right to evict them students at any time they deemed necessary were used as the legal basis for the eviction of the students.

Emanating from such practices was a culture of students' psychological wellbeing characterised by hopelessness and othering as a result of which the students felt that they were victims of university leadership's insensitivity to their plight.

The feelings described by students could also have been worsened by the experiences they encountered during the process of moving out of the campuses. The 83.7% who experienced negative emotions also cited that the process of moving out of accommodation was stressful and exhausting as it had to be done in a hurry. As shown in Fig. 3, 17% of the students were not given notice as they were asked to move out of their residences with immediate effect; 47% were given a period of between one and seven days; 8% were given between eight and fourteen days while 3% received over 15 days' notice while 19% of them were not affected as they did not stay on campuses. Given the severity of the pandemic, getting alternative accommodation and transport to travel back home was difficult due to the imposed lockdown and the fear of contacting the virus. The negative impact on students' psychological wellbeing arising from this situation as reported by many of the respondents could be attributed to lack of awareness of the part of university authorities on the extent to which physical, financial and social discomfort would negatively impact on the students' psychological wellbeing.

Responses from students also showed a breakdown in the trust in the documented and psychological contracts between them and their universities.

For example, some students expressed disappointment at the fact that they were not given refunds for the accommodation fees they had paid. One student clearly stated that she had paid for fifteen weeks. Yet she had only stayed in the university accommodation for three weeks. Students also stated that the process of vacating the university accommodation premises was chaotic and demonstrated poor planning and kneejerk reactions on the part of senior management of their universities. For international students, one participant pointed out that it was a:

"Terrible experience coupled with the pressure of packing and fighting to stay in residence as well as calming family and friends back home in Zimbabwe."

However, eighty three percent of the responses showed that students were terribly affected by the financial implication of the move out of university campus. One student from one of the biggest universities in Zimbabwe reported that the experience of moving out of campus *was:*

"Too sudden with no time to adjust."

Data collected shows that institutions in Zimbabwe did not take time to engage or explain to students the course of action that was going to be taken and how the possible negative impact of such action was going to be mitigated. This ended up affecting students' psychological well-being, hence the feelings of abandonment and resultant protests. However, 16.7% of the students indicated that they were happy with the decision taken by their universities as they were aimed at ensuring everyone's safety.

It is important to note that responses that supported the decision by the universities came mostly from non-resident students. The violation of contracts by structures such as university management in respect of leases as reported by some of the participants is indicative of how the power held by some structures, university authorities, for example, can be used to expunge the agency of other structures, students, for example. Such a power disequilibrium amongst structures that have contractual agreements is bound to create conditions that induce negative psychological wellbeing in members of the less powerful structures.

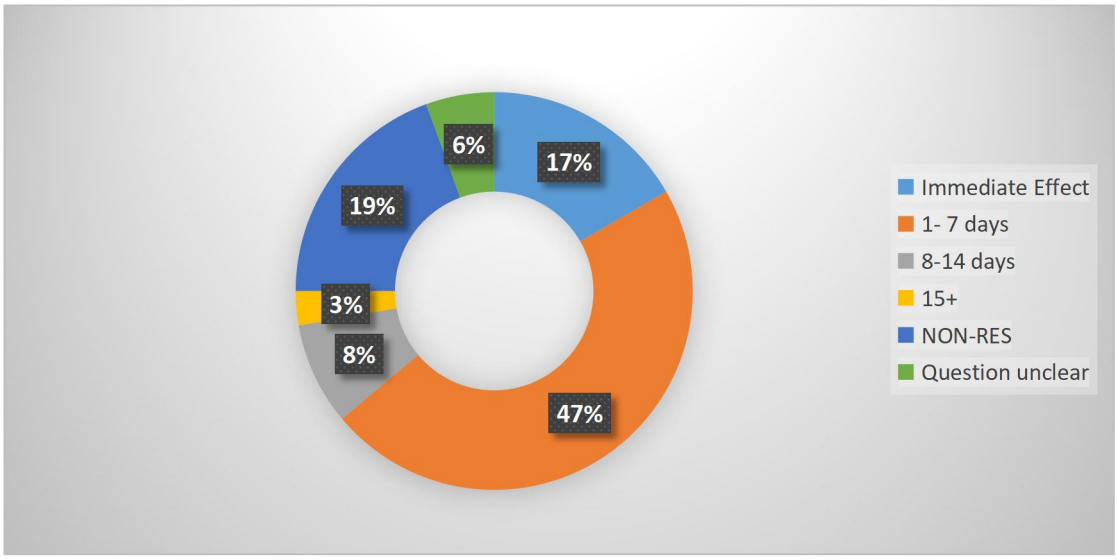


Figure 4: Notice Period Given to Students to Vacate University Accommodation Premises

Students were asked if they had had lectures between the time that lockdowns in the respective countries they were in had been affected at the time of carrying out the study. If they had answered this question in the affirmative, they were to indicate how these lectures had been carried out. Figure 4 shows that 63.9% of the students had responded to the question in the affirmative while 19.4% had only just started having lectures, in the case of students based in Zimbabwe, three months after the initial national lockdown had been effected, 6.7% of the students had not had any lectures at all. Those who had been having lectures, constituting 83.3% of the respondents, indicated that these were being carried out using e-learning platforms such as Google Classrooms, Google Meet, Zoom and WhatsApp. Initiatives leading to the use of such platforms are indicative of the capacity that structures have to put in put in place mechanisms which generate certain desired outcomes.

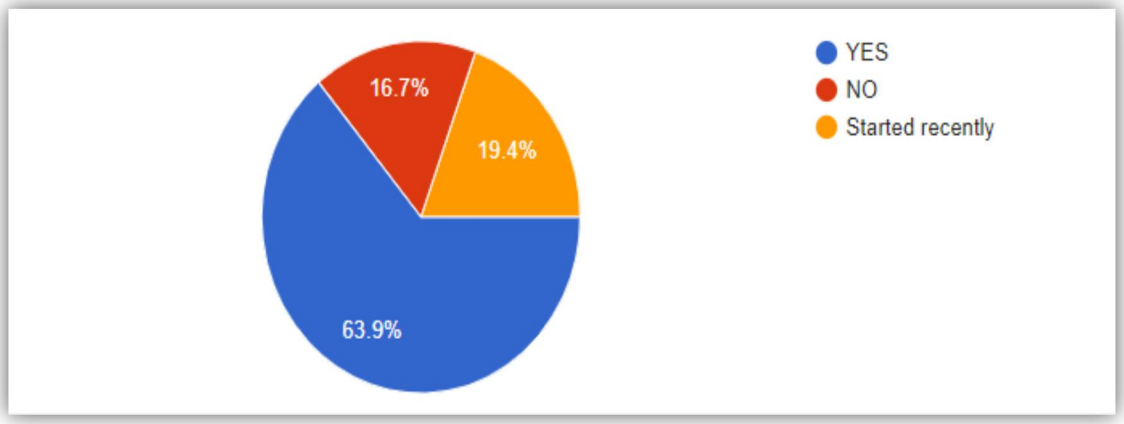


Figure 5: Students Attending Lectures Since the Lockdown.

The students were then asked to discuss their experiences of either learning or not learning from home. The 16.7% who had not been learning were from Zimbabwean universities. These students indicated that self-study was challenging as it required more effort and greater self-motivation than classroom-based learning. One student stated that not having lectures was a frightening experience, especially because in other faculties learning was taking place. This induced in the students a sense of fear, panic and trepidation as it meant a realistic possibility of being left behind. Another student explained that he always felt pressured to remain calm and in control of things on his own hence being away from college had increased the pressure, especially without lectures. This was evidence that the student was experiencing negative psychological well-being. One recurring sentiment from those studying on their own was that it is challenging to understand material without explanation by lecturers or tutors. This provides evidence of the critical role that structures such as the body of lecturers and tutors contributes to students' psychological well-being through such pedagogical strategies as explaining content.

From those that had been carrying out lectures using online platforms, at universities in America, the major challenge was that attending online classes required self-discipline and good time management skills as shown by the fact that some students missed some of these lectures. Evident in this is the extent to which, on the basis of individual agency, individuals make choices that lead to certain outcomes. The students also pointed out that it was difficult to adjust to the increased workload as lectures continued to pile work on them regardless of the number of courses they were taking. One student summarised this by saying:

"*It's hectic. The manner in which it has been conducted (online classes) is much disorganised and every lecturer is not aware of the load of work each one is giving. It's crazy! We're crashing."*

In such cases, the students' psychological wellbeing was characterised by panic, fear and despondence.
A common challenge amongst students from Zimbabwean and South African universities was that data is expensive so most of them could not afford to attend all lectures online. 58% of learners attending Zimbabwean universities pointed out the following as the major challenges with online classes:

- Limited/no access to internet.
- Poor network.
- Data is expensive.
- No laptops and phones are not user friendly.
- WhatsApp is not easy to use as a learning tool.
- Pdfs with no explanation are difficult to understand.
- Work overload as lectures are not communicating regarding the amount of work being given.
- Electricity challenges also affect internet network.

The plethora of challenges cited by the students tie well with the emotions of fear, stress, panic and depression that they felt when the universities were closed. Based on the L-DR model, it can be concluded that without the proper resources, students' psychological wellbeing is negatively affected as they are left behind thus inducing fear, hopelessness and panic amongst them.

The students were also asked if they had received any form of support from anyone and if that support had been helpful in terms of their capacity to face the effects of Covid-19 on their academic studies. A total of 55% of the students reported that they had received support from family, friends, lecturers, church and online platforms such a YouTube. Parents, for example, provided financial support; words of encouragement and therapeutic moral support. These gestures helped to ease the amount of pressure which the students felt. Lecturers also helped in terms of providing learning guidance and being flexible in terms of submission deadlines while churches provided spiritual support through prayers. All these forms of support were reported to have assisted in keeping the students focused and 'sane.' One student indicated that he had been helped on deciding not to defer his studies through the encouragement of family and friends. Another student stressed that family and friends are an important part of positive psychological wellbeing because:

"Having people sharing the same experience with you virtually created a sense of calm in the wake of all the uncertainty in the world."

However, 44.7% had not received any form of support from anyone and this caused a lot of panic, fear, depression and stress. Tan and Karabulutlu (2005:2071) posit thus:

"Perceived social support from institutions and people around us such as family, friends and neighbours is important. Social support can improve psychological well-being and help in affective physical and cognitive aspects of an individual's development. It fulfils individuals' physical, psychological and social needs through self-esteem, loyalty, love, and the sense of belonging."

Thus, in view of the external resource factors affecting psychological well-being family support is critical for improving and developing positive psychological well-being (Harding *et al.*, 2019). This form of support is also indicative of the influence of collective agency on social activities such as learning.

As a counter measure to the support or lack thereof, students were asked if they had their own initiatives which they instituted to remain strong and vigilant during the COVID-19 pandemic. The responses by students showed a wide range of actions and initiatives which included staying calm and meditating through prayer and reading of the bible.

Religion was used as spiritual support with 0.3 % of the students indicating that they had learnt new crafts in the form of cooking, learning new languages and engaging in long forgotten hobbies such as reading and exercising. Furthermore, in order to keep sane, talking to friends and exercising, taking mental breaks by sleeping and planning for the future, students were able to face the various challenges arising from COVID-19. As a result of the closure of academic institutions, some students were not engaging in online classes hence they decided to read and research more on their intended careers, their courses and also found new and better ways of studying. One student indicated that she had joined the British Council Digital Library and created a WhatsApp group to study with friends and share information. Others decided to take the time to relax by watching movies and catching up with friends. Such initiatives are demonstrative of the power of individual agency in influencing the choices that students make in pursuit of positive psychological wellbeing based on the hope to attain their goals.

To support fellow students who had been asked to vacate university accommodation, one student became involved in the formation of the African Students Association to ensure that international students from Africa would receive support. Online study groups and watching YouTube tutorials were also mentioned as initiatives to remain calm and confident in the face of the pandemic. Others started small businesses to raise funds for the coming semester. From the responses, it emerged that 100% of the students found ways to remain calm and to advance their studies regardless of the closure and the challenges associated with the pandemic. This confirms the view that positive psychological well- being requires that individuals have strong internal resource protection factors (mindfulness, self-efficacy, resilience) and external resource protection factors (strong support from family, friends and institutions) (Harding et al, 2019). Thus, as soon as their psychological well-being was threatened by the pandemic, students considered other initiatives to create a sense of balance, control and calmness.

Asked whether they thought the university reactions to the Covid 19 pandemic showed concern and care, as shown in Figure 6, 39% of the respondents agreed that the universities had indeed showed care and concern for students by ensuring that they all went home where they would be safer. Others who had received data from their universities, especially the students enrolled in American universities, were happy with the decisions made. However, a few of the international students who had been initially asked to vacate university accommodation expressed anger and disgruntlement at the insensitivity that the universities had shown to foreign students. The 33% that felt there was no concern and care on the part of the university were disappointed with the short notice they were given to vacate premises, unfulfilled promises for data bundles and the lack of communication from the universities regarding the way forward in terms of the academic year. One student pointed out that the university in which he was enrolled had not showed any care or concern because they had;

"*Assumed that all students come from stable homes with the financial security to move out at short notice*."

Another one pointed out that the university was more concerned with instituting policies and decisions without taking into consideration the needs and socio-economic status of its students. However, 28% of the students felt that the universities had partially showed concern in instances where they provided data bundles but had not done well by evicting them from student residences. The differences in the students' perceptions of the degree of care shown by universities illustrate how differences in structural contexts account for differences in mechanisms to address the same phenomenon, thus generating different outcomes.

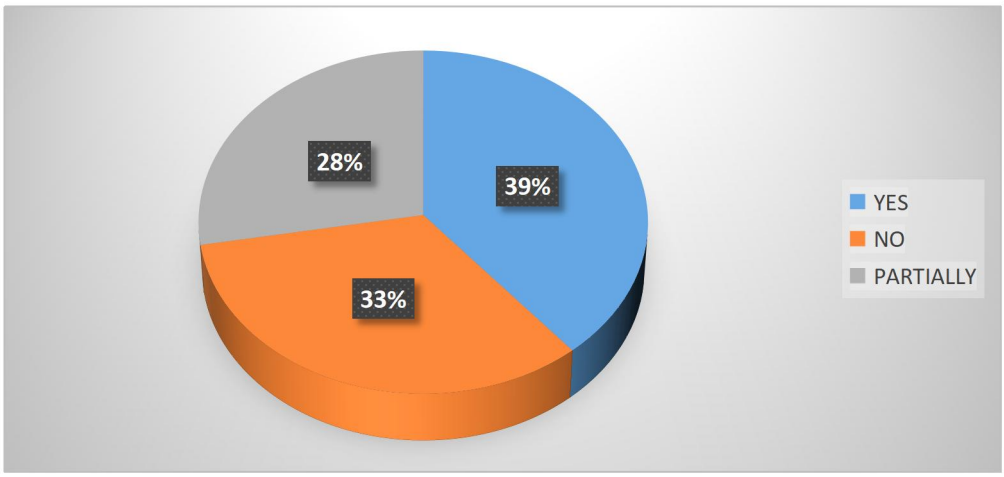


Figure 6: Concern of Students at Universities

The students were further asked if they thought that the universities should have done things differently. Figure 7 shows students' responses.

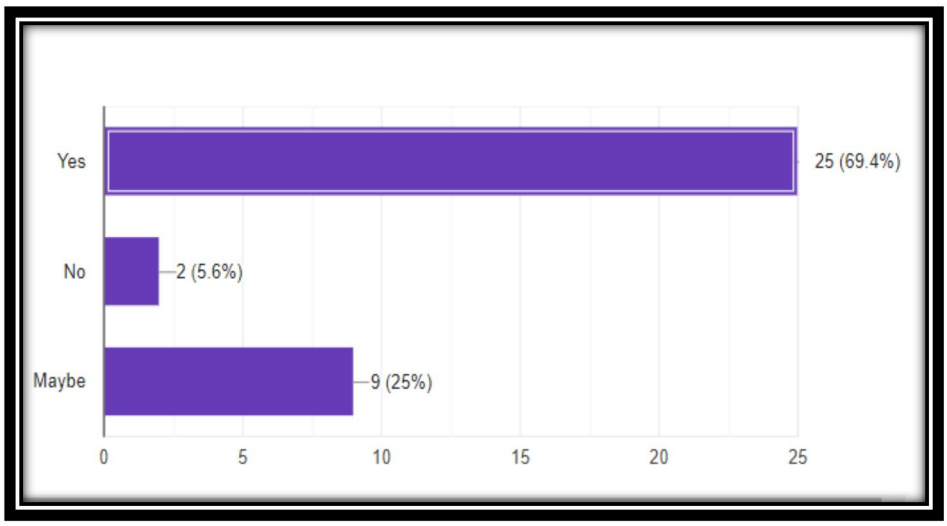


Figure 7: Students Views on Whether Universities Could Have Done Things Differently.

Responses to this question shows that 69.4% of students felt universities should have done things differently, while 5.6% thought universities had no option and did what they could under the circumstances around COVID-19 and 25% were impartial. Students felt that the universities should have showed compassion and commitment to students' well-being by taking into consideration the different backgrounds that students come from.

In addition, they said that it would have helped if the universities had provided financial support to access laptops, data and accommodation for those who came far from the universities and had no other means of securing accommodation around the universities. Students who were regularly checked on by the university management as well as being provided with information regarding COVID-19 felt that information overload and the constant checks suffocated them, causing them to panic and, in some cases, leading to mental health concerns. This points to a negative impact on their wellbeing born out of institutional communication initiatives which did not seem to have been well thought out.

For students enrolled in Zimbabwean universities, 87% stated that provision of data should have been prioritised as well as spreading the academic year over a realistic time period, considering the major drawbacks that COVID-19 had caused. They further indicated that communication with students should have been improved by using social media platforms to keep them informed on the decisions that were being made by the universities. The lack of communication caused a lot of panic and confusion and would have been improved by creating contact groups and online support services to provide academic, counselling and psychological support to the students. Students generally felt that their needs were not taken into consideration. In their view, participatory or bottom-up approach to decision-making, involving the students' body in all universities, locally and abroad would have been more preferable than the top-down approach which was adopted by many of their universities. This confirms Roslan *et al'*s (2017) contention that a sense of belonging and importance are critical elements in developing positive psychological well-being.

In a bid to understand the students' psychological state at the time of carrying out the study with regards to future prospects, both academic and career, students were asked what effects the pandemic had caused on their goals and plans for the future as well as completion of their degree programs. While 2 of the students said that they did not anticipate any effect as they had continued with lectures even under lockdown, 27, indicated that their plans had been grossly affected and put on hold because of the pandemic. They also felt that their studies had been prolonged as half of the year had already elapsed, forcing some of them to cancel internships since the companies at which they were engaged had also stopped operating. Three (3) students said they were not sure if they were going to graduate in the current year and felt the future was bleak since they might possibly not be able to pay their fees the following semester.

The financial strain on both students and their parents was a worrying factor for the students leading to stress, confusion and depression. Thus, in the face of the challenges caused by COVID-19 most students expressed concern at the prospect of reconsidering their academic and career decisions and re-envisioning goals set before the pandemic. This concern is in keeping with the holistic approach to wellbeing which, as discussed earlier, suggests that if an individual is experiencing ill-health in one dimension of their being, they are likely to experience ill-health in other dimensions as well (Amos *et al,* 2019). For example, as a result of the situation which the pandemic threw them into, many of the students experienced feelings of anxiety, fear and disillusionment which contributed to negative psychological well-being amongst them.

However, one student said that the pandemic had positively impacted him in that the break had provided an opportunity for self-introspection and providing time for personality assessment without the disruptions of lectures. Three students said that the pandemic had not affected their plans for the future in anyway. This is perhaps also illustrative of how, because of differences in the psychological capital (Celliers & Floatman, 2016) which individuals bring to a similar situation, there might be variations in their responses to that situation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the results of the study showed that Zimbabwean students in institutions of higher learning were impacted negatively by the Covid-19 pandemic. This arose mainly from the very little to no attention being paid to their psychological wellbeing by many of the institutions at which many of the participants were enrolled.

The institutions of higher education's responses to the Covid-19 pandemic with respect to the students' psychological wellbeing can be explained in terms of the absence of realisation on the institutions' leadership of the holistic nature of wellbeing as a result of which lack of wellbeing in one dimension negatively affects wellbeing in another. This was demonstrated by, for example, the eviction of students from halls of residence, at short notice in many cases, without regard to the impact that such a decision would have on their psychological wellbeing.

Drawing insights from the holistic approach to wellbeing, we suggest that, in making decisions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, the institutions of higher learning at which the Zimbabwean students were enrolled at the time of carrying out the study needed to have factored the interrelatedness of the different dimensions of their students' wellbeing. In addition, they could have relied on the different paradigms from which wellbeing can be approached such as positive psychology, the humanistic-existential and sociocultural paradigms. This perhaps would, have seen them not evicting the students from halls of residences at a short notice as it happened at many of the institutions.

We further suggest that the institutions of higher learning could have done well to be proactive and reflect on the possible impact of their decisions as a structure on the psychological wellbeing of their students who constitute another key structure in any higher education institution. This might have seen them involving the students in the decision-making structures in response to the pandemic. Giving agency to the students in this way might have resulted in win-win outcomes which would have been effective in mediating positive psychological wellbeing amongst the students. We therefore argue that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the institutions of higher learning at which Zimbabwean students were enrolled needed to have conceptualised the students' wellbeing on the basis of the holistic approach to wellbeing.

We further argue that this paradigm which acknowledges the interconnectedness of the different dimensions of wellbeing and its layered nature can be relied on in future in the event of crises which have the potential to negatively impact on Zimbabwean students' psychological wellbeing.

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A REVIEW OF RESILIENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A CASE OF STRATEGIES, CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract

Resilience is a preferred way to promote student wellbeing in higher education, through its indisputable impact on students' ability to productively traverse stressful environments. It is thus seen as a crucial integrant to versatile recovery leading to stabilisation following threats to one's wellbeing. Additionally, the constructive relationship between resilience and mental health is suggested to be strongest following exposure to challenges or adversity. In a way, to effectually bring about resilience, exposure to challenges or stress is required. A lot of psychological strategies to enhancing wellbeing and developing student resilience have been implemented by Higher Education (HE) academics and administrators before, during, and after stressful experiences such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The transition to remote learning presented various challenges to many students as there was a sudden withdrawal of the social attachment, as the pandemic removed both the opportunity and the will to be productive. A resilient HE student is one who has sturdy enduring skills and has the ability to assemble their readily available resources, seek help when necessary, and explore ways to deal with the situation they are facing. This article looks at strategies to foster students' resilience, impact of resilience on these students and how lack of resilience affects HE students. The article concludes that resilience is instrumental to maintaining balance on individual and societal levels and is especially relevant to the wellbeing of students. The article recommends that HE staff, families, communities, and societies should therefore constantly boost students' resilience as this may result in the development of the five pillars of resilience.

Keywords: Resilience, Psychological Resilience, Emotional Resilience, Social Resilience, Wellbeing.

Introduction and Background

Higher education (HE) students experience higher levels of depression and anxiety compared to those found among the greater populace (Dopmeijer, 2021). One reason is profound lifestyle changes when they move away from home, experience changes in support systems, an increase in decisions pertaining to personal and academic opportunities, and increased levels of stress from relationships. All this can affect their wellbeing (Hartley, 2011). In order to survive the effects of these and other challenges, HE students need a great deal of resilience. Resilience is one's ability to recuperate from difficulties and deal with or handle stress (Southwick & Charney, 2018).

There are different types of resilience, each of which can influence a student's ability to handle various forms of stress, namely, physical resilience, emotional resilience, mental resilience, and social resilience. Physical resilience appertains to how one's body deals with challenges and recoups from physical demands, illnesses, and injuries. Physical resilience also affects how one ages as well as how they respond and rebound from physical stress and medical issues (Whitson, Duan-Porter, Schmader, Morey, Cohen, Colón-Emeric, 2016).

Emotional resilience entails one's ability to modulate emotions during times of stress. Resilient HE students are conscious of their emotional reactions and tend to be cognisant with their inner lives. Because of this, they are also able to calm their mind and manage their emotions when they are dealing with negative experiences. Emotional resilience also helps students maintain a sense of optimism when facing challenges. Because they are emotionally resilient, such students understand that distress and difficult emotions do not last forever.

During their academic life, many HE students encounter emotional challenges (McLafferty, Lapsley, Ennis, Armour, Murphy, Bunting, 2017) emanating from academic overload, anxiety associated with succeeding, peer competition, and a reduction in leisure and family time (Tosevski, Milovancevic & Gajic, 2010). When HE students undergo psychological distress, there is a likelihood that academic productivity decreases (Dopmeijer, 2021). Students who suffer from depression or any other psychological challenges are likely to have difficulties maintaining academic and social progress, and have problems adjusting to higher education (McLafferty et al. 2017). There is a strong belief that academic failure ascents with an increase in psychological problems. Some HE students who would have dropped out suggest psychological issues to be the cause (Dopmeijer, 2021).

Mental resilience on the other hand appertains to one's capability to adjust to change and uncertainty. HE students who exhibit this type of resilience are usually flexible and calm during challenging times. They use their cognitive strength to solve problems, move forward, and remain hopeful even when they are facing setbacks. Psychological resilience develops as a result of life experiences and attainable as a result of cognitive and behavioural training (Southwick & Charney, 2018). However, resilience concedes that adversities, stressors and setbacks are integral to life hence cannot be fully eradicated (Wong, 2011). This view point is applicable to the HE environment as academic stress and impediments are part of the adaptation to being an academic and a professional (Eisenberg, Lipson & Posselt, 2016).

Outside of the HE academic space, issues such as the climate crisis and other huge and more demanding challenges will call for resilient leaders who can bring about socio-technical transformations. These leaders will make the most of the occurrence of psychological capital across a career defined by stressors outside of their control (Luthans, Luthans, & Avey, 2014).

In as much as problem-solving techniques exist that bring forth methodological and technical expertise to steer these adjustments (Bolumole, 2020; Geels, 2004), an emphasis on the resilience of the problem solver to succeed in a career handling various problems remains a belief. Challenging this afterthought is crucial given HE students will grapple with diverse challenges the world over such as 2050 carbon zero goals, United Nations Sustainable Development goals and other universal commitments.

A lot of psychological strategies to enhancing wellbeing and developing student resilience have been implemented by HE academic and administrators, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ibrahim et al. 2013). Scholars go as far as to suggest that there is a 'HE mental health crisis' (Shek, Yu, Wu, Zhu & Chan, 2017). This crisis has worsened during the global COVID-19 pandemic where HE students have faced a consequential array of difficulties (Lederer et al. 2021). Social resilience, also referred to as community resilience, involves the ability of groups or communities to recover from difficult situations. It involves people linking with others and working together to overcome problems that affect them both individually and collectively.

Facets of social resilience involve coming together after disasters, supporting each other socially, becoming aware of the challenges or risks that the community faces, and building a sense of community. Such responses to challenges can be crucial during challenges such as pandemics, or natural disasters that affect communities.

Theoretical Framework

In any study, the theoretical framework is the structure that can hold or support a theory of a research study. In a way, it introduces and describes the theory that explains why the research problem under study exists (Munhall & Chenail, 2008). It is a foundational review of existing theories that serves as a roadmap for developing the arguments researchers will use in their own work. Considering the focus of our study, we opted for a four dimensional framework for student resilience.

A Four-Dimensional Framework for Student Resilience

Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley and Weatherby-Fell (2012) came up with a framework for exemplifying the:

"Overarching and overlapping nature of the aspects of teacher resilience," (p. 361).

The framework comprises four elements, namely, the profession-related dimension, the emotional dimension, the motivational dimension, and the social dimension.

The profession-related dimension consists of elements linked to the practice of teaching. Such elements encompass preparation, being organised, reflective, committed to students, and using effective pedagogic skills. The emotional dimension, on the other hand, comprises elements focusing on emotional responses to teaching experiences, emotional management and coping with stress.

The motivational dimension involves aspects such as self-efficacy, persistence, perseverance, and the continual zeal to learn and improve. The social dimension looks at social interactions in the work environment. Work environments social interactions include establishing support networks among colleagues, assisting each other in solving problems, and accepting advice from colleagues. Mansfield et.al. (2012)'s framework is appropriate when looking at resilience among HE students as these will encounter all these dimensions one way or the other, whether at university or in their careers (Platsidou & Daniilidou, 2021). A resilient HE student will remember to have courage, draw on their strengths, are flexible, have compassion, have a positive mind-set, surround themselves with good people, and are more self-aware.

Our choice of the framework was informed by key theoretical principles and the fact that this framework illustrates four dimensions of student resilience that should be considered in HE which are: the profession-related dimension, the emotional dimension, the motivational dimension, and the social dimension. We are of the view that resilience is a multidimensional construct, and that resilient students demonstrate skills and attributes across dimensions. As multiple theories give varying perspectives on the same issue, this seemed the best fit as it speaks to most dimensions associated with student resilience.

Literature Review

A literature review is an overview of the previously published works on a specific topic. In reviewing the relevant literature, we divided it into the following sub-headings:

Definitions of Student Resilience

Resilience is the capability of an individual to withstand challenges and rebound from difficult life experiences. It is the ability to be happy, successful, and return to the original form after encountering a challenge. Resilience is thus the process and result of triumphantly accustoming to challenging life experiences, chiefly through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adaptation to external and internal demands. The inability to adapt to the challenges one encounters gravely affects students' wellbeing. Student wellbeing can be viewed as a more holistic conviction of health encompassing psychological, social, spiritual, and physical activities of the respective student.

While reviewing literature, some scholars present wellbeing as a broad and ongoing situation, whereas resilience is envisioned as a specific ability to be employed when a HE student is dealing with setbacks and negative events in the HE educational space (McLafferty et al. 2017).

Bolumole (2020) and Hartley (2011) present a clear picture of the interconnectedness between wellbeing and resilience among HE students. They present resilience as a predecessor to wellbeing. The authors suggest that new stressful experiences one comes across during HE studies avails instants where resilience can be invoked to enhance student wellbeing. As such, the argument is that in such circumstances resilience is sought to protect the student's continuing wellbeing status from stressors, setbacks and other obstructive events.

Some studies link resilience to emotional intelligence, with many spotlighting mindfulness training as an approach to develop resilience (see for example Bolumole, 2020; Dopmeijer, 2021; Lederer, Hoban, Lipson, Zhou, & Eisenberg, 2021). Other studies explore student motivation, self-efficacy, confidence, and self-esteem in connection with either resilience or wellbeing of HE students (for example Lee, Blackmon, Cochran, Kar, Rehner, Gunnell, 2018; Manfield et. al., 2016; Rose et. al., 2013). These studies offer a variety of options, techniques, and strategies for use by those interested in supporting or exploring student resilience and wellbeing. However, the scholars point out that these should not be treated through a ‘one-size-fits-all’ approach. Rather, academics should contextualise the approaches according to their respective circumstances. Regarding the 3 R's of resilience researchers have identified reasoning, resilience and responsibility as key problem solving skills that, when learned, can benefit HE student achievement and general life success strategies (Bolumole, 2020; Hartley, 2011; Platsidou & Daniilidou, 2021).

These studies also suggest that apart from cognitive limitations or complexities such as depression, stress is also seen as being pivotal in student wellbeing (Robotham, 2008). Issues such as enhanced academic stress emanating from increased academic workload, and inflated levels of loneliness within the HE academic context, point to an inviolable effect on depression than do indices of aggregating academic demands and workloads (Southwick & Charney, 2018). For example, in the Netherlands there are reports of an escalating onerous student life in HE (Dopmeijer, 2021). Notable contributors towards stress among Dutch HE students include performance pressure, finances, and inflexible study continuation (Eisenberg et.al., 2016; Ibrahim et.al., 2013). In a way, recurring stress exposure is associated with increased higher levels of psychological distress and use of support services (Dopmeijer, 2021; Eisenberg et. al 2016; Ibrahim et. al., 2013).

For example student wellbeing during the coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak was grossly affected, as some HE students reported increased levels of hardship and vulnerability during the universal pandemic (Yeboah, Aloka & Charamba, 2023). Even though the whole world was affected by the pandemic, students, as compared to other population groups, experienced annexed constraints resulting from the instructional transition to a predominantly online education environment (Dopmeijer, 2021; Platsidou & Danillidou, 2021). The change in the instructional mode is suggested to have caused a significant increase in stress levels (McLafferty et al., 2017).

The transition to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, presented various challenges to a lot of students as there was a sudden withdrawal of the social attachment, as the pandemic removed both the opportunity and the will to be productive (Bolumole, 2020).

Global health-imposed restrictions demanded practices such as social distancing and isolation, resulting in consequential increases in psychological distress and development of disorders including stress, depression, irritability, and insomnia (Shi et.al., 2019). Trends of increased psychological vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic are found universally among HE student populations, notably amongst students in China, Italy, England, Greece, the United States, Germany, and France (Back, Steinhauser, Kamal & Jackson, 2016; Geels, 2004; McLafferty et al., 2017).

Student Resilience: A Global Perspective

A resilient HE student is one who has sturdy enduring skills and has the ability to assemble their readily available resources, seek help when necessary, and explore ways to deal with the situation they are facing. Students with psychological resilience are in a position to employ their skills and strengths to react to their life's challenges. As opposed to crumbling into despair or shying away from challenges through the use of unhealthy coping strategies, resilient students face challenges head-on (Luthans, Luthans & Avey, 2014). HE students with resilience do not encounter less distress, grief, or anxiety than their peers. Rather, such students employ healthy coping skills to manage such challenges in ways that develop strength and growth, often coming out of the situation stronger than they were before. Several studies have been conducted on an array of topics around resilience. These include how to foster or enhance resilience, advantages of being resilient, and effects of lack of resilience among HE students (McLafferty et al. 2017).

A study by Vaughan, Koczwara, Kemp, Freytag, Tan and Beatty (2019) in Australia whose objective was to enhance the employability of their Bachelor of Science HE students by exploring the effectiveness of internships recommends that HE students should partake in internships as a way of developing flexibility and stress coping strategies that contribute to career readiness and resilience later in life.

Also in HE, two other scholars Southwick and Charney (2018) recognise the essence of resilience in courses of natural sciences, biology and geography where New York students link up under the communal challenge of survivability or endurability.

Southwick and Charney (2018) put forward the thesis that students in such courses will encounter the global life-threatening problem of climate change which envelops issues of value conflicts, ethical and moral dilemmas and imbalances demanding emotional intelligence, patience and most importantly, resilience. Their study assesses the effectiveness of conscientious schooling through reflective pedagogy. The researchers discovered that meditation by having about 5 minutes of silence before a class begins helps to calm HE students and illuminates expeditious cognitive challenges. An interesting suggestion is put forward by Shek, Yu, Wu, Zhu and Chan (2017) and Tosevski, Milovancevic and Gajic (2010) following studies conducted in Hong Kong and Serbia respectively, that conflict is a prerequisite for promoting resilience.

They thus submit that programmes whose goal is to advance resilience in HE students must strive to strike a balance between eliciting and replicating undesirable experiences whilst affording safe educational spaces. In the same line of thought are Kwok, Doyle, Becker, Johnston and Paton (2016) and Luthan et. al (2014) who are of the opinion that protectionism does not cultivate resilience in the HE students. They opinion that any course or intervention strategies whose goal is to foster resilience ought to be considerate of the ethical dimension and invoke psychologically trained gurus in the designing and implementation of such programmes (Robotham, 2008).

Basing on the literature reviewed, resilient students normally possess a number of divergent characteristics that help them overcome HE life's challenges. According to Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams and Glazebrook (2013), Vaughan et. al (2019) and Whitson, Duan-Porter, Schmader, Morey, Cohen and Colón-Emeric (2016) some of the signs of resilience include:

A survivor mentality: Resilient HE students normally consider themselves as survivors. Even when chips are down such students keep going until they overcome the challenge. Effective emotional regulation: Resilient HE students exhibit the capability to handle emotions in the wake of stress. This does not, however, mean that such students don't experience strong emotions such as anger, sadness, or fear experienced by their peers. The difference is that resilient students view those feelings as temporary and can be managed until they are overcome (Dopmeijer, 2021).

Feeling in control: HE students who exhibit signs of resilience normally possess a strong internal locus of control and believe that their actions are pivotal in influencing the result of an event or challenge (Geels, 2004).

Problem-solving skills: When problems arise, resilient students look at the situation rationally and try to come up with solutions that will make a difference. They look for a solution in every problem whereas the opposite group of students would look for a problem in every solution (Hartley, 2011).

Self-compassion: Another sign of resilience exhibited by resilient HE students is self-acceptance and self-compassion. They tend to treat themselves and others with kindness, especially when facing challenges (Lee, Blackmon, Cochran, Kar, Rehner & Gunnell, 2018). Social support: Having a solid network of supportive people is another sign of resilience. Resilient students acknowledge the significance of support. They know when they need to ask for assistance and are not shy. HE students with higher levels of distress are incapable of effectively seeking assistance (Rose, Buckey & Zbozinek, 2013).

This underscores the likelihood for higher education institutes to increase education, awareness, and availability of wellbeing and resilient promoting facilities and programmes (Back et. al., 2016). In this way, institutions inculcate in students resilience skills such as leveraging one's personal strengths, setting healthy boundaries, regulating emotions, recognizing cognitive misrepresentations, developing realistic expectations, finding meaning in what one does, and committing to long-term development.

Impact of Resilience on Students

Resilience gives people the much-needed psychological strength to handle stress, challenges, and hardship. It is the cognitive reservoir of strength that HE students are able to utilise in times of need to propel them through without breaking down. Psychologists and other scholars of resilience and wellbeing hold the conviction that resilient students are better able to cope with adversity and rebuild their lives after a challenge (Eisenberg et. al 2016; Geels, 2004; Lee et. al 2018).

For example, dealing with change or loss is an unpreventable part of students' academic life. At some point, every student experiences differing degrees of problems, some of which might be relatively minor while others are catastrophic on a much larger scale (Wong, 2011). The way in which each student manoeuvres through each problem is different. Those who lack resilience may become overwhelmed while the resilient ones would emerge victorious and stronger (Platsidou & Danillidou, 2021). Those who lack resilient might dwell on the problem and employ ineffective coping mechanisms to deal with the challenges.

In institutions of higher education, issues such as disappointment or academic low performance might drive HE students to unhealthy, destructive, or even dangerous behaviours. Students who experience such behaviours might be slower to recover from setbacks and may experience adverse psychological distress (Lee et. al., 2018). Being resilient does not mean one does not experience stress or difficulties in life.

However, resilient students do not perceive life through rose-coloured lenses. Rather, they do understand that setbacks happen and challenges are a part of life. Even though they may experience the negative emotions that come after a tragedy, their mental outlook allows them to work through these feelings and recover.

Resilience gives HE students the zeal and strength to confront problems head-on, subdue adversity, and carry on with their lives. Ensuing large-scale traumas such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, and the recent COVID-19 pandemic, some students demonstrated the behaviours that typify resilience while others crumbled under the pressures exerted by such challenges. In their study in Macedonia, Platsidou and Danillidou (2021) describe how fixed beliefs lower a student's ability to remain resilient. Scholars such as Lee et. al (2018), Rose et. al (2013), and Shi, Sun, Wei and Qiu (2019) come up with discipline specific profiles demonstrating why resilience is required in their respective fields of study. They argue that, for example, construction managers, teachers, and lawyers will face careers characterised by stressful experiences that erode general wellbeing, thus the need to be resilient.

Approaches to Foster Student Resilience

Fortunately, resilience is something that HE students can develop in themselves with academics and administrators helping their students become resilient. Discussed below are some of the well-defined approaches that can result in greater resilience in HE students.

Re-evaluate Negative Thoughts

Resilient students have the capacity to view negative situations realistically, but in a manner that does not revolve around blame or moping over what cannot be changed. Contrary to viewing adversity as insurmountable, students should be encouraged to re-evaluate thoughts to look for effective ways to overcome the problem and make changes that are beneficial to them (Luthans et. al., 2014).

Students should also be encouraged to focus on the positive things they can do, as this is a great way to get out of a negative mind-set. This strategy can also be used to help HE students learn how to better handle challenges (Shi et.al., 2019). Academics and administrators can encourage students to think about challenges in more positive, beneficial, and hopeful ways. If students master this approach, instead of getting stuck in a loop of negative emotions, they can learn to see these events as opportunities to challenge themselves and develop new skills (Wong, 2011).

Seek Support

Some HE students are shy to seek support. Others do not see the need to seek support from family, friends, and peers (Shi et. al., 2019).

Discussing life's challenges does not erase them, but sharing with a supportive friend or loved one can make students feel like they have someone in their corner. Sharing and discussing their challenges can support the development of resilience in students (Tosevski et. al 2010). Such discussions can also help students gain insight on the challenges they are facing, or even come up with new ideas for handling them (Robotham, 2008). To help students develop a support network, HE staff should try modelling good social skills like sharing feelings, being empathetic, cooperating with and helping others, and expressing gratitude (Tosevski et. al., 2010). Students' good behaviour also needs to be reinforced.

Focus on what is within Control

When faced with a crisis or challenge, some students can easily get devastated by events that feel far beyond their control. Contrary to students wishing there was some way to go back in time or change things to avoid the challenge they are facing, it can be helpful to inculcate in students the ability to try focusing on what they can directly impact (Tosevski et. al., 2010). HE staff can thus encourage students to develop this essential skill by talking about their situation and helping them make a plan for how they can react (Tosevski et. al., 2010). Even when the situation appears dreadful, students need to be encouraged to take realistic steps that can help improve it. Regardless the magnitude of these steps, they can improve the student's sense of control and resilience.

Manage Stress

Another approach is for HE institutions to help their students build healthy stress management habits as this is another effective way to increase overall resilience (Tosevski et. al., 2010). These habits could include behaviours that help overall health, like getting enough sleep and exercise, as well as specific actions to take during moments of stress (Rose et. al., 2013). Such actions include cognitive restructuring, expressive writing, effective communication, and problem-solving strategies.

To master these skills, students need to learn and practise them regularly. As a result they will then feel equipped to face stressful situations and resilient enough to bounce back quickly and stronger. For those struggling to keep stress levels under control, it may be helpful to consider engaging the support of a qualified cognitive therapist.

Conclusion

According to research, the seven principles of resilience are maintain diversity and redundancy, manage connectivity, manage slow variables and feedbacks, foster complex adaptive systems thinking, encourage learning, broaden participation, and promote polycentric governance systems (Eisenberg et. al., 2016; Geels, 2004; Lee et. al., 2018; Lee et. al., 2018; Robotham, 2008; Shi et. al., 2019).

While some HE students appear to be more naturally resilient, it is also a skill that can be developed further. Examining situations in more positive ways, seeking support from others, and focusing on what can be controlled are helpful strategies for any HE student facing challenges or problems. Students also need to be taught good stress management skills as these can also foster greater resilience (Lee et. al., 2018). Even though resilient students may experience the negative emotions that come after a tragedy, their mental outlook allows them to navigate through these feelings and rebound stronger. We are also of the opinion that HE students with high academic resilience have higher odds of maintaining and improving academic performance compared to the other students. HE staff, families, communities, and societies should therefore constantly boost students' resilience as this might develop in them the five pillars of resilience which are energy, future focus, inner drive, flexible thinking, and strong relationships.

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COVID-19-INDUCED ONLINE EDUCATION AND THE RESILIENCE OF DISADVANTAGED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The impact of 2019-2020 Covid-19 pandemic saw the disruption of businesses and services including education. The shutting down of conventional face-to-face teaching and learning ushered in a new dawn of online education. While not an entirely new phenomenon and one being championed in within the neoliberal globalisation discourse, this article examined the impact of this change. The explored how the Covid-induced online education impacted the resilience of disadvantaged students in the African context. Using Sen's capability approach and the salutogenesis theory of resilience, the paper focused on how online education as an alternative capability to traditional face-to-face affected the resilience of disadvantaged students in achieving the functioning of meaningful learning. The conceptual paper analysed the resilience of disadvantaged university students and how Covid-induced online education affected them. The findings revealed that Covid-induced online education, further amplified pre-existing inequalities. Individuals from privileged backgrounds had greater access to the necessary resources and commodities that enabled them to effectively engage in online learning. Despite online education being considered a capability, the actual implementation of this capability in the form of meaningful learning was hindered by factors that negatively influenced the conversion process. Recommendations include the acknowledgement of the role of digital technology as an enabler to the realisation of the right to education and a call on governments and institutions to incorporate it into policy and practice.

Keywords: Covid-19; Online Learning; Resilience; Capabilities; Functionings; Conversion Factors.

Introduction

The turn of events that came with the onset of the Coronavirus commonly known as the Covid-19 pandemic that first broke out in Wuhan, China, towards the end of 2019 was a development that the caught the world unawares (UNESCO, 2020). Economic and social activities were halted as people were forced to stay at home and countries-imposed lockdown measures on their citizens. The once taken-for-granted routines were no longer possible, as people were required to socially distance themselves to avoid the spread of the virus and try to flatten the curve, which by then was exponentially growing in most countries (Musa et al,. 2020; WHO, 2020). With its rampant spread was the increasing number of people succumbing and the death toll on the rise.

Due to the unpredictability of the pandemic regarding the possibility of controlling it and resuming the 'old normal', decisions had to be made to mitigate the situation to ensure that life continued even under the constrained conditions. One of such mitigation measures was the transition from traditional face-to-face contact teaching to online education, which the World Bank (2020) referred to as emergency remote teaching and learning. This was to emphasise the circumstances in which this shift was implemented because of closure of schools. According to UNESCO (2020) by August 2020, 60.5% of learners in 106 countries had been affected as by the closure of learning institutions, bringing the number to over 1 million.

This paper, therefore, provides insight into how this shift to online teaching and learning following Covid-19 affect the resilience of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It argues that while the shift to online teaching and learning was considered a viable substitute for face-to-face teaching and learning, the situation may have not be equally applicable to all. The socioeconomic and digital inequality between the developed and developing countries, as well as inequalities within developing countries themselves meant compromising of the realisation of the capability to meaningful learning for students from disadvantaged background.

The next section lays out the theoretical framing from which these effects would be laid down.

Capability Approach and Salutogenesis Theory

The first of the two theoretical lenses for the paper is Sen's capability approach. The theory has several constructs which will apply in analysing the secondary data in this paper. Firstly, the capability approach is based on two main claims: that the freedom to attain one's goals is of primary moral importance and that such goals are to be understood within the context of capabilities and functionings.

According to Sen (1993) a capability constitutes 'one's ability to be and do valuable acts or reach valuable states of "doing and being".' (p. 28). The ultimate state of being or realised goal is described in capability theory as functionings. To attain one's functioning, therefore, there are real opportunities or freedoms that individuals need. Robeyns (2017) considered capabilities as the real freedoms that people have to achieve their potential doings and beings. Put differently, for individuals to be able to realise their valued beings and doings, freedoms and opportunities must be a prerequisite. Another important construct that falls within the capability approach is the conversion factors. These could be considered as the factors that stand between an individual's capabilities and their ability to achieve and their functionings, which are the actual achievements (Sen, 1987).

These conversion factors according to Nussbaum (2000) and Sen (1999) could take the form of a personal, environmental or social nature which could either foster or restrain the realisation of one's capabilities and ultimately their functionings.

In view of this article, the abrupt transition to online learning during Covid-19 could have been perceived as a capability or a real opportunity to realise the functioning of education acquisition. But Hart (2019) in applying the notion of capabilities to education argued that 'the mere existence of a school does not guarantee educational success for a given individual. It depends on how well suited the resource is to an individual's needs' (584). Following the same line of argument, one would argue that the online education, while intended to bring about learning, did not guarantee the realisation of this goal in bringing about meaningful learning as a substitute for face-to-face learning during the Covid-19 period. The question of whether individuals have genuine opportunities or freedoms to pursue and achieve what they value becomes crucial in determining the extent to which the capabilities can be effectively translated into actual functioning.

The second theoretical lens is the salutogenesis theory of resistance by Aaron Antonovsky (1923-1994), a medical sociologist whose central focus was on what it was that made people healthy rather than what made people sick. He took on a strength-perspective to life, rather than focusing on weaknesses (deficits). Salutogenesis, like most resilience theories emphasises strength and health above weaknesses or pathologies and how individuals are able to overcome against the odds (Rak & Patterson, 1996).

While one would argue that this theory is applicable to the field of public health, the constructs that make up this theory could be applicable across disciplines (Lindostrom & Eriksson 2005) and more so to this article.

There are two main aspects that explain the theory: the sense of coherence (SoC) and the generalised resistance resource (GRR). The former speaks to an individual's ability to move from seeing themselves as a 'victim' to begin to see themselves as changers of their destiny. The stronger the SoC an individual possess, the higher chances they have to overcome. Lindström and Eriksson (2005) point out the three aspects that form one's SoC: individual's understanding and appreciation of the situation they are in and its challenges (comprehensibility); how well one can convince themselves to overcome a challenge (manageability); and the value that one attaches to their goal which gives them the drive (meaningfulness). The GRRs are phenomena, relationships and characteristics that make it possible for an individual to overcome or resolve challenges (Antonovsky, 1987). Again, there are strong parallels between Antonovsky's GRR and Sen's conceptualisation of freedoms and opportunities as Lindström and Eriksson (2005) consider GRRs as being more a factor of one's capability to make meaning and purposive use of resources, rather than mere availability of resources.

Having looked at the theoretical framing of the article, the subsequent sections provide insight into online education as a phenomenon and within the context of Covid-19. This is then followed by how online education within the Covid-19 context impacted disadvantaged students and their ability to withstand the perceived adversity of migrating from traditional face-to-face, to online platforms.

Methodology

The paper is conceptual in nature and a product of a meticulous desktop review that made use of several search engines as well as library resources. The following online search engines were employed: semantic scholar, google scholar, science.gov and Education Research Information Centre (ERIC). Using the following keywords: Covid-19, online learning, resilience, capabilities, functionings, conversion factors, disadvantaged students, higher education relevant literature was reviewed and analysed in keeping with the aim of the paper that was to explore how the resilience of disadvantaged students in higher education faired in the face of Covid-19-induced online education.

Online Education

Online education is not a novel phenomenon in the context of higher education, especially within the discourse of internationalisation of education in a globalised neoliberal world. The traditional face-to-face mode of teaching and learning was the dominant means until the dawn of the 1800s when the University of Chicago became one of the first institutions of higher education to introduce remote learning through what was referred to as correspondence education. This later developed to incorporate the use of radio and television as mediums of instruction in the 1950s (Wood & Wylie, 1977). Other institutions would later follow, including the first Open University to be established in UK in 1970 followed by the likes of University of Wisconsin in 1986 that promoted the use of technology in teaching and learning. The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed a move by most countries in the Global North towards open distance education (ODE) as a means of complementing the traditional face-to-face mode of education (Jahng, Krug, & Zhang, 2007). The step towards online education was considered as one of the responses to the call for widening of access to higher education (Modise, 2022) with most countries in the Global North and Asia having established online satellite campuses within the developing countries more especially in Africa in what is referred to as transnational higher education institutions (Miller-Idriss & Hanauer, 2011, Wilkins, 2016).

Online Learning During Covid-19

While the above section provides a brief insight into online learning, its history and practice over time, it could be argued that the circumstance within which online learning came about as a result of Covid-19 brought with it some dynamics that may have impacted people differently. One distinguishing feature about online education unlike the usual type that was discussed earlier and had been practised in other universities was that with the Covid-induced online education, there was no option or choice (Mohalik & Sahoo, 2020; Adarkwar, 2021). The online learning that occured before Covid-19 involves people's choices where individuals opt to pursue online education based on their situations and probable possession of requisite resources that could support the online education, in Sen's language, described as the 'freedoms.'

It is these limited freedoms that determines the extent to which students would make use of the online education as a capability to realise the functionings of meaningful learning. In the following section, the experiences of online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic in various African contexts are presented. It is through these experiences that the narratives of capabilities and resilience will illustrate how the transition to online education impacted students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

A Broad Reality of Online Learning in Higher Education in Africa

As was alluded to in the above sections, the abrupt switch from traditional face-to-face education to the Covid-induced-online education brought with it mixed implications as well as consequences. The rationale for the transition was to mitigate the disruption of education caused by the unpredictability of the pandemic's duration and the resulting lockdown conditions. Online education was thus considered an emergency measure of ensuring continuation of learning (Bensoiah, 2021; Johnson, Veletsianos, & Seaman, 2020; Mohmmed, et al,. 2020). In Africa, the perceptions towards the transition to online learning were for the most part negative.

One of the distinctive features of the Covid-19-induced online education was the unpreparedness that governments, institutions, educators and students experienced in the implementation (Adeoye, Adanikin, & Adanikin, 2020; Woldegiorgis, 2022). With most countries in Africa heavily relying on traditional face-to-face education, prospects of venturing into online education were not in their plans. The lack or absence of policies supporting the development of ICT technology in most African countries meant a gap as far as making intentional investments in online education for both the present and near future (Kisanga & Ireson, 2015). The shift to online education during the Covid-19 pandemic was primarily driven by political directives, without adequate consideration of the implications and the long-term nature of technology-enabled education, which necessitates investment (Faturoti, 2022).

The lack of foresight by most African governments to put in place policies and invest in technology in keeping with the digital era that the world has gravitated towards is an aspect Faturoti considers unpardonable.

At institutional level, and in many parts of African higher education institutions, implementing online education as an emergency substitute for traditional face-to-face was equally a challenge. In a quantitative study by Paschal and Mkulu (2020, just over 82% of students indicated that their universities did not have policies that supported online education. Ndibalema (2022 proceeded to point out some of the institution-specific challenges that stood in the way of institutions properly operationalising the Covid-induced-online education. Some of these challenges included the unequal access and exposure to digital technology, erratic internet distribution and lack of digital competency among educators.

On the part of higher education educators, migrating to online education from the approach that they had been accustomed to, had its own challenges. According to Guruukal (2020, the transition to online teaching, although regarded as effective, resulted in an overwhelming number of teachers being pushed into an unfamiliar mode of instruction. Gurajena, Mbunge, and Fashoto (2022 highlight the digital skill challenges that educators had to grapple with in implementing online education during Covid 19 disruption. In most institutions, there was a perceived dearth of educators who were experienced or at least acquainted with the use of technology and online teaching methodologies. In Ghana, Adarkwah (2021 observed reluctance on the part of educators to embrace online education. A huge part of the reluctance lay in the adequacy felt by educators to deliver due to lack of expertise as well as infrastructure to support teaching and learning. Within the South African context, Adu, Badaru, Duku, and Adu (2022 presented the concern that university educators raised regarding the move to online education. Among these was the lack of skills in tackling online teaching. While most of the educators expressed expertise in delivering lectures using the traditional approach, there was an acknowledgement of the gap that was there in switching approaches to online teaching. The lack of skills and institutional support as well as support from the Department of Higher Education (DHET to mitigate the situation meant substandard delivery of education and such challenges as well as those at institutional and government (policy level would later be looked at in the light of their impact on the resilience of disadvantaged students Adu, et al., (2022.

Finally, the students' transition to online education due to Covid-19 likewise magnified existing gaps, that were only exacerbated by the Covid-19 situation. The obvious gap was the inequality gap that arose from differentiations in socioeconomic status. To a large extent, socioeconomic background of students was the main differentiating factor that spoke to access to resources, skills and the capability to benefit from online education.

Davids (2020) asserts that the shift to online education due to the disruption caused by Covid-19 created an advantage for children from privileged backgrounds compared to their less privileged counterparts who lacked access to the necessary resources and commodities possessed by their affluent peers. Worth noting though is that the possession of economic capital that affluent students had went hand in hand with some of the capitals that Pierre Bourdieu refers to in his theory of social reproduction, which include the social, cultural as well as symbolic capitals (Bourdieu, 1977). In this case, in comparison to those from disadvantaged backgrounds, the affluent student not only had the economic resources, but they were also more exposed to and in possession of resources for enabling their online education. Hence, the subsequent section examines these realities within the framework of Sen's capability approach and Antonovsky's Salutogenesis theory, focusing on their impact on the resilience of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Lack of Online Support in Policy and Institutions – Commodities and Capabilities

The lack of policy supporting ICT in education in Africa has been brought to the fore in the wake of Covid-19 and exposed cracks in education systems that should have been thriving within the 4IR era (Woyo, Rukanda, & Nyamapanda, 2020). In providing a global analysis of the right to education and ICT during Covid-19, Lorente, Arrabal, and Pulido-Montes (2020) attributed the challenges encountered in most developing countries in the Sub-Saharan Africa to a large extent to the absence of policies that foster digital remote learning, of which online education is a part. Policies are considered a first step, or at least a promise of governments committing to invest in a cause. In the case of most African countries, the lack of such policies meant the absence of any impetus to governments to invest in digital technology, which became evident in the failed attempt to sustain the provision of access to education to students in most higher education institutions. According to Ndebalema (2022), the lack of readiness and preparedness for the transition to online education can largely be attributed to the absence of political determination in implementing policy guidelines that would facilitate the integration of digital technology across various sectors in African countries, aligning them with global trends. Faturoti (2022) in concluding on the idea of moving to digital online platform education during Covid-19 disruption, described it as a 'cataclysmic failure' (p. 74).

Looked at from a human rights approach, the move only served to worsen the inequalities that already exist between those that do not have and those that have. As a recognised right, the sort of education offered during Covid-19 highly discriminated against the socioeconomically disadvantaged students. Looked at from a capability approach, for online education to be considered as a capability, it entailed possession of commodities or resources which, when put to use, would actualise into freedoms and real opportunities to access the capability.

In this case, the possession of devices, exposure to online education or technical know-how would be viewed as these prerequisite commodities. The absence or lack of such commodities, which was the case with students from disadvantaged backgrounds meant that though online education was available as a potential capability, it would not be of benefit to them. Hart (2019) argues on how the presence of schools does not automatically translate into educational success depending on the suitability of resources to meet individual needs.

She further observes that commodities have the potential of translating into capabilities that later convert into functionings. For disadvantaged students, the absence of supportive policies that could drive the investment of infrastructure and probable exposure to online education equipping them with the readiness for what followed during the Covid-19 disruption meant denying them the opportunity to realise the capability of an online education. To this end, scholars have debated whether, based on the instrumental role that technology plays and was seen to have played, technology has not earned its place of being considered as a right (Coccoli, 2017; Faturoti, 2022).

Role of Educators as a General Resistance Resource (GRR)

Ideally, the educator plays a greater role in facilitating learning than other roles in online education. The differences in approach between face-to-face and online education have been presented widely and are not discussed in this paper (Elliot, 2017; Paul & Jefferson, 2019). Suffice to mention though that with such differences in pedagogical approaches among other differences, the type of support that needs to be provided to students differs too. From the discussion in the previous section, the unpreparedness of the different levels of stakeholders (countries, institutions, educators and students) to embrace online education during Covid-19 disruption meant a compromise on the level of support that students would have received. Most educators lacked the knowledge and skills of how to extend a helping hand to students using online platforms (Bruggeman et al., 2022 Lufungulo et al., 2021). Adarkwah (2021) describes how the inadequacy felt by educators due to the lack of skills to support to student sometimes manifested itself in the form of reluctance. In South Africa, the lack of sufficient training in interacting with learning management systems and other online software was a hindrance to effective educator-student support (Mpungose, 2020). The assistance offered by educators to students has been shown to have a substantial impact on the overall wellbeing of students, encompassing not only academic aspects but also extending to psychological and other areas (Eloff, O'Neil, & Kanengoni, 2021). In a study conducted on underprivileged students in Malawi's higher education system, a key element that surfaced as a facilitator of student resilience was the supportive role assumed by educators. Their presence was not only limited to academic support, but also extended to offering social, psychological, and at times even spiritual assistance (Ngalo-Morrison, 2017; Sinthampi-Banda, 2020).

From the resilience and salutogenic approach, student support as an aspect of the GRR forms a safety cushion for students who otherwise would fall through the cracks. With the Covid-19-induced online education, such GRR was missing for most students from disadvantaged backgrounds who were already in a vulnerable state owing to the inadequate and lack of commodities that would have enabled them to convert online education into a capability. A study by Chisadza et al (2021) focused on predictors of the performance of students coming out of online education back to face-to-face and reported, among other findings, a positive correlation between those that had better access and support during online education compared to their peers who, due to a lack of such support, struggled and thus reported lower performance.

Disadvantaged Student Experiences- Capability and Resilience Risks

Having looked at how online education came about and developed during the onset of Covid-19 at policy, institution and educators' levels, we now turn our focus to the students and how their experiences affected the levels of resilience. It is within this discussion that Sen's conversion factors, which are the resources that individuals possess that could enable or constrain them from translating capabilities into functionings (Sen, 1999). These experiences will therefore be explained with reference to the same three conversion factor categories that Robeyns (2017) used: personal, social and environmental factors.

Online Education and Personal Factors of Disadvantaged Students

The nature of being classified as disadvantaged can take on various dimensions including physical, socioeconomic, psychological and others. The central focus of this paper lies in the socioeconomic dimension. By their very nature, socioeconomically disadvantaged students would fit the category, according to the definition by La Noue (2012, p. 275) 'whose ability to compete in the free enterprise system is impaired due to diminished capital and credit opportunities as compared to others who are not socially disadvantaged'. The concept of diminished capital highlighted by La Noue aligns with Bourdieu's (2004) notion, which holds a prominent position in his theory of social reproduction. As observed in this study, this diminished capital, understood as a form of commodities or resources, plays a crucial role in granting individuals access to genuine opportunities and capabilities.

For online learning to be successful, there are a number of conditions that must be met. Among these is the ability to access to digital devices as well as affordability of data. With regard to access to digital devices, Beaunoyer, Dupéré and Guitton (2020) pointed out how the COVID-19 pandemic brought to light the reality of the digital divide and exposed barriers to accessibility of technology that rendered socioeconomically disadvantaged people more vulnerable through the further perpetration of inequalities.

While in countries such as South Africa, institutions provided students with an allocation of data to access online learning, other countries in the continent did not make such provisions. The ultimate result was a total exclusion from online education to those who, as a result of economic challenges, could not afford to access online education. According to the Human Rights Watch (2020) due to the cost of data, some students had to make the choice of focusing on particular subjects at the expense of others just to ensure that their data allocation lasted. The majority of individuals expressing this sentiment were those coming from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds. One student from this group encapsulated their view of online education at the university as 'gambling with the degrees of the poor' (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021, p. 170).

Anecdotal evidence from working with students during the Covid-19 period and more so during the lockdown period showed that the main reason for students requesting an extension of assignment submissions was the failure to access institutional computers to type their assignments. Most students expressed the frustration of using smartphones to type a 4-page assignment. For most of them, this was for more than one course, as such slowing their progress in keeping up with academic demands. The majority of these students were from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.

The online education prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic, which held the potential for enabling meaningful education, relied on possessing certain prerequisites in the form of resources or commodities. These prerequisites were closely tied to socioeconomic factors. As such, to the disadvantaged students, there were no real freedoms or opportunities that would allow them to attain the 'doings and beings' of what they valued as students, which was an education. It could then be argued that the lack of freedoms that would enable one to convert a given resource into a capability would amount to what Sen (2000) described as capability deprivation. Considering the personal dimension, the experiences of disadvantaged students revealed that their lack of access to the necessary resources impeded their ability to fully engage in online education as a capability. This deprivation of resources hindered their pursuit of valued aspirations, thereby obstructing their potential to realise the functioning of accessing a meaningful education.

Online Education and Social Factors of Disadvantaged Students

One distinct feature of Covid-19 and the lockdown that ensued was the disruption that it caused to the social setup of society, world over. From being free human beings that were capable of interacting and mixing with others, in one day, Covid-19 confined everyone to a single place where the only people one could socialise with were members of the same household. This abrupt change and its persistence over a long period translated into other challenges including psychological (depression, suicidal tendencies, and other mental disorders) as well as physical (domestic violence) (Chaudhury & Samudra, 2020; Mazza et al, 2020).

These problems and others affected all of us but for the purposes of this paper, the focus is on how the social element and exclusion that came with Covid-19 impacted disadvantaged students' capability for online education and the risk it posed to their resilience.

It is an undisputed fact that human beings are social beings, and this is more evident among those who are disadvantaged that consider communality as a safety net and a means of coping against adversity. In looking at resilience, Ungar (2008) distinguishes the conceptualisation of resilience as perceived from the western world, which is individual-centric to the wider view of resilience that incorporates collective or communal elements. With Africa, as is with most non-western countries, communalism plays a great role in people's lives. It is no wonder that the proverb, 'it takes a village to raise a child' holds in most parts of Africa.

It is within the same context that the disruption that Covid-19-induced education affected the resilience of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. For the most part, the survival of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in higher education is closely linked to the social ties that they develop with others that cause them to face and overcome various adversities (Bensouiah, 2021; Ngalo-Morrison, 2017; Sinthampi-Banda, 2020). In contrast to Bourdieu's theory of capitals, which has been criticised for its deficit perception of students from disadvantaged backgrounds, Yosso (2005) highlights the concept of community cultural wealth.

This notion emphasises that individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds may not possess the traditional 'beneficial capitals' associated with academic success, but they possess their own unique forms of capital derived from their community. These could also be likened to what Cross and Atinde (2015) referred to as compensatory capitals. It is a form of social capital that was described by Putnam (2000) as the bonding social capital that is different from what he describes as the bridging social capital. The former involves homogeneous groups coming together with the aim of meeting a common cause. Putnam observed the bonding social capital as being more prevalent among the socioeconomically disadvantaged people. Later, Yosso observed the same among Mexican and African American women whose motto was '*Lifting as we climb'* which was a reflection of working together in achieving an intended goal. In an interview with the University World News, Bensouiah (2021) explains how socioeconomically disadvantaged students were further disadvantaged by Covid-19 disruption through the inability to be there for each other and offset some of their challenges through helping each other, and share the costs as was the case when they were on campus.

Similar observations have been made in relation to how such interdependence of students from disadvantaged backgrounds enables them to overcome the challenges that they encounter by the very nature of their backgrounds (Sinthampi-Banda, 2020; Stephens et al., 2012).

In another study by Piff et al. (2010), there was evidence of a greater propensity towards supporting one another and looking out for the next person among those from low socioeconomic backgrounds compared to their peers from well-off families.

Given this context, the online education resulting from the impact of Covid-19 not only endangered the resilience of disadvantaged students individually but also had adverse effects on their social well-being by eroding the support networks crucial for their survival. Considering their aspirations for achieving meaningful education through the perceived potential of online learning, the impact of Covid-19 and subsequent lockdown measures, which forced students to leave supportive campus environments, became a detrimental and limiting factor. This situation posed significant challenges to their ability to overcome academic, social, and economic hardships, as highlighted by Bensouiah (2021).

Online Education and Environmental Factors of Disadvantaged Students

In this concluding section, attention is directed towards how environmental factors influenced the experience of disadvantaged students in the context of Covid-19-induced online education. In this section, the focus is on the conduciveness of the environment to realising the functionings of meaningful learning from online education as a potential capability. Most students from disadvantaged backgrounds went home to places that were overcrowded, noise infested and unsuitable for any form of learning of occur (Azionya & Nhedzi, 2021; De Groot & Lemanski, 2021).

Living under such circumstances exerted pressure on the students, adversely affecting their learning experience. The lack of privacy caused by sharing limited living space had a negative impact on most students' ability to concentrate. In contrast, their counterparts who had access to more spacious living arrangements had a different experience, as they were better able to create an environment conducive to concentration.

Access to internet and connectivity is an important variable that affects the creation of a conducive environment where communication and collaboration are assumed to enhance learning through online education (Meyer, 2008). At the heart of digitalised online education is the ability to connect via the internet. This ability to connect to internet is dependent on several conditions: access to (internet), connectivity (geographically determined) and affordability among others. World Bank data on global internet connectivity and the Groupe Speciale Mobile Association (GSMA) (2020) reported the percentage of the population globally with access to internet. Within Africa, some of the countries cited included Somalia with 2%, South Sudan registering 8%, Sierra Leon with 13% and Malawi registering 14%. The digital divide is apparent not only between the Global North and Global South but also within these countries, particularly in terms of access to digital resources.

This variation is evident between the socioeconomically advantaged and disadvantaged, with the latter having less internet access than the former, who have a greater share of available resources.

The second determinant of the creation of a conducive environment online education is connectivity. This refers to the ability to access internet providers and is influenced among other factors by geographical and topographical features. In GSMA (2020), Sub-Saharan Africa registered the highest connectivity coverage gap globally. This factor is particularly significant when explored in the context of Covid-19 where institutions were shut down and students had to access their education from home. For some of the students who resided in remote rural areas or areas with terrains that did not afford them internet coverage, digital online education was somewhat of an illusion. In some South African institutions, arrangements were made to accommodate students in institutional residences due to their inability to access the internet from their homes. This was especially the case for students living in rural areas or areas with challenging terrain that hindered connectivity.

Conclusion

The changes that occurred with the disruption of Covid-19 resulted in the transition from face-to-face education to online education. While it may have been considered as an emergency and the only solution to ensuring continuity of education and fulfilling the states' obligation to providing education as a right, the implications of the transition for students from disadvantaged backgrounds is an area that is still being investigated. This paper focused on how the Covid-19-induced online education affected the resilience of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Using Sen's capability approach and Antonovsky's Salutogenesis theory, several findings emerged.

First was that as a potential capability, Covid-19-induced online education deprived disadvantaged students of the freedoms and real opportunities of taking advantage of online education to realise the functionings (ultimate achievement) of meaningful learning. While their counterparts from socioeconomically advantaged backgrounds were able to enjoy the freedoms and real opportunities to access the capability of online education through the possession of resources and commodities that enabled them to convert these to a capability, students from disadvantaged backgrounds lacked such resources. Despite demonstrating a strong SoC by employing coping strategies and seeking assistance from educators or relying on peer and communal support, students faced a significant challenge to their resilience strategies due to the risks posed by online education. These risks stemmed from the lack of sufficient support from educators who themselves grappled with the transition. Institutions' unpreparedness and educators' inadequate skills in facilitating online teaching further exacerbated the situation. Second, the lockdown and confinement of students to their homes meant a breakdown of the social fabric that held and strengthened their ability to be resilient.

In conclusion, considering the conversion factors influencing the translation of capabilities into functionings, socioeconomically disadvantaged students experienced a deprivation of capabilities in all three dimensions: personal, social, and environmental. Their capacity to effectively translate online education into meaningful learning was hindered, and they struggled to cope with the academic, social, and economic challenges they faced. Working in isolation and under unfavourable conditions created obstacles that compromised their ability to engage in meaningful learning.

Looking at the findings presented, a number of recommendations would be made with regard to online teaching and learning as an option for face-to-face education. Looked at from a human rights perspective, education remains a human right and while it is acknowledged that rights that entail economic implications may not be fully realised equally across states, there is a need for government to aim towards progressive realisation of this right. In the case of online learning, progressive realisation of the right would entail investment into digital technology that would widen the reach oof especially internet connectivity across countries. Covid-19 has brought to light the necessity of digital technology beyond being a luxury as was the view of many prior to the pandemic. Bansal et al,. (2021) argue on how digital technology played an enabling role in the realisation of the right to education, as such and in the context of the 21st Century, the development of digital technology cannot be isolated when strategizing for access to education.

Readiness and preparedness of educators and students on engaging with online education is another recommendation that this paper seeks to bring to the fore. Part of the resilience factor among students from disadvantaged backgrounds was in the face of a lacking in resources and technical know-how in navigating online education. Covid-19 revealed gaps in knowledge, skills and pedagogies in the education systems due to the reliance on face-to-face teaching and learning.
While most institutions especially in the developing world have reverted back to the traditional face-to-face mode, there is need to equip educators and trainers with tools that will enable them to operate through online platforms with more ease than the experience of the majority during Covid-19, which in turn affected the overall quality of delivery of online teaching and learning.

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STUDENT RESILIENCE BUILDING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Humankind has in the past, experienced the devastating impact of a wide range of catastrophes, including famines, floods, earthquakes, wildfires, windstorms, wars, and outbreaks of potentially deadly infectious diseases. In recent times, COVID-19 took the world by storm and radically transformed the lives of masses of people around the globe, including students. To that end, 2020 and 2021 will be remembered as the most challenging years in the history of higher education having held major implications for the way higher education students lived and performed, affecting their physical and mental well-being in profound ways. In the light of this background, this study examines student resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic and discusses Institutional support relative to such resilience building in South Africa. This study was conducted using a desktop review of literature, policy documents, as well as related models between COVID-19 and higher education. Key findings suggest that COVID-19 severely threatened the health of students and their family members and strengthened the need for educational institutions in South Africa, particularly higher education, to garner relevant support to students to build resilience, improve performance and also ready themselves and others should similar catastrophes strike again.

Keywords: Higher Education, Resilience, Mental Well-Being, Health, Performance, Support.

Introduction

In recent times, COVID-19 took the wrld by storm and radically transformed the lives of masses of people around the globe, including students. In that regard, 2020 and 2021 will be remembered as the most challenging years in the history of higher education having held major implications for the way higher education students lived and performed, affecting their physical and mental well-being in profound ways. This study examines student resilience building during the COVID-19 pandemic and discusses Institutional support relative to such resilience building in South Africa. The study which adopted a qualitative approach, was conducted using a desktop review of literature, policy documents, as well as related models between COVID-19 and higher education. In clarifying the concept of Student Resilience building during the COVID-19 Pandemic, this study explored the impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education, Generation Z and resilience, the Resilience Theory, Higher Education Students Resilience and Social Support.

Key findings suggest that students were afforded more opportunities to collaborate with each other (online), which also assisted in building resilience even among the generally quiet students albeit, to a certain extent and that the pandemic also exposed gaps in the higher education system and the need for more training of educators in digital technology to adapt to the rapidly changing education climate of the world (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). The study recommended Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to garner relevant support to students to build, boost and maintain resilience, improve performance and also ready themselves and others should similar catastrophes strike again. This study concludes by stating that all relevant stakeholders should collaborate and play a crucial supporting role by coordinating efforts in building and strengthening resilience and that determination and resilience, particularly through times of adversity to reach a desired outcome can be the hallmark of a successful student.

Background

Dating back to earliest times, humankind experienced the devastating and psychological impact of a wide range of catastrophes, including famines, floods, earthquakes, wildfires, windstorms, wars and outbreaks of potentially deadly infectious diseases and according to Liotine and Magee (2020) we are certainly no exception today as people try to figure out how to cope—and help others cope—with the grief, stress, and anxiety caused by biggest health challenge of our time: the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic which ravaged the world and caused global confusion in the recent past. The pandemic took the world by storm and radically transformed the lives of masses of people around the globe, including students.

It is for this reason that 2020 and 2021 will be remembered as the most challenging years in the history of higher education having held major implications for the way higher education students lived and performed, affecting their physical and mental well-being in profound ways. In the light of this background, this study examines student resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic and discusses Institutional support relative to such resilience building in South Africa.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a disaster, defined as an event that suspended normal activities and threatened or caused severe, community-wide damage (Herbers, Hayes & Cutuli, 2021) and left an indelible mark on our world (Mitzi, 2020). In an effort to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus, many countries around the world adopted various disease control measures, including strict social distancing and mandatory lockdown or stay-at-home orders which forced the closure of many institutions across the world, including Higher Education (Herbers et al., 2021).

Though the lockdown policies effectively mitigated or slowed the transmission of the coronavirus disease, they adversely affected people's way of life, with serious consequences for mental and psychological health and well-being, particularly among young people (Labrague & Ballad, 2021). Fatigue or a mental or physical state of tiredness and lack of energy is one of the most common reported consequences of the lockdown or home confinement measures during the COVID-19 pandemic (Talmon, 2019). Labrague and Ballad (2021) explain that lockdown fatigue occured due to the overwhelming disruptions on an individual's routines and activities, social isolation, lack of security, imminent threat to health, and unpredictability of what was ahead, and could manifest as a mix of physical, mental, and/or emotional signs.

Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a great change in the world. One aspect of the pandemic was its effect on Education, the domain of which the pandemic served as a phenomenal change event and a wakeup call to the education fraternity (Fotuhi, 2020). The ferocious pandemic with its devastating impact affected Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) not just in Wuhan, China where the virus originated, but all other higher educational institutions in the 188 countries of the world (Toquero, 2020). Thomas, Ana and Ninoslav (2020) concur in their statement that the COVID-19 pandemic had an unprecedented impact on higher education worldwide in virtually all aspects of its functioning. As a social system, resilience meant that the people in the educational environment continued to function albeit differently and as Bauboun (2020) posits, the environment, meaning the processes, hierarchy and the intricate social ties in the system contributed to the resiliency of the system, thus the measure of resilience in education has three major facets—people, the technology which facilitates the process and the process environment (Raghunathan, Singh, & Sharma, 2022).

The pandemic resulted in temporary physical closures of schools and higher education institutions around the world (Bauboun, 2020). Students have in the past overcome many obstacles throughout the history of higher education (World Bank, 2020). However, the COVID-19 period was the most uncertain period with approximately 220 million HEIs students globally having been affected due to the disruption caused by the pandemic, leaving policymakers and educational institutions with unprecedented challenges such as how to mitigate learning losses, how to deploy remote learning, how to safely reopen educational institutions and how to ensure that underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged learners are not left behind (Thomas et al., 2020).

In many parts of the world including South Africa, the transfer to online teaching was announced without prior warning, which radically changed students' daily functioning. This situation clearly showed the students' helplessness and difficulties with coping with this new, stressful situation, which then became the 'new norm'. A sudden and far-reaching change in daily functioning caused anxiety, depression, and stress in this group.

The COVID-19 situation, its rapid spread, insufficient preparation, and significant changes in everyday functioning, including university culture, contributed to increased stress among students (Babicka-Wirkus, Wirkus, Stasiak, & Kozłowski, 2021). Fotuhi (2020) concurs in his statement that the COVID-19 situation, its rapid spread, insufficient preparation, and significant changes in everyday functioning, including university culture, contributed to increased stress among students. Thus, from a pedagogical and psychological point of view, it was pertinent that students' (particularly from HEIs) resilience and copying strategies were put to a ferocious test.

Given the shift to remote learning, Fotuhi (2020) cautions against making assumptions that every student feels comfortable using technology as a sole means for learning or has technological literacy for online learning. For example, some students may need time to learn and navigate a new platform that is now their main method for learning content delivery. Some may prefer learning on paper, which allows for processing time and the ability to physically touch the material (for example, taking notes, writing cue cards, skipping back to previous sections). Unanticipated difficulties with basic requirements for online learning, like a stable Internet connection or a computer capable of streaming lectures can pose additional problems for students (Fotuhi 2020) and cause unnecessary stresses in them.

In the light of the instability of the global environment and the disastrous impact of the pandemic, Luthra & Mackenzie (2020) suggest that students in HEIs needed a heavy dose of resilience and adaptability to focus and successfully see themselves through their education journey.

Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education

COVID-19 outbreak caused a downward spiral in the world economy and caused a huge impact on the higher education system. This is corroborated by Markowitz (2020) in his observation that COVID-19 had a globally devastating impact, threatening not only the learning of tens of millions of students but also their mental health. Generally, the impact of such public health emergencies is destructive, unpredictable and overwhelming and their impact on an individual's mental health may manifest as acute mental stress as well as chronic mental stress and corresponding mental reactions (Mai, Wu and Huang, 2021).

Due to the spread of the epidemic, a host of factors, such as stress regarding health, increased time living with parents and changes in learning style and environment caused students to be unable to perform their duties (Mai et al., 2021). For students, the effect of deferred school openings, decreased employment opportunities, and school transfers caused tremendous pressure (Markowitz, 2020).

On a positive note, the pandemic highlighted the importance of universities' community engagement on the impact COVID-19 had on higher education in the world, with a special focus on three thematic areas: teaching and learning; the social dimension of higher education (concerning the effect on underrepresented, vulnerable and disadvantaged learners); and student mobility (Jena, 2020).

Indian Bureau (2020) and Rashid and Yadav (2020) stress that the sudden closure of campuses as a social distancing measure to prevent community transmission shifted face-to-face classes to virtual or online learning systems. The pandemic exposed gaps in the higher education system and the need for more training of educators in digital technology to adapt to the rapidly changing education climate of the world (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). Of greater importance is that the pandemic sounded a warning shot to higher education institutions and universities of the need to plan for disasters and also post-disaster education and research strategies to ensure student learning outcomes and standards of educational quality.

The outbreak of COVID-19 compelled lockdown in every sector including education (Jena, 2020). Since young adults value greater social connectedness and highly engage in social activities than other ages, they were heavily affected by the lockdown or home confinement measures during the pandemic. A lockdown is a restriction policy for people or community to stay where they are, usually due to specific risks to themselves or to others if they can move and interact freely or is as defined by the Indian Bureau (2020), an emergency protocol implemented by the authorities that prevents people from leaving a given area. A full lockdown as enforced in other countries meant that people in the given areas had to stay where they were without exiting or entering a building or a given area.

According to Labrague & Ballad (2021), the lockdown resulted in loss of connection to higher education students' peers and friends, increased social isolation, emotional loneliness, leading to increased risk of fatigue and other mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, and psychological distress and symptoms of physical exhaustion, including tiredness, headaches, insomnia, fatigue, and muscle pain.

COVID-19 destabilized all educational activities including admission, examinations, entrance tests, competitive examinations conducted by various boards/schools/colleges/ universities (Jena, 2020). Many entrance tests for higher study got cancelled which created a great challenge in the lives of students of higher education. The primary challenge was to continue teaching the learning process when students, faculties and staff could no longer be physically present on the campuses (Arora & Srinivasan (2020) yet student needed to write exams, pass and graduate and move on with their lives.

Thomas et al. (2020) add that the pandemic had a direct impact on how research got carried out, on university operations (in terms of campus closures and the shift to online learning) and on university governance, with management staff needing to take a range of emergency decisions and allow additional flexibility in many areas of activity.

The COVID-19 pandemic pressured educational institutions at an unprecedented pace to adopt and enhance digital readiness (Zalite & Zvirbule, 2020). Jena (2020) agrees that COVID-19 accelerated the adoption of digital technologies to deliver education and encouraged teachers and students to become more technology savvy. The Higher Education Institutions started conducting orientation programmes, induction meetings and counselling classes with the help of different e-conferencing tools like Google Meet, Skype, Youtube live, Facebook live, WebEx, to provide support services to the students. This is further confirmed by Zalite and Zvirbule (2020) in their statement that traditional face-to-face learning was replaced by online platforms and exploring alternative methods of delivering knowledge became an urgent matter. As technologically savvy students prefer learning via digital platforms, how students utilize such platforms on their own initiatives for learning needs to be understood (Deng & Tavares, 2015).

Generation Z and Resilience

Higher Education students are increasingly made up of Generation Z. Seemiller and Grace (2017) define Generation Z as individuals born between 1995 and 2010, who present different attitudes, expectations, strengths, and weaknesses from previous generations and according to Dweck (2015), Generation Z students have fixed ideation of their self-worth influenced by the self-esteem movement and they are associated with higher narcissism, over-confidence, aversion to negative events, and a focus on praises and high grades (Twenge, 2013). These students are thought to be “bubble-wrapped” due to helicopter parenting (Talmon, 2019), which may lead to poor academic or career outcomes (Bradley-Geist & Olson-Buchanan, 2014). Given that resilience is proposed to be developed through exposure to adversity (Generation Z students have potentially lesser resilience owing to the lack of exposure to adversity due to helicopter parenting and their general aversion to risk and negative events (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013 and Luecken & Gress, 2009).

Resilience Theory

With reference to resilience theory, Van Breda (2018), explains that how resilience takes shape involves three connected components. These are:

1. Adversity,
2. Mediating process, and
3. Outcome.

Understanding adversity is critical in appreciating how resilience plays out, given that resilience is described as an ability to either bounce back from adversity or how one copes in the face of adversity (Bonanno & Diminich, 2013). In relation to coping abilities, resilience theory describes individual (problem-solving skills, emotions, motivation), social (interpersonal relationships), or environmental (infrastructure or school facilities) factors that augment or mediate an individual's resilience (Masten, 2015). As one encounters adversity and following interactions and support from either individual, social, or environmental resources, he/she may then become resilient (Van Breda, 2018).

According to Ainscough, Stewart, Colthorpe and Zimbardi (2018), resilient students are characterized by their ability to utilize resources or seek help to mitigate the challenges and excel in their academic pursuits. This theory relates very well to the phenomena that HEIs students went through relative to the COVIS-19 pandemic.

Higher Education Students Resilience

Education systems have certain qualities that make them uniquely placed for building individual, community, and systemic resilience. In times of hardship, education retains high public value and demand, reaches populations at scale, and serves as a critical hub for information sharing (Volante et al., 2021). To that end, an efficient education system has the potential to expand individual, community, and institutional resilience, and resilient populations are best able to deliver safe, relevant, quality education and learning for all children and youths (Bauboun, 2020).

Academic resilience refers to a student's ability to overcome academic adversities that can influence students' educational development (Cassidy, 2016 and Martin, 2013). This is in line with Labrague and Ballad's (2021) definition of resilience as an individual's capacity to rebound from adversity or stressful situations. In the same vain, Volante, Klinger and Barrett (2021) state that the Oxford dictionary defines resilience as "the ability of people or things to recover quickly after something unpleasant happens or has been experienced such as shock, injury and others." Clearly, the general notion of resilience is much broader than what is typically captured and often widely reported when discussing students and education systems. The unprecedented and generational challenges presented by COVID-19 provided an important impetus to reconsider how students should be supported in times of disaster. Resilience has been documented as an essential component in managing stress but according to Ang, Shorey, Lopez, Chew and Lau (2021), understanding how students with different sociodemographic characteristics perceive resilience remains understudied.

According to Perkins-Gough (2013), resilience is one component of grit that explains phenomena that are related to overcoming adversity in the face of challenges.

As Liotine and Magee (2020) put it, being able to pick yourself up from a failure and keep moving forward exemplifies the definition of grit in that a student who may have a lot going on outside of school, will work harder in their courses to understand material and receiving a passing grade in a class. When adaptive systems are functioning well, most students will demonstrate resilience to disaster. The capacity of students' adaptive systems to function well depends upon their developmental histories and the social and community resources available to them (Herbers, Hayes & Cutuli, 2021). Intrinsic values, such as strength, determination, future orientation, coupled with the development of a sense of belonging and social support are qualities of resilient students (Bailey, 2020).

As earlier discussed, due to the sudden outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, comprehensive social distancing measures were widely adopted, and students had to shelter in place at home. Facing stress caused by various difficulties, some students showed resilience, such as adopting active countermeasures as well as a more stable psychological state to deal with the crisis, while some students did not (Mai, Wu and Huang, 2021).

Herbers et al. (2021) argues that the pandemic created even greater inequities with respect to students' access to learning resources and support due to socio-economic factors. The impact of these inequities impacted more than just academic outcomes. It (the pandemic) also underscored the growing necessity of broader notions of academic resilience that recognize important mental health as well as physical well-being concerns in students in HEIs (Volante et al., 2021) – elements of resilience that are typically not captured by large-scale assessment measures (Vinkers, Van Amelsvoort, Bisson, Branchi, Cryan, Domschke, Howes, Manchia, Pinto, de Quervain, Schmidt, van der Wee, 2020).

During the COVID-19 period, it was important for schools and higher education systems to branch out and remain knowledgeable about the situation (Vinkers et al., 2020). Rather than dwelling on the fact that students may or may not be able to return to school as planned, schools rightly began to plan for the "new normal" while being as resilient as possible (Volante et al., 2021). As Bauboun (2020) observes, education systems across the world:

- Supported and strengthened social capital, which acts as an important safety net during crises,
- Raised the human capital of individuals, a critical foundation for resilience,
- Played a critical role in strengthening community knowledge,
- Strengthened the self-efficacy, aspirations, and confidence of individuals.

Bauboun (2020) further explains that in difficult times like these we must come up with solutions and build resilience, both individually and for our communities including education.

Determination and resilience, particularly through times of adversity, to reach a desired outcome can be the hallmark of a successful student (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews & Kelly, 2007).

In South Africa, some HEIs students drew their resilience by the mere fact that as a community, they could draw strength from the realisation that "we are all in the same general predicament and can take action to overcome this situation" (Jena, 2020:18), thereby giving them a certain level of control. At the same time, the South African government, politicians, and decision makers stressed the fact that they (students) were not exposed to an uncontrollable threat – neither with respect to health, nor from an economic point of view (Bauboun, 2020).

COVID-19 also highlighted the urgent need to augment HEIs' focus on resilience and on strategies to enhance it (Mahat, 2021) as, as discussed above, resilience was pivotal for students to cope with the stress imposed by the virus outbreak not just as students but also at the individual and societal level.

Coping skills and personal resilience are key factors that assisted in protecting individuals from lockdown-induced fatigue and other mental and psychological health consequences of the pandemic and the measures implemented to control the disease (Labrague & Ballad, 2021). Mai et al. (2021) agree that in the context of a pandemic or crisis, adequate coping skills are vital to help an individual cope with the negative effects of the crisis (like those of the mandatory lockdown) and support their mental health. Mahat (2021) and Markowitz (2020) confirm that strengthening resilience and enforcing healthier coping skills helped students combat fatigue related to the lockdown or home confinement measures and other stressors associated with the inevitable changes brought about by the pandemic.

Without a doubt, COVID-19 tested the resilience of higher education, the students and academics. Resilience strategies supported students and academics to develop resilience during the pandemic and in the longer-term recovery from the crisis (Mai et al., 2021). These strategies also helped them (students and academics) to reflect on their own evolving academic identities, particularly as the pandemic had vigour and the potential to rebalance the three academic missions of research, teaching and service to the field (Mahat, 2021). Most importantly, the strategies were firmly hinged on the comprehension of social support patterns and coping tendencies of the student population which ultimately helped to build a more targeted social support system to help them the students cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and ready them for similar crises (Mai et al., 2021).

Social Support

During challenging times where resilience is critical to student success, social support must be garnered to empower and inspire students to persist.

Despite Hupcey (2002) arguing that social support is a multi-faceted concept that has been difficult to conceptualize, define and measure, that the concept has been extensively studied, but with little agreement among theoreticians and researchers as to its theoretical and operational definition and also that as a result, the concept remains fuzzy and almost anything that infers a social interaction may be considered social support, Mai et al. (2021) state that "Social support" refers to the care and support people feel from others and based on the perspective of interpersonal relationships and resilience building. In concurring with Mai et al. (2021), Yu, Li, Li, Xiang, Yuan, Liu, Li and Xiong (2020) define social support as a series of support measures accessible to an individual through their social relationships with other individuals, groups, and the larger community, and can be divided into three components: subjective support, objective support, and the utilization of support.

Mai et al. (2021) divide social support into four categories:

i. emotional support refers to providing others with empathy, warmth, love, and trust;
ii. instrumental support refers to providing material help and services when others are in need;
iii. informational support refers to helping others solve problems by providing useful suggestions, information, etc.; and
iv. appraisal support refers to providing useful information for others' self-evaluation.

There are two possible mechanisms through which social support can influence mental and physical health (Yu et al., 2020). One is through main effects: social support is salutary for all individuals independent of the extent of stress that they are currently facing. The other mechanism is a stress-buffering model, in which the social support of others may have an ameliorating effect on life stressors, particularly for individuals under greater stress (Yu et al., 2020).

A number of universities posted social support related helpful tips for students on their websites in the wake of the pandemic. North-eastern University, for example, established a Global Resilience Institute in response to COVID-19. The institute offers specific ways that students can (even now – beyond the times of the pandemic) manage their emotional and physical well-being. For example, students are encouraged to share their feelings with trusted family members or friends and ask for help if they want support (Global Resilience Institute, 2020). The University of Michigan is another university that offered ways to support students during the pandemic. Like the Global Resilience Institute, they suggest that students find their new normal. They want their students to recognize that without their usual or traditional approaches to learning (Mitzi, 2020 and The University of Michigan, 2020).

The importance of social support lies in its subconscious conversion into 'copying strategies' by its (social support's) recipient.

Coping strategies refer to the specific efforts, both behavioural and psychological, that people employ to master, tolerate, reduce or minimize stressful events (Yu et al., 2020). In addition to coping strategies, effective social support has consistently been reported to protect individuals from developing mental health problems when they experience stressors particularly in disaster times like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

This paper adopted a qualitative approach and was conducted using a desktop review of literature (forty two sources), documentary analysis, as well as related models between COVID-19 and higher education. Some of the literature was derived from Google Scholar using the phrase "Student resilience building during the COVID-19 Pandemic".

Findings

Key findings suggest that COVID-19 severely threatened the health of students and their family members and strengthened the need for educational institutions in South Africa, particularly higher education, to garner relevant support to students to build and maintain resilience, improve performance and also ready themselves and others should similar catastrophes strike again. The findings further suggest that students were afforded more opportunities to collaborate with each other (online), which also assisted in building resilience even among the generally quiet students albeit, to a certain extent and that the pandemic also exposed gaps in the higher education system and the need for more training of educators in digital technology to adapt to the rapidly changing education climate of the world (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). These findings relate well with the resilience theory as they involve connected components of adversity, mediation and outcome (Van Breda, 2018).

Lessons Learned

While COVID-19 brought with it several severely damaging effects to students in HEIs, it also brought with it some positive aspects. This study uncovered several lessons learned relative to COVID-19 and students from Higher Education Institutes, including social support, copying strategies and resilience and also their communities. With many different approaches being taken by countries worldwide, the COVID-19 crisis was an opportunity for Higher education policy makers to learn from each other and co-operate to mitigate the effects of the pandemic and maybe even "build back better" (World Bank, 2020). While COVID-19 amplified existing problems in communities and in education, innovation suddenly moved from the margins to the center of many education systems enabled by the improved use of technology.

We will never go back to where we were before COVID but if we pay attention to the data and listen to what our communities say they need, we can make incredible strides in education that will be felt for generations to come (Mitzi, 2020). Students were afforded more opportunities to collaborate with each other, which also assisted in building resilience even among the generally quiet students. Strengthening resilience and enforcing healthier coping skills helped students combat fatigue related to the lockdown or home confinement measures and other stressors associated with the inevitable changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Most importantly, blended learning (combining both virtual and traditional delivery), has come to stay (Mahat, 2021).

Recommendations

This study suggests the following recommendations:

1. HEIs need to develop more training of educators in digital technology to adapt to the rapidly changing education climate of the world (Rashid & Yadav, 2020).
2. HEIs must regard the organization of teaching in ways that consider students' psychosocial functioning to a greater extent. According to Luthra and Mackenzie (2020), these suggestions include implementing assessments of students' psychosocial functioning in order to determine the potential need for emotional, social, and psychological support, and establishing psychological consultation points for students requiring such support.
3. HEIs administrations must consider reviewing their curriculums. An obligatory course on coping skills should be recommended for the first-year curriculum. This could improve students' competences, wellbeing, and resilience (Mahat, 2021).
4. HEIs should garner relevant support to students to build, boost and maintain resilience, improve performance and also ready themselves and others should similar catastrophes strike again (Bailey, 2020).

Conclusion

Disparities often increase during crises and widening gaps must be anticipated and proactively addressed. The world battled COVID-19 and economies across the globe declared a lockdown which tested the resilience particularly of students in HEIs. Following governments instructions, even the academic institutions had to shut down temporarily, affecting academic delivery (Arora & Srinivasan, 2020). Thus, they had to find new alternatives to academic delivery and virtual classes were the way forward. The pandemic left an important lesson in the realisation that resilience does not only exist at the individual level, but also at the community level. In any societal ecosystem, there is a certain level of shared resilience needed to be able to overcome the stress of adversity (like the coronavirus pandemic) and recover to normal levels of functioning.

This shared resilience is vital to face the challenges together, not only at the Higher Education level but also at a national level, where all relevant stakeholders should collaborate and play a crucial supporting role by coordinating efforts building and strengthening resilience. In the light of this, determination and resilience, particularly through times of adversity to reach a desired outcome can be the hallmark of a successful student.

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RISK FACTORS FOR RESILIENCE DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN UNIVERSITIES: A CONCEPTUAL REVIEW OF STUDENTS FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS

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Abstract

The COVID -19 pandemic brought mental health issues among university students from disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there has been little prior research on how risk factors affect students' resilience during pandemics like the COVID-19 crisis. Using resilience theory as a lens to guide the conceptual review in this paper, we examine risk factors for resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic in universities, with a focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The reviewed studies in this paper indicated that social support plays a very important role in enhancing resilience among students during pandemic and that developing active problem-solving skills makes students capable of managing individual problems. Moreover, self-efficacy is key in enhancing resilience because university students who regard themselves as having strong levels of self-efficacy and resilience as well as a low risk of infection worry less about COVID-19 than their peers do. Self-control is important in making students to have sufficient sense of choice, freedom, and autonomy motivates individual to feel inspired and take action. We recommend that university students should also lean on one another for support and coping mechanisms as they deal with an onslaught of stressors associated to the disturbances in their life brought on by the pandemic to lessen the impact of stressors on their academic progress.

Keywords: Risk Factors; Resilience; COVID-19 Pandemic; Universities; Students Disadvantaged Backgrounds.

Introduction

A considerable disruption in education has occurred, affecting both teaching and learning in schools. Although temporary school closures due to health and other crises are not new, Audrey Azoulay, Director-General of UNESCO, believes that "the global scale and speed of the current educational disruption is unparalleled and, if prolonged, could threaten the right to education" (UNESCO Associated Schools Network, 2020, p. 1). According to a Human Rights Watch (2022) study conducted in nine African states, students who were already at risk of being denied access to a decent education have been the most impacted by pandemic-related school closures. Education International (2019) expressed a similar issue, fearing that online education and the use of other digital educational technology might worsen the "digital divide" between rich and students from impoverished backgrounds. If these fears are realised, executing the African Union's 2016 Continental Education Strategy for Africa (CESA, 2016-2025) may be difficult.

Students from impoverished backgrounds are less likely to be able to adapt and implement the processes required to continue studying during school closures, such as internet access and the ability to adjust school calendars to match seasonal harvests (Human rights watch, 2022). In Burkina Faso, a teacher expressed concern that extending the school year to compensate for missed time may exclude some kids if it interfered with crop production. On March 18, 2020, the Cameroon government stated that all schools including higher education, as well as vocational training institutes, will be closed. Cameroon's land borders (air and sea) would also be closed, gatherings of more than 50 people would be outlawed, and school and university contests would be suspended (Etomes, 2020). According to Etomes (2022), regardless of socioeconomic status, the problem of irregular power supply and inconsistent internet connection was a ubiquitous concern that impeded students from properly participating in online classes. Pre-primary to post-secondary students in Nigeria were among the almost 39 million students who were told to stay at home throughout the outbreak (UNESCOb, 2020). Consequently, students struggle to obtain mentoring, academic counselling, and other supports that are readily available in a face-to-face learning environment. Furthermore, the consequences of a school closure due to the COVID-19 pandemic do not exempt teachers. According to Barbour et al. (2020), while the know-how and technologies to manage emergency remote learning are accessible in the developed setting, countries such as Nigeria lacked the infrastructure and legislation to properly operationalize the change. South Africa proclaimed a national lockdown alert level 5 on March 23, 2020, and the government began enforcing it on March 26, 2020; as a result, students were not permitted to physically enter any educational facilities (UNESC, 2020). Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of social restrictions were enforced, such as the obligation to remain indoors during the lockdown to reduce the risk of exposure to this severe illness (Van Schalkwyk, 2021). The restriction of public gatherings led to the establishment of online learning in an effort to save education with minimal preparation, particularly in rural locations where the technology to conduct online learning was lacking. However, for students and teachers at higher education institutions, remote learning presents a number of challenges, including limited access, inadequate training, and a shortage of online resources (Muhuro & Kang'ethe, 2021). This also made assessment and evaluation challenging (Ntshwarang et al., 2021). Furthermore, Ojo and Onwuegbuzie (2020) discovered that students' attitudes to various colleges' decision to open their campuses to online learning beginning in April 2020 varied. The majority of students expressed their dissatisfaction with a variety of issues they encountered when studying at home. The same survey discovered academic performance issues, such as noise and distractions from their environment, a poor internet connection, and unreliable electricity. Furthermore, the South African government mandated that each university develop a mitigation plan, which included using online study delivery as a substitute for traditional classroom instruction in order to stop the disease's spread, which posed difficulties for students, particularly those in rural areas (Chothia, 2020).

The president of South Africa declared on May 1, 2020, a gradual lowering of the lockdown restrictions to alert level 4, allowing only final-year students in clinical training programmes to receive face-to-face instruction. Higher education institutions were allowed to allow up to 33% of students from all years of study registered for clinical training programmes, as well as postgraduate students who needed access to labs, to return to campuses under alert level 3 by 1 June 2020 (Van Schalkwyk, 2021). While some universities opted not to give contact classes for the rest of the 2020 academic year, others allowed students to return (Ngqakamba, 2020). As a result, students were obliged to participate in online and hybrid learning in an environment with restricted resources. Because of the COVID-19 epidemic, this was the only viable option, but many students at South African higher education institutions did not have internet access, had difficulty connecting, and could not afford the costs of a device and data to connect to the internet (Tamrad & Teffera, 2020). Despite the fact that numerous schools collaborated with internet service providers to secure zero-rated access to specific educational learning management systems and information websites, the digital divide widened. Many academics with teaching responsibilities had to quickly become familiar with the various platforms in order to continue online teaching because they had little to no experience doing so (Hedding et al., 2020). Not every university employee had home internet connection or a laptop or desktop computer. The laptops were occasionally shared with a partner or home-schooled children (Hedding et al., 2020). Furthermore, meeting study outcomes related to supervising postgraduate students or academics in reaching their expected results was difficult (Fleming, 2020). Despite the difficulties encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of students displayed perseverance in dealing with the circumstance. The Resilience theory is discussed in the following section.

Resilience Theory

Engineers in the nineteenth century invented the concept of resilient systems (Mock et. al. 2019). However, there is disagreement over the existence and utility of a global resilience framework. The promotion of resilience epistemology is intended to expand global actors' reach into the deep recesses of peripheral systems and to advise on how to diminish resistance (Amo-Agyemang, 2021). According to Cassidy (2015), there is a need to contextualise resilience because risk and adversity perceptions, as well as evaluations of abilities and results, are closely related to events and circumstances.

Thus, according to the resilience hypothesis, there are things that negatively influence an individual, and then there are helpful mediating variables that allow one to cope with life, bounce back, or even go beyond. According to Ray et al. (2019), the online intervention described may be an effective tool for reducing obstacles for students seeking mental health care and may promote student welfare.

Furthermore, Yates et al. (2015) stated that a large body of research has demonstrated ways by which individuals attain beneficial developmental outcomes despite exposure to known adaptation hazards.

Setbacks are a feature of life for people and collectives, according to Hoegl and Hartmann (2021), and resilience is a vital notion in explaining why some entities positively adjust (bounce back) or even emerge stronger (bounce beyond), while others suffer from such events, sometimes permanently. According to van Breda (2018), resilience research consists of three interconnected components: adversity, outcomes, and mediating factors. This means that people may endure adversity and tremendous pressure in their lives, but if they obtain help, they may come out of it. For example, during the Covid - 19 pandemic, many first-year university students were forced to accomplish all of their work from home, despite the fact that they were unfamiliar with academic writing and the use of electronic devices. However, online education became the "new normal," and they were able to manage after receiving online aid from academic personnel, friends, and colleagues. Furthermore, van Breda (2018) highlights that resilience is a process that results in an outcome, and the primary focus of resilience research is on mediating processes (see Figure 1).

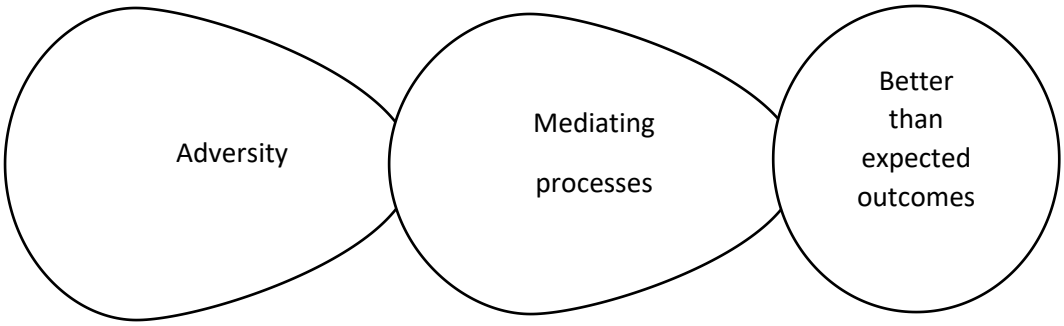


Figure 1: *Resilience as a process and outcome* (adapted from van Breda (2018)

Mental resilience, according to Fullerton et al., (2021), is important for students' well-being and performance. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many university students were under pressure to adjust to the "new normal" of learning from home. Because contact classes were abruptly halted due to lock-down, they had to adjust and learn to use new technology gadgets on their own. It was stressful for first-year students since they had to start learning on computers while also dealing with a heavy workload, and it was even tougher for kids from low-income families who couldn't buy these gadgets. However, studies by many authors, such as Fullerton et al (2021), filled the gap by investigating a variety of human resilience resources and their interaction with coping responses to achieve beneficial adaptation results.

In agreement with Fullerton et al., (2021), Farber and Rosendahl (2018) state that maintaining mental health is widely regarded as an indication of successful coping with adversity.

Similarly, Mai et al., (2021) found that high levels of emotional support from family and friends can improve students' proclivity to use positive coping mechanisms. In the current paper, it is possible that some University students from low-income families experienced mental health problems during the Covid -19 pandemic, as socioeconomic situations deteriorated due to lock-down rules that made it hard for most individuals to go to work. As a result, the resilience hypothesis comes into play and assists underprivileged students in coping with harsh conditions. In postsecondary education, this means that institutions' support networks have to assist poor students in dealing with difficulty during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Research Question

What are the possible COVID-19 pandemic risk factors for resilience among students from disadvantaged backgrounds?

Methodology

This study used a systematic research design. A systematic research is developed to derive conclusions from earlier research and literature. Every scientific study is developed on the foundation of systematic research (Muchanga, 2020).

The preliminary breadth of literature assisted in ensuring the validity of the presented idea as well as the feasibility of the research questions. A quick search on EBSCOhost and Google Scholar revealed that there was sufficient material for evaluation. To be eligible for inclusion in this review, articles must be student-focused and contain deliberations of students with risk factors for resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic in universities. Exclusion criteria included inaccessible full texts, abstract-only studies, and publications older than ten years. While the majority of the literature is from the last 5 years, some earlier sources were included if they were relevant to answering the study questions.

In light of the previous scoping review, the following search terms were defined: risk factors; resilience; COVID-19 pandemic; Universities; students from disadvantaged background.

This review of the literature was undertaken using ERIC, Scopus, and EBSCOhost, with a focus on gathering pertinent peer-reviewed journal articles. Any items considered worthy of further investigation were added to an online library before being imported into an Excel spreadsheet for investigation.

Thematic Analysis

A thematic approach was adopted in this conceptual review.

The thematic approach tries to rely on recurring themes to examine alternate viewpoints within a field of study, allowing the researchers to exercise autonomy (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was used to examine topics as the material was acquired. Thematic approach may be considered a tool rather than an approach in and of itself. Braun and Clarke, (2022) argue that because of the autonomous nature of thematic approach, it is critical that the research be conducted in a way that provides rigour and trustworthiness, which can be accomplished through collaboration between authors as co-researchers for the conceptual review.

Risk Factors for Resilience

A number of ecologically different risk and resilience characteristics have been found that affect people in their daily lives and, more specifically, at times of tragedy or outbreak. Furthermore, during a pandemic, university students may face pandemic-specific concerns that have a negative impact on their mental health and wellbeing, such as emotions of susceptibility to getting the COVID-19 virus and compliance with preventative measures (social disengagement). Several ecological risk factors for resilience, such as social support, active problem-solving ability, self-efficacy, and a sense of self-control, have been discovered by research.

Social Support

Uncertainty, disturbed daily routines, financial stress, and social isolation are just a few of the projected changes in students' lives and educational experiences brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic. As a result, the pandemic may put a significant psychological and emotional pressure on university students, particularly those from underprivileged families (Wernli et al., 2021). Although fear and anxiety are commonplace during a pandemic, it is also common for students to demonstrate high levels of resilience in times of need. To decrease the impact of the public health disaster on their academic progress, students should draw on one another for support and coping techniques as they deal with an avalanche of stressors related with the upheavals in their lives caused by the pandemic (Hannan & Arends, 2021). Understanding individual conditions and related protective variables can thus provide better focused counselling and aid for kids' academic achievement (Hannan & Arends, 2021). "Support made available to an individual through social ties to other people, groups, and the larger community" (Kaniasty et al., 2020, p.340). In general, social support for a student can come from a variety of sources, including but not limited to friends, study partners, family, community connections, and tutees. Numerous studies have found that different types of social support have varying effects on kids' resilience (Hoadley, 2020). As previously said, sources of support and psychological resilience are two strategies that can assist kids in dealing with adversity. When looking at resilience as a process or outcome, research shows that social support is critical (Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2023).

Although there are individual variances in social support and psychological resilience, when we view resilience as a trait, we must assess if an excess of perceived social support can compensate for a lack of resilience. In one study, it was discovered that family, friends, and others strongly moderated the link between resiliency and subjective well-being in college students (O'Brien et al., 2020). In contrast, social support had no effect on the link between resiliency and psychological distress in cancer patients (Park et al., 2020). Furthermore, the stress-buffering theory describes how social support acts as a buffer to mitigate the negative impacts of stress on student well-being (Abel & McQueen, 2020). Researchers discovered that family support played a specific role in minimising the negative effects of stress by taking into account the various forms of assistance (Aristovnik et al., 2020). This is due to the fact that students face increased expectations outside of the classroom, including significant changes in how they interact with key individuals.

Social support has been associated to improved mental health and wellbeing in outbreak situations all across the world (Aini et al., 2020). For example, Ebola survivors reported that seeking help from friends and relatives was an effective coping strategy for dealing with mental suffering (Azubuike et al., 2021). In addition to these findings, it was discovered in a study conducted during the COVID-19 crisis by Calonge et al., (2021) that social support improved healthcare personnel's sleep quality, reduced anxiety levels, and increased feelings of self-efficacy towards their professional obligations. Other research has revealed a reciprocal relationship between these categories, despite the fact that social support was found to promote wellbeing longitudinally rather than the other way around (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Despite the fact that these studies provide light on how it could operate as a protective factor against the negative consequences of an outbreak or pandemic event. There is currently no research on how social support may operate as a risk factor for resilience in students from disadvantaged backgrounds in the current COVID-19 scenario (Chauke, & Chinyakata, 2020). Social support and resilience may work together to mitigate the harmful effects of COVID-19-related stress on depression and anxiety. When stresses develop, social support works as an external component that can enhance an individual's potential for resilience and adaptability (Brusadelli et al., 2020). Social support may be critical for building resilience (Coibion et al., 2020). Resilience also mediates the link between social support and mental health outcomes among healthcare professionals throughout the pandemic (Dikid et al., 2020). The mediation effect of resilience on the connection between social support and subjective well-being has been shown in patients with spinal cord injuries (Fino et al., 2020). Furthermore, social support and resilience have been shown to have a sequential mediation influence on the association between work-related stress generated by COVID-19 and mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety (Brusadelli et al., 2020). As a result, among young individuals, social support and resilience may act as a moderator in the association between COVID-19-related stress and mental health outcomes.

Peer support has been shown in research to be a substantial source of social support for university students (Crompton et al., 22021). These ties provide an individual with moral and monetary resources to assist in easing stress, reducing stress-induced unpleasant feelings, and eventually becoming a substantial element influencing the individual's response to the hard situation. Schoolmates, friends, and other peers may be the most trustworthy people in their social networks, and they can be an important source of social support for university students who are away from their families. Furthermore, family support can successfully assist students in coping with difficult circumstances, minimising mental stress, and preventing mental health disorders, hence maintaining their mental health development (Gittings et al., 2021). Other social support systems, such as family, professors, and so on, can surely assist students improve their physical and mental health, as well as their willingness to take risks (Badat, 2020).

Active Problem-Solving Skills

As part of COVID-19 containment measures, all educational facilities in South Africa and other countries were closed, and online learning took their place. This occurred between March and August 2020 in South Africa. Students had to deal with a significantly increased workload, changes to their daily routines, and difficulty working from home at that time (Essop, 2020). Students have to make sacrifices as a result of the swift shift to remote online instruction and the use of digital pedagogies. Many kids were obliged to swiftly acquire new information community technology (ICT) and mentor other students and parents who were struggling with ICT. Online instructional programmes that have been established and evaluated, as well as sufficient planning, are the foundation for the efficiency of online learning. A major disadvantage of online learning is the loss of face-to-face interaction and involvement. Students rated online learning settings such as Microsoft Teams and live Zoom lectures as more accessible but less effective at fostering learning and less engaging than face-to-face interactions (Landa et al., 2021). It is not practicable to support learning and teaching with technology in contexts with limited access to digital technologies. Students may be unable to contribute academically in these conditions, which might raise anxiety and pessimism (Landa et al., 2021). According to studies, educational system disruption had a significant detrimental impact on students' global skill development and resulted in burnout, heightened levels of anxiety, and depression (Laher et al., 2021; Landa et al., 2021; Hoadley, 2020). Considering the overall condition and disparity in economic classes in South Africa, which was marked by load shedding and other equity challenges. Academic advancement was practically impossible for pupils from previously poor communities. However, there is evidence that some kids were able to cope successfully with these difficult circumstances. Students who were able to stay active with their school community and work within supportive administration and leadership teams, for example, had a greater sense of personal problem-solving skills and were better equipped to handle the aforementioned issues (Laher et al., 2021).

The South African government ordered a return to conventional schooling by August 2020 due to discrepancies in access to education (Lawton-Misra & Pretorius, 2021). Many schools in South Africa are in poor or rural areas with insufficient resources to facilitate digital learning. When students returned to regular schooling, their fears and anxieties about coming into touch with COVID-19 and perhaps passing it on to their loved ones grew (Landa et al., 2021). Assessments of greater susceptibility to infection were likely to heighten these worries and psychological pain. As the 2021 and 2022 academic years began, students faced the challenge of reconciling the enormous learning loss caused by school closures, the obligation to maintain high levels of instruction, and the implementation of COVID-19-related safety practises. Because of the pandemic's and containment efforts' specific effects on university students, it is nevertheless critical to nurture the development of student problem-solving talents. Risk assessments are formed based on a person's judgements of their ability to avoid risk in the context of their surroundings (Le Grange, 2020).

When someone deems a threat to be substantial, such as the possibility of COVID-19 exposure, they engage in a coping response assessment process, which involves evaluating the resources at their disposal to deal with or prevent the threat, as well as their ability to implement a coping reaction (Le Grange, 2020). This latter type of appraisal is similar to the concept of self-efficacy, which can improve psychological resilience and reduce the appearance of negative pandemic consequences.

Self-Efficacy

According to Ngogi (2010), self-efficacy is a self-assessed capacity to successfully carry out a stated activity required to attain a desired state or outcome. Toquero (2020) describes self-efficacy as "a broad trust in one's abilities and skills to affect difficulties in an effective manner and thus demonstrate a sense of coping," and it is a personality feature. Students with higher levels of self-efficacy may be able to cope better with problems and experience less stress (Ngogi, 2020). Prior study has shown that having high levels of self-efficacy reduces a person's risk of stress (Spaull & Van der Berg, 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2021).

Because it lets one feel more in control of possible situations, self-efficacy can be considered as a stress-coping mechanism. The concept of feeling in control, rather than actual control, can be a potent protection against negative stress (Sahni & Sharma, 2020). According to scientific evidence, resilience and self-efficacy are inextricably linked (Ungar & Theron, 2020). Another study found that resilience and aspects of self-efficacy were marginally to significantly associated (Sahni & Sharma, 2020). Students who believe they have high levels of self-efficacy and resilience, as well as a minimal risk of infection, are less concerned about COVID-19 than their peers.

Low risk perception was associated with high levels of self-efficacy and resilience, but high perceived knowledge was associated with high levels of preparation and self-efficacy. People who have high levels of perceived resilience and self-efficacy may know more about the illness than their peers, making them more prepared to prevent getting sick. As a result, these people may be less concerned about the pandemic's effects than their less prepared colleagues (Reddy et al., 2020). According to research, public health interventions that focus on COVID-19 knowledge and preparedness may be able to boost persons' sense of self-efficacy and resilience. According to national polls, combining multimedia advertising with community outreach and support programmes has increased understanding of diseases and pandemics while also changing behaviours (Richter, 2018).

A Sense of Self-Control

Having a sufficient sense of choice, freedom, and autonomy encourages an individual to feel inspired and take action. It is critical to highlight here that motivation is influenced by one's sense of control.

According to studies, students who thought they were more susceptible to infection, thought they were less conscious of COVID-19, and thought they were less resilient felt more alone and out of control. Furthermore, living in a rural region was associated with feeling more lonely. A person who has a high-risk perception may engage in tight self- and social isolation, which can erode social bonds, raise anxiety and panic, and imperil a person's sense of affiliation and belonging (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). Students' sentiments of social isolation can be exacerbated by a lack of access to digital technology (Shepherd & Mohohlwane, 2021). Students who are unfamiliar with the disease may lack access to digital technology, which are the primary source of information on the epidemic. According to prior research on the impact of resilience on psychological outcomes, poor perceived resilience is associated with high degrees of loneliness. The need for social distance characterises the COVID-19 pandemic; social distancing limits may contribute to the collapse of social bonds, tax support networks, increase fear and stress, and risk a person's sense of identification and belonging (Li & Wang, 2020). Students in disadvantaged communities in South Africa may feel more isolated due to a lack of access to current technology (Sosibo, 2020). According to research, living alone may increase the prevalence of obesity (Van der Berg, Van Wyk, & Selkirk, 2020; Wade et al., 2020) and worsen present cases (Wade et al., 2020), thereby leading to an increase in COVID-19-related mortality (Pillay, 2021). Furthermore, social isolation caused by widespread lockdowns may increase psychological instability. As a result of being compelled to isolate and quarantine themselves in their houses, people's mental and emotional health may deteriorate, resulting to conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and depression, among others (Padmanabhanunni & Pretorius, 2023).

School closures may exacerbate mental illness in children and adolescents who already have it due to a lack of exposure to the resources they generally have access to in schools (Prime et al., 2020). People become bored when they are alone for long periods of time and are exposed to the same people on a regular basis (such as family members), which may drive them to become focused on social media. Because excessive social media use has been connected to mental health difficulties, specifically anxiety and depression, it may have a negative impact on student academic performance (O'Brien et al., 2020). Furthermore, because of the rapid spread of fake news on social media (Nwosu, 2021) and people's susceptibility to fake news due to a lack of critical thinking and reasoning skills (Oluka et al., 2021), high social media exposure may result in misinformation about the COVID-19 pandemic, which may cause panic and serious health issues (Gustafsson & Nuga, 2020). Furthermore, as a result of the COVID-19 epidemic, the strain on breadwinners to support their families may increase, and the withdrawal of free school meals may compound this pressure. This stress may lead to long-term mental health problems and a rise in domestic violence (Marshall et al., 2020). South Africa's dangers are much higher due to the bulk of the population's socioeconomic destitution, poor physical conditions, and dirty lifestyles. There is a substantial discrepancy in children's literacy levels due to disparate socioeconomic situations, as demonstrated by the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study in South Africa (Kantamneni, 2020).

School cancellations caused by the COVID-19 epidemic may exacerbate the problem (Czerniewicz, 2020). Furthermore, school closures may put a pressure on healthcare systems (Marques & Braidwood, 2021), despite the fact that most schools lack clear regulations on how to practise social distance when needed (Dlamini & Ndzinisa, 2020). However, when compared to other social isolation tactics that have the ability to restrict the spread of Covid-19, this strategy reduces the frequency of Covid-19 infections and fatalities dramatically (Essop, 2020). Despite the fact that similar observations have been made in other countries, the COVID-19 pandemic has implications for South Africa. If the pandemic is not effectively managed, the consequences could be severe.

Furthermore, student learning assessments have to be completed remotely. However, South African media stated that students at two of the country's best institutions were exchanging answers to online texts, raising concerns about the quality of university graduates due to remote assessment management (Motala & Menon, 2020). Rafaeli and Hutchinson (2020) outline empirical grounds for remote teaching failures from both their most recent and previous investigations and offer helpful guidance on how failure in this area might be prevented.

Conclusion and Recommendation

In this paper, we conclude that social support plays a very important role in enhancing resilience among students during pandemic. This is because social support may act as a moderator in the relationship between COVID-19-related stress and mental health outcomes among students. The study also concludes that developing active problem-solving skills makes students capable of managing individual problems. Moreover, self-efficacy is key in enhancing resilience because university students who regard themselves as having strong levels of self-efficacy and resilience as well as a low risk of infection worry less about COVID-19 than their peers do. Finally, having self-control is important in making students to have sufficient sense of choice, freedom, and autonomy motivates individual to feel inspired and take action. The implication of this result is that university students should also lean on one another for support and coping mechanisms as they deal with an onslaught of stressors associated to the disturbances in their life brought on by the pandemic to lessen the impact of stressors on their academic progress. We recommend that university students should develop close family relationships which provides a buffer in times of stressors. Moreover, Dean of students at universities should periodically asses the self-efficacy levels of students in an effort to identify those with low levels and at risk or prone to stress related circumstances.

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ADAPTATION AND RESILIENCE OF RURAL STUDENTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITIES: AN INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Using secondary data sourced from scholarly articles, the study focuses on rural students who are from indigenous communities who do not get equipped with urban life and adaptation strategies and culture in higher education. The results of the study demonstrate that students from rural areas have difficulties making friends, keeping to themselves, interacting, using technology, and comprehending metropolitan society because they are used to living in smaller villages with fewer resources. The majority struggle to adjust to the higher education culture, which is different from what they are accustomed to. Many students choose to leave their education and go home due to the challenging environment, but the few that stay develop resilience and are compelled to adapt. In higher education, rural students face more transitional challenges than urban students, which makes them feel alone. Students in rural areas do not receive a quality education that effectively prepares them for life in the modern world. This study further argues that these students find it difficult to integrate themselves into the higher education culture, which is by itself unwelcoming and challenging for rural students who don't have any prior experience with urban areas or higher education.

Keywords: Adaptation; Culture; Higher Education; Resilience; Rural Students; Transformation; Universities.

Introduction

Similar to many developing and some developed countries, rural communities in South Africa continue to be less fortunate than those living in urban areas. The educational system is an excellent illustration of the gap and inequality between rural and urban communities. The Department of Education (2005) highlighted that historically disadvantaged groups that live in rural areas continue to face difficulties in the educational system and that learners lacked access to a high-quality education. Rural schools continue to suffer, as seen by the national exam scores, and rural areas typically have lower quintile schools (Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014; Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012).

Young et al. (2023), stated that university faculty may not be aware of the sociolinguistic difficulties experienced by students from rural backgrounds, such as the limited or non-existent use of English for learning, teaching, and evaluation. Higher education in South Africa has long struggled with the topic of language, and students from rural areas are frequently unwilling to speak due to their poor command of the language.

South African higher education has become personal instead of accepting institutional, societal, and cultural limitations (Boughey & McKenna, 2016). The university staff's accents and the staff's diversity make it more difficult to understand. Several Indigenous knowledge systems are presented to rural pupils outside of their own environment. Rural students are accustomed to engaging in particular activities that help them connect with the environment, such as gathering firewood from the forest, herding cattle, and negotiating raging rivers on school excursions—things that pupils from similar backgrounds may not be able to comprehend.

When studying natural ecosystems at the university level, which calls for practical skills, students who were progressive in rural areas will probably have significant direct knowledge. Such demonstrate how rural students use a variety of sources of information to create possibilities for cognitive justice by developing contextual understandings through their own actions and those of others (Leibowitz, 2017). The cultural traditions that rural students bring to the university are sometimes not acknowledged or mediated, which causes them to feel like they do not belong (Kapp & Bangeni, 2011).

As explained by Mushtaq and Khan (2012), students from rural areas first struggled with peer connections because they feel socially inferior to their urban counterparts, which has an impact on their wellbeing. Ali et al (2021) agreed that everyone is expected to "fit in" and adapt, which is a high expectation. For many students from rural areas, adaption requires being resilient and persevering through the culture of higher education until course completion. Relying on these justifications, the aim of this study is to look at the academic resilience of students from rural areas who struggle to adapt to higher education. The argument of this study is that rural students encounter several difficulties in higher education that devastate them and require them to become resilient in their adaptation to the system. Moreover, this study also uses universities as an example of a higher education institution while presenting its arguments.

Rurality

This study has employed Chigbu's (2013) definition of rurality, which is a state of place-based belonging shared by people of similar background who dwell in traditionally defined, culturally significant areas or places legally classified as rural. This study has employed Chigbu's (2012) definition of rurality, which is a state of place-based belonging shared by people of similar ancestry or background who dwell in traditionally defined, culturally significant areas or places legally classified as rural. Chigbu (2013) claims that traditional values predominate over modernity, agriculture over industry, nature over culture, and changelessness over dynamic in rural areas. The oldest known occupants of a region, particularly one that has been colonized by a now-dominant population, are rural people, who are categorized as indigenous people. Yet, depending on nationality and culture, the term is used differently, and different people can be considered to be indigenous (Beinart, 2012).

Masinire and Maringe (2014) raised the issue of how indigenous people are currently marginalized in society and how they are dedicated to preserving their ethnic identity and ancestral homelands as the cornerstone of how they survive as a people in keeping with their own cultural norms, social structures, and legal frameworks. Rural communities tend to have higher community cohesion and identity when there are indigenous people living there because they have cultural traditions, indigenous knowledge systems, and a strong sense of civic duty.

The indigenous knowledge that is passed down from one generation to the next is what indigenous people rely on. They also rely on their educational systems for imparting knowledge, and they see education as a way to prepare people for life (Vass & Hogarth, 2022). As a result, they guarantee that each person is completely prepared to become a member of their community through learning-by-doing methods, making indigenous languages essential for the conservation of indigenous knowledge (Burgess et al., 2022). Indigenous languages are essential for the conservation of indigenous knowledge since it is acquired experientially through methods like practical demonstrations and oral methods like storytelling, myth narration, metaphors, or songs.

Resilience

This study has adopted the definition by American Psychological Association (2023:1) which defined resilience as a "method and result of successfully adjusting to difficult or demanding life experiences, particularly through mental, emotional, and behavioural flexibility and adaptability to external and internal demands". In reaction to environmental change, persistence, little adjustments, or transformational responses are the combined results of coping, adaptive, and transformative capacities (Kirmayer et al., 2011). According to de los Reyes et al. (2022), vulnerability can sometimes be the opposite of resilience since it results from a deficit, absence, or lack of coping, adaptive, and/or transformative capacities or because the scale of changing situations exceeds these capacities.

Vulnerability and resilience can coexist in a population and can differ over time, across social groupings, and depending on the type of stress experienced. Hence, the same factors that make some people resilient may also make others vulnerable (Ross et al., 2022). This study also makes the case that resilience in regard to indigenous people emphasizes overcoming and adapting to difficult circumstances. Indigenous people's resilience in education according to this study refers to the successes they achieve in adapting to the education system despite the numerous challenges they encounter in higher education.

Young et al., (2022) mentioned that students who excel in higher education despite the existence of adverse environments are considered to have educational resilience.

Despite challenges, equity concerns, or "invisible fences", students may encounter, educational resilience is frequently associated with consideration of student attrition and better-than-expected student participation, retention, and outcomes. For indigenous students, overcoming the disadvantages posed by coming from high-risk families is a key component of educational resilience (de los Reyes et al., 2022).

Spaull (2013) explained that there are numerous indications that there is an education crisis in South Africa. It is clear that a greater emphasis should be placed on educational quality given the high enrolment numbers each year and reducing grade 12 production. Public schools in rural areas are frequently located in isolated locations and suffer from a poor education that does not adequately prepare learners for life outside the learning environment (Donohue & Bornman, 2014). In South Africa's traditionally underprivileged rural schools, implementing educational innovations has proven to be more difficult than in affluent ones (Msila, 2010). This supports the notion that South Africa's rural communities are underserved and underprivileged. Provincial governments are unable to give rural schools the financial support they need to help guarantee that students receive high-quality education due to financial constraints.

According to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, the South African Schools Act, and related regulations and policies on equity, every South African learner ought to have access to learning and teaching, comparable facilities, and equal educational opportunities, but unfortunately this is not the case, as stated by (Msila, 2010). The issues of poverty and unemployment, which cause the aforementioned challenges, have a direct impact on the duties of instructors and the standard of instruction offered to learners in these situations. Hlalele (2014) stated that the quality of education offered in rural areas greatly contributes to the struggles encountered when they are exposed to higher institutions such as universities which are mostly placed in urban areas/ developed areas.

Msila (2010) argued that rural students lack survival skills in higher education and are most vulnerable when they encounter universities for the very first time. Stenman and Pettersson (2020) argued that education in rural areas does not equip them to have adequate networking skills, survive without parents, use the digital space, and use the common English language. However, it is the argument of the study that knowing how to communicate using the English language does not degrade and should not degrade indigenous languages which are considered 1st languages for students while English is a first additional language in most rural schools (Van der Berg et al., 2011).

It has been suggested by various authors, such as Mphasha et al. (2022), Madadzhe (2019), and Neethling (2010), that indigenous languages be employed as a medium of teaching in universities and recognized by staff members and students.

As a result, it will be simpler for students from rural areas to feel accepted and share any difficulties they encounter in the classroom without feeling inferior and turning to vulnerability. Recognizing indigenous languages in higher education gives students a wonderful opportunity to exhibit their cultural heritage while appreciating one another's diversity. Students will have the chance to collaborate, appreciate one another regardless of where they are from, and help one another adjust to novel environments (Madni & Jackson, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Rutter's (1987) resilience theory, which has been utilized by researchers to characterize people who have overcome significant obstacles in their lives, served as this study's main theoretical framework. Resilient people were defined by Werner (1995) as those who showed “good developmental outcomes despite high-risk status, sustained competence under stress, and recovery from trauma” (Werner, 1995: 81). According to resilience theory, how people respond to adversity rather than its actual characteristics is what matters most. Resilience aids humans in overcoming hardship and adapting to situations. It not only aids in the capacity to endure, bounce back from, and even flourish after adversity. Resilience theory in this study guided the authors to understand how rural students in higher education successfully adjust and adapt to trying or difficult experiences. The theory also allowed the authors of this paper to learn more about the value of resilience and evaluate how rural students in higher education see and develop resilience.

Methodology

The obstacles that rural South African students who attend higher education face and the adaptive mechanisms they implement to survive and be resilient in the educational system are examined in-depth in this study using desktop research drawn from academic papers which focused on similar topics and have been published recently. The study also looked at the opportunities for rural students in higher education and how universities serve them. This study also discussed how to build resilience in higher education and how to use the Ubuntu philosophy to foster a welcoming environment in academic settings.

University Culture and Adaptation

This section of the study begins with authors focusing on the daily challenges rural students face in universities. Before students adapt to the higher education system and culture, they face challenges which the study has identified as follows: Lack of computer skills; language barrier; difficulties of online learning; urban life and adaption; difficulties in making friends.

1. Lack of computer skills

Lack of computer skills in higher education can be seen as a transitional stage with significant social and cultural implications for rural area students who must move to pursue higher education. In remote, isolated areas, Internet access is more constrained, making it more challenging to explore various universities (Chothia, 2017).

This necessitated excursions to libraries and Internet cafes, both of which were pretty far away and required expensive cab fares. Students from remote areas sometimes struggle with using the online system to apply to higher education institutions and frequently rely on people with basic computer experience or internet café personnel for assistance. They were reared in low-income families where having access to electronics was viewed as a luxury rather than a need, which is the main cause of their lack of computer literacy.

The same students enrol in higher education for the first time without having used computers before. They subsequently have trouble finding information and accomplishing their assignments, which aggravates them. Students who migrated from rural high schools to urban universities, where they got their first computer experience, experienced difficulty when attempting to use computers for academic work (Ajani & Gamede, 2020). They were effectively unable to access the many types of material from the internet and other databases that they would have needed for their academic work due to their incapacity to use computers. The research of Naidoo and Raju (2012) stated that many students in South Africa's higher education institutions are being exposed to internet technologies for the first time.

According to Hogdson (2012), there are two types of students in higher education institutions: wealthy students and impoverished students. Young people who have access to many internet platforms including at home, on their mobile devices, and at school are regarded as fortunate. They are first introduced to digital communication technology in elementary and high school (Hogdson, 2012). These students often come from wealthy, middle-class, and urban backgrounds, and they have acquired digital skills that allow them to use a variety of computers and internet-connected devices. As stated by Oyedemi and Mogano (2018:170), students who are digitally underprivileged lack the “knowledge, abilities, and capacity to use the internet and other technology for academic, social, political, and self-empowerment goals”. For students who come from rural areas, access to the Internet is more restricted (Chothia, 2017), exacerbating the challenges of finding out about different universities.

2. Language barrier

As it has been mentioned before in this study, rural students are from indigenous communities who use indigenous languages as medium of instruction and English has been taught in school as a basic mean of reading, writing and communication. When rural students are exposed to higher education, the difficulties they face is communication which hinders them from getting assistance, guidance, and support throughout their academic journey. In higher education, course books, documents, and other materials are written in English, as stated by (Walker & Mathebula, 2020). Students struggle to comprehend because of their poor command of the English language. Students from rural or provincial areas have difficulty using the English language in a classroom context.

Students who enrol in higher education institutions to study African languages, some of which are still taught in English, are typically safe. Language difficulties can cause issues in the social sphere that can have a variety of negative effects. Seabi et al. (2014) argued that social scientists link a lack of touch with people from the host nation to feelings of worry, despair, and alienation. These circumstances frequently make it difficult for students to adjust academically, which has a detrimental impact on the academic advancement of black rural African students.

The importance of English proficiency at the institution was acknowledged by Steyn and Kamper (2011). Black pupils have difficulty fully understanding lectures and text material. Perhaps more crucially, they struggle to communicate their problems to their instructors and peers. This frequently results in people receiving bad advice. Friends are also frequently illiterate in language. Some students still categorize one another as either black or white, which discourages them from seeking advice from one another.

3. Difficulties of online learning

Before the advance of technology, rural students did not have to rely on technology in universities. Due to technology improvements, many colleges increasingly use online learning and teaching platforms, which provides a challenge for rural students. A majority of rural students do not know how to use the internet and the online system which hinders them from completing tasks. Even though students are exposed to cell phones, their technical knowledge and skills are limited (Dumford & Miller, 2018).

South Africa experienced a lockdown in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic that forced higher institutions of learning to conduct classes online. The COVID-19 outbreak has demonstrated how exposed the educational system is to external dangers (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). According to Ribeiro (2020), there were numerous logistical issues and intellectual adjustments brought on by the digital revolution in educational delivery.

Students were asked to return home for a specific amount of time while classes and lectures were held online during the COVID-19 period. Students in rural areas typically come from low socioeconomic backgrounds and have access to few technological resources (Kopp et al., 2019).

Findings from Fishbane and Tomer's (2020) research on what non-internet-connected students should do in the COVID-19 pandemic suggest that as communities' income disparities rise, internet accessibility rates rapidly decline. Because of this, students who did not have accessibility to or could not afford a connection to the internet were more likely to fall behind or struggle to keep up with their peers when learning online. This study points out that despite numerous obstacles to such an approach during the COVID-19 period, the South African government (public higher institutions) made reasonable attempts to make remote learning simpler for students by adopting various teaching methods and supplying data bundles for students which will be discussed further in the study.

The government's efforts nonetheless demonstrated how technologically limited rural students were since they encountered obstacles that prevented them from studying online and obtaining reading materials while in their villages (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020). On the other hand, Feldman (2020) made recommendations when discussing student assessment during this pandemic and how districts can legislate fair and impartial grading policies based on them. The following were noted:

- Students' academic performance will suffer as a result of concern associated to the pandemic;
- The academic achievement of students may be impacted by variations in race, income, and resources; and
- The majority of teachers lacked the necessary preparation to deliver excellent instruction. During COVID-19, the dependence of online learning on technological equipment and the provision of the equipment caused substantial obstacles for organizations, instructors, and students.

As per Dengarian (2020), and Reddy-Moonasamy & Naidoo (2022), education needs to undergo a fundamental rethink, and the COVID-19 dilemma has fuelled the conversation about alternative teaching strategies, innovative exam formats, and education as a whole. According to Kopp et al. (2019), the digital transformation of higher education institutions is not a recent phenomenon and has been present for some time. The issues associated with the digital divide include a lack of infrastructure and poor levels of digital literacy among low- and middle-income groups.

4. Urban life and adaption

The authors of this study have previously noted that students in rural areas are exposed to rural living that adheres to indigenous cultural norms.

When people migrate to cities, it typically takes them some time to get adjusted to the sophisticated lifestyle that urban regions provide. In general, urban residents live quite differently from those who reside in rural or provincial locations. The way people live, dress, and eat in the province is straightforward, and this is evident in many aspects of daily life. While urban life is incredibly complex and anything but simple (Sumida & Kawata, 2021).

For rural students, urban life signifies a "fast" life, which includes clubs, large shopping malls, traffic, and modern architecture. Because of how urban life has developed, many rural students have long dreamed of living there. Yet, for rural students who are unfamiliar with its layout, changing to urban life and adapting to it might be very difficult. According to Totan et al. (2014), a lot transpires rapidly, and students must immediately acclimate to the way of life, which can be highly daunting. Other rural students succumb to the "fast" lifestyle of urban, which consumes them and prevents them from finishing their studies on time or at all (Hlalele, 2014).

Stone and Évora (2021) argue that students from rural areas frequently make poor judgments due to peer pressure, which has an adverse effect on their academic lives. Poor decisions result in low academic performance, which stresses and panics rural students. Often, parents advise their kids to avoid urban places and to avoid letting the city's condition of development absorb them. Nonetheless, rural students must adjust to city life and change in order to conform to local conventions, which they quickly forget about in favour of the cultural values that have been instilled in them.

5. Difficulties of making friends

Making friends in universities is very difficult since students are from diverse cultural backgrounds and areas. Rural area students usually feel like outsiders in urban areas and cannot distinguish good and bad people. Harper et al. (2018) trying to understand the university environment while attempting to make friends can be very challenging for students. Finding new friends can seem overwhelming if one is introverted or have social anxiety. Many students end up focusing on their studies in order to obtain good greats with also hopes to make friends with students who study the same field (Harper, 2013).

In universities, making friendships do not happen according to luck or chance. In actuality, those who rely on chance or good fortune to make companions are more likely to still be single five years later. However, people who deliberately seek out friendship are more likely to establish long-lasting relationships in the future. Wilcox et al. (2005) hold that loneliness is what rural students are subjected to when living away from their parents. Rural students live alone for the very first time and need to take full responsibility for their own actions. As a result, overcoming adjusting to an urban lifestyle, the challenge of living alone, and the difficulties of making friends are not particularly difficult challenges; they simply require time (Li, 2013).

Through clubs, associations, and organizations that cater to a variety of interests and affinity groups, higher education institutions offer a wide range of options for social interaction. There are many organizations on the list, including choirs, charities, and churches. The majority of rural students try to acclimate over time by joining various networking organizations. The argument put out by returning students who have surmounted the challenges they had in their first year is that (Scanlon et al., 2020).

Ubuntu Philosophy in Higher Education

The authors of this current study felt it was essential to discuss the potential of the Ubuntu philosophy as a means of establishing relationships between students and university staff for universities to be friendly and accommodating to everyone. Assié-Lumumba (2017) claims that the African philosophy of Ubuntu has the power to not only reacquaint South African students with their native values, heritage, and cultures but also to foster harmony, unity in society, and inclusivity among students from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Waghid (2020) claims that in order to maintain Ubuntu's cultural integrity and incorporate it into the educational system, a deeper grasp of its concept and guiding principles is necessary.

In African cultures, ubuntu is understood as the ability to express humanity, compassion, respect, dignity, and reciprocal caring. Makalela (2017) defines ubuntu as the trait of showing kindness, generosity, concern, and compassion for one's fellow humans. Someone who practices Ubuntu gives whatever they have, no matter how little, away so that others may also own something. The core principle of the Ubuntu philosophy is compassion (Nussbaum, 2003). Then, one can find out if Ubuntu has any connections to benefactors.

The Ubuntu philosophy, as explained by Broodryk (2005, p. 12), is an “ancient African worldview based on the primary values of intense humanness, caring, sharing, respect, compassion and associated values, ensuring a happy and qualitative human community life in the spirit of family”. Sharing is just one component of the Ubuntu principle; the community may also be made more harmonious and peaceful by appreciating others. Respect among neighbours makes sharing, working together, and coexisting easier.

In contrast to greed and competition with or among African community members, the notion of solidarity is based on unity, unwavering love and respect for one another, mutual interest in the collective survival, and responsibility for fellow members. In the same way, Muwanga-Zake (2009, p. 415) claims that “the spirit of solidarity is best epitomised by a metaphor that one finger cannot crush a grain of wheat on its own, it needs the help of the other four fingers”. In other respects, the value of solidarity is the capacity of people to cooperate with one another in a spirit of "one for all and all for one” as stated by (Ngubane & Makua, 2021).

Building Resilience in Higher Education

Rural students must exhibit feelings of self-efficacy, self-esteem, and autonomy in addition to having emotional resilience, problem-solving skills, and knowledge of how to deal with changes and adaptations. For students who live in rural areas, resilience includes things like a sense of community, close friendships, and parental and familial guidance. The institution plays a role in academic resilience because it serves as a setting where students can learn problem-solving skills in conjunction with other educational agents (Ford et al., 2020).

According to outstanding educational outcomes, resilience in education has frequently been related to students' resilience in both basic and higher education and has been seen as the opportunity for advancement in varsities despite hardship (McDougal et al., 2018). Less persistent underachievement, self-system debilitation in the face of academic failure, absenteeism and detachment from school, alienation from school, and hostility to teachers have all been linked to academic resilience in rural students (Lotz-Sisitka et al., 2015; Whyte, 2018).

Students from rural areas who are resilient, and hopeful are better able to view things clearly and have the stamina to "bounce back" from setbacks. Furthermore, resilient pupils usually demonstrate confidence and persistence, two qualities that are crucial for raising one's self-esteem in order to persevere and endure in the face of difficulties (Forray, 2017). Collectively, these behavioural, cognitive, and emotional abilities may help rural children become more resilient so they can better handle challenges, which could then minimize the impacts of stress (Szanton & Gill, 2010).

A Place for Rural Students in Higher Education

Badat (2010) observed that rural students are doubly marginalized since they lack knowledge about higher education. The problem is made worse by the fact that these pupils are unlikely to get this information from their rural relatives or communities. However, these negative consequences are made worse by the agricultural economy or background, which may increase rural students' sense of unhappiness and insecurity. Moreover, race affects how long rural students stay in college, according to Strydom et al. (2010) and Rember and Moeti (2017). Racial prejudice harms one's self-esteem and divides rural cultures, among other reasons. According to Hardwick-Franco (2019), achievement levels for high school pupils in rural areas were somewhat lower than those of students in urban areas. The likelihood of returning to school is also found to be lower in rural areas than in cities for school dropouts.

South African universities have been changing to become more accommodating and inclusive of students (Bozalek, & Boughey, 2012).

Higher education institutions attempt to create an environment where students can succeed while cooperating as a team by supporting several organizations and programs that connect students. 2015 saw a unification in South Africa as students rallied to fight financial exclusion from higher education. According to Mavunga (2019), the campaign was led by many Black people who came from both urban and rural locations. The #feesmustfall movement, which brought together students, later inspired the #rhodesmustfall movement.

This current study discusses how students gathered together and overcame a comparable obstacle by participating in the #feesmustfall movement, which sought to increase government support of universities as well as stop fee rises. It is outside the scope of this study to discuss in depth why the movement was necessary, but we can point out that students presented a unified front and that it was an inclusive movement in which they stood up for one another. First-year students in rural areas, in particular, were observed embracing the movement, taking part, and standing up for what they considered to be right. They experienced a sense of being needed, valued, important, and a member of the larger team which is what a higher institution should be all about.

Moreover, the study argues that higher institutions of learning have shown unity and inclusivity during the COVID-19 period when distance and online learning were encouraged. Many concerns were raised regarding online learning which was introduced in higher education and involved students from rural areas who had not enough resources to attend online classes and access online reading material (Ntombana et al., 2022). As a result, according to Landa et al. (2021), the South African government worked with a number of non-governmental organizations to come up with ideas for how to keep providing education. “On the basis of online, mobile, and social media platforms, a number of projects have been launched, including the Lockdown Digital Schools, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp groups. In order to deliver "zero-rated" educational applications (apps), the government also worked with a number of mobile network providers” (Landa et al., 2021:4).

Furthermore, the education process was inclusive and lenient as higher institutions were trying to save the academic year while making sure students are able to adjust to online learning. The online learning during the COVID-19 period showed how accommodating higher institutions were to students and lecturers and the resources they were willing to provide to rural students to ensure that they pass the academic year. Sonn et al. (2021) concur with the arguments of this study that, despite the fact that some students struggled or failed to access learning resources remotely due to data accessibility issues, higher educational institutions made an effort to develop strategies to address these issues and gave students enough time and opportunities to make up for lost time.

Based on the discussions above, it is the study's argument that rural students experienced worry and emotional strain throughout the COVID-19 period, but because of government and higher education support, they were able to cope with and adjust to the online learning that took place while they were waiting for further instructions to return to campuses.

Higher Education and Transition

Students in higher education have to undergo transitional phases which consist according to Field and Morgan-Klein (2010:2) of three elements; "exclusion marked by rites of separation, the liminal phase characterised by rites of transformation, and incorporation where the new identity is marked and where the individual is incorporated into society as a new kind of social person". Higher education promotes isolation or detachment from, localized structures, knowledge, and social networks, according to (Hlalele, 2012; Kromydas, 2017; Asad et al., 2021).

The educational process alters students' social and cultural standing during the transitional era through formal credentials, knowledge, new social networks, and to varied degrees, altered lifestyles. Thus according to Van der Berg et al. (2011), the students are part of the local community they have left behind and also a part of a temporary student community. After finishing their schooling, they are reintegrated into society as transformed people who can occupy different social and frequently also geographic positions than they could before the transitional phase started (Paphitis & Kelland, 2016; Timmis, et al., 2019).

Undergraduate students must succeed in their transition to higher education in order to succeed academically (Parmentier et al., 2021). Expectations of higher education prior to educational and life experiences readiness for higher education and other factors all influence how students react to the many changes associated with higher education, such as new learning environments, altered finances, and social, and academic changes (Ibrahim & Nat, 2019). All of these could pose difficulties for both institutions and students. Students are less likely to continue in higher education if this transfer fails (Schaeper, 2020).

The way that rural students interact with the new learning environment is unsure and impacted by various psychological problems. Briggs et al. (2012) stated the anxiousness of not knowing what is expected during the transition to university causes "cultural shock. The learning process is negatively impacted by this anxiousness. Hence, learning is perceived as being dangerous and intrinsically uncertain. So, a student's difficulty upon joining university is to become familiar with the reality of the new learning environment (Gale, & Parker, 2014). Knowing how much emotion plays a role in the transition to university can help with student assistance strategies that go beyond more conventional initiatives like curriculum innovation and academic improvement.

Conclusion

The study concentrated on the resilience of indigenous rural students in higher education, making the case that they frequently face difficulties in making an adjustment to university culture. The study also showed that rural students did not obtain an education that adequately equipped them for an outside life. Due to the fact that the majority of South Africa's universities are located in metropolitan regions, it is mandatory for students to be technologically literate and use English as their primary language of teaching, which presents a problem and obstacle for students from rural areas. Rural students have a hard time fitting into university culture, which limits their ability to ask for assistance when they encounter challenges.

Rural students typically find it difficult to establish friends and ultimately end up being alone and alone because they cannot integrate into university culture and urban life. According to the study, higher education should adopt the Ubuntu philosophy so that the educational climate is more accommodating of students from rural areas because rural students should experience a sense of belonging and importance in their higher education environment. The #feesmustfall movement and COVID-19 demonstrated that higher education presents a significant chance for unity, acceptance, accommodation, and inclusion and to be led by the spirit of Ubuntu. Receiving assistance from university officials and taking part in events that promote interaction and a seamless transition to higher education are the best ways to proceed.

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TEACHING PRACTICE FOR RESILIENCE DURING COVID -19 AT A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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Abstract

This article focuses on student resilience at a university that trains pre-service teachers. The compulsory practical component is a fundamental that students need to complete for both the Bachelor of Education (B Ed) and Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) courses. Known as teaching practice or work integrated learning (WIL), pre-service teachers attend schools for a limited period in order to learn skills and competencies from a mentor teacher who is assigned to them. The article foregrounds student resilience and resistance to adversity at a time when it seemed impossible for students to complete their school-based teaching practicum. Schools throughout South Africa were closed and re-opened intermittently, due to the waves of infection in different areas. This made it impossible for pre-service teachers to complete their teaching practice within a continuous period at schools. Within this context, the writer set out to explore how pre-service students' resilience was achieved at one university by using the online teaching practice programme in 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic. This qualitative article is situated in the interpretivist paradigm and utilises document analysis as its research method. The content and procedures found in the students' online teaching-practice handbooks was analysed to show how its implementation contributed to the resilience of pre-service student teachers. The research question is, therefore: How was pre-service students' resilience achieved at one university through the use of an online teaching practice program, during the period of the pandemic in 2021.

The key findings revealed that the online teaching practice program enabled pre-service teachers to complete their teaching practice component, even though it did not meet the Minimum Requirements for the Teacher Education Qualification (MRTEQ) in South Africa. The study concluded that there was a positive adaptation of teaching practice with the use of the online program, because all the students who registered for teaching experience completed the module. It also enabled final-year students to complete their practicum and qualify at the end of 2021. The success of the program suggests that the Council for Higher Education (CHE) reviews and updates the MRTEQ, making the teaching practice requirements applicable to 4IR, so that technology can be used legitimately when training teachers during future pandemics and other difficult circumstances.

Keywords: Covid -19; Online Teaching Experience; Resilience; Pre-Service Teachers

Introduction and Background

This qualitative article presents the main factors that contributed to pre-service student teachers' resilience during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Corona virus had a massive impact on all aspects of life, internationally, during 2020. One of these aspects was the inability of pre-service teachers to complete their practical, school-based teaching component.

The National Policy for teacher education (MRTEQ) require pre-service students in initial teacher education programmes to complete a total of twenty-four weeks of school-based teaching practice over a four-year period for the Bachelor of Education degree, and between ten and twelve weeks of teaching practice for the one-year PGCE program (MRTEQ, 2015; Rusznyak & Robinson, 2020). During the school-based teaching practice, every student is under the supervision of a mentor teacher. Students observe teaching, prepare and teach lessons and take on the role of a junior member of staff (Rusznyak & Robinson, 2020). Teaching practice prepares the student for their final, school-based teaching practice evaluation, conducted by both their mentor teachers and university supervisors.

When countries around the world went on lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, only people in essential service jobs were allowed to travel to their places of work (Merisi, Emekako, Legg-Jack, Mpundu, Lubombo, 2022). This restriction led to student confinement within their university residences or their homes (Sarmiento, Ponce & Bertolin, 2021). This meant that pre-service students did not have access to schools to complete their compulsory school-based teaching practice, and those in their final year of study were not be able to graduate at the end of 2021. From a policy perspective, non-completion of teaching practice meant that students would not have met the Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ) and would therefore not qualify as teachers (MRTEQ, 2015).

This added to the depression and sense of adversity that the pre-service students experienced; the uncertainty around the different types of Covid-19 and the physical isolation associated with them had an adverse effect on the students' socio-emotional, physical and mental state (Sarmiento *et al*., 2021; Bruinsma, Tigelaa, Rijswijk & Jansen, 2022). Isolation, quarantine and social distancing were vital to prevent the spread of the disease, but the solitude and separation enhanced students' levels of anxiety and stress (Lanranjeira, Dixe, Valentim, Charepe & Querido, 2022). Pre-service teachers had to learn to cope with not having access to teacher education programs or to schools (Bruinsma *et al*., 2022). Their increased stress levels impacted negatively on their inability to complete their teaching program (Rots *et al*., 2014 cited in Bruinsma *et al*., 2022).

When students are faced with such difficulties, resilience is of paramount importance.

To encourage students' resilience during that time, as well as to provide a means of assessment, the teaching experience office developed a special online teaching practice program.

The purpose of this article is to report on how pre-service teachers were resilient in participating in an online teaching practice program during the Covid-19 pandemic and completed their teaching practice in 2021. The writer analysed the online teaching practice program, noting how it was aligned to the face-to-face teaching practice program and how it contributed to students' resilience during their teaching practice in 2021. The article is based on the lived experience of the writer, and recounts how the inquiry-based online program of Bybee (2009) was used as part of a pre-service teaching practice program. The inquiry-based program followed the pattern of engagement, explanation and evaluation when students had to develop their lesson plans. The online program was analysed to show its successful implementation, which supported student resilience.

Research Question

Given the problem statement above, the main research question is:

"How did the online teaching practice program implemented at a higher education institution during the Covid–19 pandemic, ensured student resilience?"

Research Aim and Objectives

The aim of this study was to examine how student resilience was promoted during teaching practice which occurred during Covid-19 at a higher education institution.

The following objectives are pursuant to this aim:

a) To demonstrate how an online program contributed to student resilience during Covid -19
b) To examine the similarities of the teaching practice program when compared to a school-based teaching practice.

Significance of the Study

This article presents an alternative teaching practice program to the standard school-based teaching practice that promotes student resilience. Since the main focus of the article is to demonstrate how the online program embraced teaching practice during Covid-19, for students' resilience. It will assist policy-makers to include alternative methods of teaching practice in the MRTEQ (2015).

Literature Review

A Definition of Resilience and its Application to the Study

Resilience is the ability to recover quickly from difficulties (Oxford Dictionary). In line with this, Bruinsma *et al.* (2022) assert that resilience involves recovering after challenging and difficult situations. During teaching practice, students were able to recover from the emotional stress of not knowing how they were going to qualify without completing the teaching practice component of their courses. The online teaching practice program reinforced student success, despite the adverse conditions that students were experiencing. It provided an opportunity for students to recover lost ground through the completion of the tasks provided. For the teaching experience office, student resilience was achieved when most students "bounced back" from the adverse circumstances they were in by completing the online teaching practice program.

Consequently, in the social sciences, Diaz, Prados, Canos & Martinez (2020) view resilience as a reconstruct of academic achievement in difficult contexts. In line with this definition, student resilience was achieved through the reconstruction of the teaching practice program from school-based to an online mode during the difficult context of Covid-19. The use of students' technical skills reinforced the "in practice" that MRTEQ (2015) makes reference to when they had to use the various online applications to deliver their lessons. However, the views of Diaz *et al*. (2020) can be refuted in instances where students were in difficult settings such as remote areas, and were at a disadvantage due to lack of connectivity. This meant that it brought about additional distress for some pre-service teachers.

In contrast to Diaz *et al.* (2020), Morrison and Allen (2009) expand on the idea of student resilience to include social and academic competence, problem-solving skills, autonomy and sense of purpose (Waxman, Gray & Padron, 2003). In line with Morrison and Allen's (2009) definition of resilience, the completion of the online program assisted students in their teaching competence. Students were able to teach online using the theoretical skills for promoting teacher competency, included in the *Becoming a teacher* and *Being a teacher* courses that were taught when face-to-face teaching was still possible at the university. It also gave them a sense of purpose to know that they were afforded an opportunity to complete their teaching practice and be awarded their qualifications on schedule.

The online program assisted pre-service teachers in overcoming the ingrained anxiety that they experienced during the pandemic. The completion of the online teaching practice program gave students a sense of purpose and increased their ability to cope, develop and use new teaching strategies.

A further refinement and exploration of the definition of resilience is proposed by Vanistendael (2002) and Cyrulnick (2002) as "a person's ability to resist possible psychological trauma caused by a problematic and harmful environment". This definition further encapsulates the previous definitions of how student's psychological distress was overturned when their internal drive to complete their teaching practice took over. From a teaching practice perspective, it is the ability of the teaching experience office to adapt the teaching practice program so that it avoids difficult situations and non-completion of a course so that students are able to qualify.

In defining the concept of resilience, one is led to question how the national policy on teaching practice, MRTEQ (2015) makes a space for resilience. The guidelines provided to universities in the policy on teaching practice is based on knowledge and practice in schools, but there is no in-depth reference as to *how* teaching practice should actually occur.

Teaching Practice according to MRTEQ

In South Africa, the policy on Minimum Requirements for Teacher Education Qualifications (MRTEQ, 2015) outlines the core curricula for initial teacher education, which leads to teaching qualifications. The complexities of teaching derive from the integration of different types of knowledge practices and learning. Teaching is the infusion of the different bodies of knowledge (Rusznyak, 2020) applied to the moment of practice. MRTEQ refers to this as integrated and applied knowledge.

Competent teachers need to have content knowledge, must be able to reflect on teaching and find a synthesis that emphasises "what is to be learnt and how it is learnt" (MRTEQ, 2015: 9). A renewed emphasis on what and how occurs when pre-service teachers are in actual classrooms (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019). Students' practical teaching is further enhanced when they observe their mentor teachers modelling lessons to them. The definitions of teaching practice and teaching in MRTEQ (2015) refer to school-based teaching only.

MRTEQ (2015) stipulates five types of learning that are associated with the attainment, amalgamation and application of knowledge for the purpose of teaching. The five types are: disciplinary learning, pedagogical learning, fundamental learning, situational learning and practical learning. None of them include student teacher resilience as an important component.

The focus of this article is on practical learning, which refers to the learning of teaching skills, both from practice and in practice. MRTEQ, (2015), divides practical learning into two distinct parts:

1. **Learning from practice,** which occurs when students analyse different practices in diverse contexts. These include analysis of case studies, video recordings and lesson observations that help trainee teachers to theorise learning in practice.

When students learn from practice, they need to observe their mentor teachers teach a few lessons. This can be done, not only as school-based teaching practice, but also when students are involved in watching videos of others teaching.

2. **Learning in practice** occurs when students are placed in classrooms or teach in simulated classroom environments: what is generally known as teaching practice or work integrated learning (WIL). It includes aspects of learning from practice, such as observing and reflecting on how others teach, as well as learning to teach in practice, by preparing lessons, delivering them and reflecting on ones performance (MRTEQ, 2015).

Both learning from practice and learning in practice are fundamental to all initial teacher education programs and must be incorporated into the other three components of learning (MRTEQ, 2015). Learning from and in practice does not prescribe the specific activities that students need to engage in; it therefore leaves out teaching practice activities that can be completed online.

Online Teaching versus School-Based Teaching Practice

Online (or remote) teaching and learning uses digital tools for these activities. During online teaching and learning, students are physically distant from the lecturers (Hermida, 2020). The teacher-student engagement is mediated through the use of technology (Hermida, 2020) and web-based learning management systems (LMS) such as Canvas (Arroyo, Quin, Paretti & Grove, 2022). Some universities, in South Africa and worldwide, have used the web-based LMS method prior to the pandemic. For example, the University of Washington in the United States, the University of Birmingham in the UK, Temple University in Japan, the American University in Nigeria and the University of the Witwatersrand, all use Canvas or Blackboard Collaborate (Tekel, Bayir, Dulay,2022) as their online teaching and learning systems. In relation to student resilience, online teaching became the key mode of teaching for content knowledge courses. However, this method was not used for the practical components such as teaching practice.

During school-based teaching practice, pre-service teachers are required to be physically present at schools (Bruinsma *et al*., 2022; MRTEQ, 2015) in order to gain real classroom experience or “practical learning” (MRTEQ, 2015), through the classroom supervision of mentor teachers, who assist the pre-service teachers with planning and preparing lessons (Rusznyak, 2020), assist with developing teaching resources and assess student teachers when they teach (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019; Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020), providing them with feedback on lesson presentation and guiding them on classroom management (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019).

For the duration of teaching practice, pre-service teachers become part of the school staff and participate in the real-life activities of the school (Robinson & Rusznyak, 2020), such as sports and culture.

Student teachers also participate in in-service learning and in planning and implementing projects that will benefit the school (Gravett & Jiyane, 2019). None of this is possible online (Hill,2021). However, since practical learning involves knowledge gained from observing the teaching of others (Rusznyak 2015; MRTEQ, 2015), the online platform satisfies the observing and teaching requirement of MRTEQ policy for pre-service teachers.

Challenges of Online Teaching

Morrison and Sepulveda (2020) identify a number of challenges presented by online teaching practice. Firstly, it does not provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate the combination of theory into practice in the real work environment. Secondly, there is a lack of direct interaction with school learners. This is what Morrison and Sepulveda (2020) call “lack of live teaching experience”. Thirdly, there is a lack of interaction between the university, school and students in the learning cycle. This lack of face-to-face interaction with classmates results in anxiety, poor motivation and low student participation (Morrison and Sepulveda, 2020).

Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Legg-Jack, 2020; and Martin *et al.* (2020) expand the challenges to include lack of opportunity for some students to practise what they have learnt. They observed that students received ineffective guidance to the delivery of technical training; there was a lack of prompt feedback from peers and a lack of clarity of concepts, as well as unpreparedness on the part of instructors (Karkar-Esperat, 2018; Legg-Jack, 2020; Obasa *et al.,* 2013).

Benefits of Online Teaching Practice

Jin (2022) asserts that, due to its convenience, online teaching created educational opportunities in terms of time, place, pace of learning and financial costs, for pre-service teachers to continue interacting with children (Hill, 2021) specifically during Covid-19 (Khurana, 2016). Costley (2014) suggests that technology causes students to be more engaged; thus, students often retain more of the information obtained remotely. Because new technologies are spreading rapidly on a global scale, technology is particularly relevant to pre-service students in enabling them to complete their teaching practice. Technology provides meaningful learning experiences as well as hands-on learning opportunities that can be integrated into all areas of school curricula. It provides students with opportunities to collaborate with and learn from their peers. These factors combined can lead to a positive impact on student learning and motivation and student resilience (Costley, 2014). The benefits of using technology for teaching practice promoted student resilience, as it gave them an opportunity to complete their teaching practice time (Costley, 2014).

Using Digital Tools to Teach Online

According to Arroyo, Quin, Paretti & Grove (2022) the use of digital tools for the online method of teaching and student interaction includes Zoom, Teams, video-conferencing, discussion boards, WhatsApp and the formal learning management systems (LMS) of the university (Maree,2021; Merisi *et al.* 2022). The use of digital tools suits students in lectures on theory, as well as pre-service teaching situations in which they can mediate their lessons and provide feedback on other students' lessons (Hermida, 2020).

There are two kinds of methods used in online teaching and learning: synchronous and asynchronous methods. Arroyo *et al.* (2022) explain the use of technological tools in these terms. Firstly, synchronously, a face-to-face interaction that is conducted digitally in real time is separated by the use of digital tools and apps such as Zoom, Teams or Google Classroom meetings (Hrastinski, 2008; Bergqvist, 2017; Merisi, 2022).

In online teaching practice, as much as the lecturer is engaging with the students at the same time, they both are not physically present to view how learners would react in a real classroom. The other method of teaching online is teaching asynchronously: learning materials are uploaded on the LMS and students engage with the materials at any time (Hrastinski, 2008; Ray, 2020). Asynchronous teaching could not occur for teaching practice, since teaching practice requires the presence of learners.

Activities such as simulations and quizzes (Bergqvist, 2017) can be used in online teaching and learning to enable students to complete their teaching practice. Simulations can be used when student teachers present their lessons, virtually depicting a classroom environment. Quizzes or other tools that can be used to understand a concept or task (Bergqvist, 2017) as part of the theory of teaching to be learnt for teaching practice.

The use of digital tools in teaching practice cannot be seen as a solution to problems, in education (Bruinsma *et al*., 2020). However, it can be used as a platform for pre-service students to accomplish learning outcomes (Costly, 2014). The use of digital tools for teaching practice solidified students' completion of their teaching practice. For students, it meant that they had to have data available to access the course content timeously. The use of the online teaching for the lecturers meant they had to adjust to suit pre-service student teachers practical teaching needs (Bergqvist,2017).

Student Resilience

The intermittent disruption of university life caused by the pandemic upset the continuity and rhythm of student learning. To counter this, and to promote students' resilience, requires flexibility in the deliverance and management of programs. During the pandemic, student resilience was achieved through online interventions (Eri, Gudimetls, Star, Rowlands & Girgla 2021:1).

There was a need for academics and students to undergo intensive training to support and facilitate online teaching and learning, making both academics and students digitally competent and resilient (Eri *et al.* 2021). Linked to student resilience is digital resilience: this requires that students adapt and overcome technological challenges when exploiting technology use during the changing trends in higher education during Covid-19 (Eri *et al*. 2021:3).

Sood and Sharma (2020), maintain that the main focus of literature on student resilience during the pandemic has been on student's psychological well-being, while attention was also paid to curriculum evaluation, students' learning outcomes and curriculum delivery. In terms of the delivery of practical components of courses, access to technological infrastructure created a challenge for pre-service students (Wu, 2020). Digital resilience on the part of students and academics was achieved when the university reconsidered design, development and implementation of course materials (Naidu,2021).

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, students' resilience was achieved internationally when universities had to shift their methods of instruction to remote platforms. This mode of teaching worked for content knowledge courses, which adopted both synchronous and asynchronous method of presenting content (Brammer, 2020: 5). The importance of university leaders making institutions more resilient was demonstrated: they were obliged to discover patterns and opportunities for improvement and innovation in order to ensure curriculum delivery (Brammer, 2020).

In the United States, for example, teacher education programs switched to online instruction as a method of training pre-service teachers so that they could meet their prerequisites for teacher licensing (Jin, 2022:2). The development and use of online teaching by pre-service teachers created opportunities for them to continue interacting with children through Zoom and video calls (Hill, 2021).

Furthermore, according to a study conducted by Hill (2021), pre-service teachers at Pacific Oaks College, USA, did not complete their practical teacher requirements through onsite school-based teachings for the first time during the pre-service period. The college had to adapt its instructional approaches with the use of the online approach (Fletcher 2016, cited in Hill, 2021). Fletcher (2016), expanded on the use of online teaching, indicating that pre-service teachers were producing the same results, whether they trained on site in schools, or online.

In Turkiye, according to Sayir, Aydin & Aydeniz (2022), institutional resilience during teaching practice was achieved by means of lessons taught with distance education tools such as Google Classroom and Zoom meetings one day a week. Pre-service teachers made observations and practised with these tools during teaching practice.

Since systematic reflection and reflective practices reinforce the skills of apprentice teachers, video analysis of teaching was recurrently used to modify their instructional approaches (Hone & Riper, 2016). According to Nagro and Cornelius (2013, cited in Jin 2022:320): "Video analysis" is defined as "a teacher teaching a lesson that is videotaped and then the teacher watches the video for the purpose of analysing and reflecting on their own teaching performance." This emphasises that video analysis enables pre-service teachers to increase their knowledge on essential components of classroom interaction, challenges their existing knowledge and helps them make favourable decisions regarding their teaching (Hill, 2021). Their analysis of other teacher's teaching forms part of their reflective practice (Nagro, 2017; Jin (2022:8).

However, in contrast to Hill's assertion (2020), the interaction with children on an online platform did not work for pre-service students in South Africa because the majority of learners did not have access to technology during Covid-19. Learners in rural and disadvantaged areas lacked connectivity and access to data to connect with pre-service students (Parker, Morris & Hofmeyer, 2020). During the pandemic, to save the academic year, universities had to plan to continue their programs by means of virtual and remote teaching (Robinson and Rusznyak, 2020).

Since, according to MRTEQ regulations (2015), student teachers are required to complete their teaching practice at schools, then in on-line programs one can ask: how can they be mentored by in-service teachers? How will they develop lessons using teaching aids, or observe their mentor teachers' teaching, and how will the student teachers teach learners so that their mentors can provide constructive feedback (Gravett & Jiyane,2019)?

Student resilience was gained at a University in the North, South Africa, when pre-service students completed their teaching practice through asynchronous teaching. Pre-service teachers recorded four of their lessons that they taught and produced photos of themselves teaching. These were sent via e-mail to the teaching practice assessors (Merisi, Emekako, Legg-Jack, Mpundu & Lubombo 2022), whose research showed that the asynchronous teaching program did not have any link to the stipulations of work-integrated learning found in the MRTEQ policy. However, it showed that students completed their teaching practice and that final year students were able to qualify.

Based on the evidence provided above, this article seeks to find out how teaching practice occurred at one university. To achieve the outcomes of the objective, the article uses a conceptual framework of student resilience.

Conceptual Framework

This article uses the evidence-informed framework, BRiTE of Mansfield, Beltman, Broadley & Weatherby-Fell (2016).

BRiTE is the acronym for “building resilience in teacher education”, a framework that proposes four themes that are important for building pre-service teacher resilience: 1) relationships, 2) well-being, 3) motivation, and 4) emotions. These themes are embedded in the following: building resilience and having conceptual understanding, relationships, well-being, motivation and emotions. Each of these embedded themes are discussed to show how it reinforces resilience in pre-service students. When building resilience, pre-service teachers need to understand what resilience is and why it is important for them as novice teachers. When pre-service teachers build resilience, it encourages action instead of focusing on personal and contextual limitations, building on their capacity and catering for ongoing learning and improvement.

Relationships play a critical role for pre-service teachers in strengthening their resilience. Communication and establishing relationships, engaging effectively with fellow learners and joining professional social networks assists students’ in being resilient. It gives them a sense of belonging, engagement and responsibility and creates a positive mindset. Student well-being can be promoted through yoga for stress reduction (Mansfield *et al.,* 2016) and on developing emotional competence. Professional well-being includes the ability of the students to set boundaries, reflect on their teaching practice and employ time-management strategies. All of these contribute to the students’ emotional and psychological health.

The use of motivation will promote student resilience by developing the students inner drive to progress towards the end of their program. Students must build on strategies that include goal-setting to sustain their commitment to enhance their efficiency. Finally, students need to manage their emotions through optimism, hope, empathy and courage. They need to build on strategies that develop positive emotions and use humour to reduce emotional tension.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative methodology, using document analysis to analyse and evaluate the online course guide for teaching experience, which is publicly available. According to Bowen (2009), printed documents that is publicly available can offer affordances of context, background and historical insight. Armstrong (2021) declares that documented information is analysed and interpreted to generate an understanding of its context. When using document analysis, the content in the printed document is examined and interpreted to give reasons to develop empirical knowledge from it. The empirical knowledge helps to elicit meaning and gain understanding of the content (Bowen, 2009). The online course guide that provides guidance on student teaching requirements will be analysed systematically.

During the analysis process, the researcher provides a brief background on the program itself and how it was implemented, then, the following will be considered for analysis and evaluation:

- the content of the guide and its relevance to teaching practice
- the theories and philosophies used to ensure student learning
- how the program contributed to student resilience during the pandemic
- a comparison between the school-based teaching practice and the online teaching practice program.

The next section discusses how, in an alternative delivery structure such as online digitalization, teaching practice processes were followed that successfully provided access to and assessment of the practical components of pre-service teachers during the pandemic in 2021.

Online Teaching Practice and Students' Resilience during the Covid-19 Pandemic

In developing the online program, the university followed the guidelines provided in Communique 2, received from the CHE (2021), as follows:

- …(T)he universities may develop supplementary activities that cover not more than half of the annual TP weeks that have been included in the accredited CHE program for the year
- These include simulated teaching, extended micro and peer teaching, analysis of teaching practice from different sources (videos/DVDs, etc), portfolios, the *Teacher Choices* module and other appropriate activities.

The online teaching practice program was developed as a supplementary activity, using constructivist theory and incorporating inquiry-based design of the 5 Es (Bybee, 2009).

Analysis of an Online Programme Used for Teaching Practice During Covid-19

The Context of the Online Teaching Practice Program

The online teaching practice program was accepted as a supplementary program by the CHE as part of the six-week, school-based teaching practice. Due to Covid-19, the number of weeks of school-based teaching practice for all undergraduate education students was reduced to four weeks. In order for these students to satisfy the CHE requirements for their qualifications, they were required to complete this two-week online program in addition to their four-week, school-based teaching experience. (Refer to Table 1, below.) The tasks comprised the watching and analysis of videos on classroom management, lesson plan preparation and virtual lesson presentations using the inquiry-based design of engage, explain and evaluate strategies (Bybee, 2009).

Teaching practice for all undergraduate education students occurred in the third term of the university calendar, from 5 August -18 August 2021.From March 2021 to October 2022, all theoretical programs were presented online, either synchronously or asynchronously, through the LMS of the university (University Website, 2021). To provide students with access to online teaching and other activities, the university issued students with laptops and data so that, by the time school-based teaching practice began, students were already equipped to complete the online program.

The students were also provided on the LMS with the prescribed readings to assist them in completing their activities. The teaching experience guide, *Guide to Successful TE* (Wits University, 2021) was the main prescribed reading, outlining the necessary content requirements for the program. The content consisted of the rationale for lesson planning, lesson plan templates, assessment rubrics, notes on classroom management, professional conduct and from the role of tutors.

In 2021 there were 1856 students registered for the undergraduate and post-graduate programs in teacher education. The compulsory practical component of the Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programs had to move to an online platform due to the lockdown rules occasioned by the pandemic. The online teaching practice program was developed by the author and facilitated by selected university tutors who acted as mentors. Tutors were allocated to students according to a ratio of 1:22. Students had to complete tasks both asynchronously and synchronously. Mentor tutors facilitated the program virtually through Zoom, Teams, Google Classroom, WhatsApp group meetings and video-conferencing, by means of the LMS of the university. All of the 1856 students completed the program in 2021.

There were four tasks, with three activities per task. Table 1 below shows the tasks and activities that all undergraduate education and PGCE students had to complete.

Table 1: Tasks and activities used for the online teaching practice program
The tasks were divided into asynchronous and synchronous activities.

Tasks/Activity	**Activity 1**	**Activity 2**	**Activity 3**
Task 1- Classroom management and learner discipline	Watch the video on learner discipline	Analyse the video on learner discipline	Provide strategies for learner discipline & classroom management
Task 2. Engage strategy on lesson planning	Watch the video on engage strategy	Prepare a lesson plan using the engage strategy	Present a virtual lesson to your group and tutor demonstrating how you use the engage strategy
Task 3.	Watch the	Prepare a lesson	Present a virtual lesson to

Explain strategy on lesson planning	video on explain strategy	plan using the explain strategy	your group and tutor demonstrating how you use the explain strategy
Task 4. Evaluate strategy on lesson planning	Watch the video on Evaluate strategy	Prepare a lesson plan using the Evaluate strategy	Present a virtual lesson to your group and tutor demonstrating how you use the Evaluate strategy

Asynchronous Activities

For this part of the program, students were provided with internet links to videos, so they could watch presentations on how to control a class, disrespect in the classroom, what is meant by classroom management and classroom management mistakes. Students were required to watch and analyse the content of the videos as preparation for providing feedback in a synchronous group discussion with their tutor. Guiding questions on classroom management and learner behaviour problems were provided in their online guide.

Students also had to watch the videos on the strategies summed up by the terms engage, explain and evaluate (ByBee, 2009). They then had to use the lesson rationale to prepare three lesson plans using those strategies (ByBee, 2009) in readiness for an online virtual lesson presentation to their student group and the tutor. The lessons had to be subject or phase specific.

Synchronous Activities of the Online Program

The synchronous activities took the form of discussion forums and lesson presentations for both the tutor and the students. For the tutor, time was set aside to provide guidance on how to develop lesson plans and then present feedback on the student's lesson presentations. The grouped students' discussion was held virtually with their tutor. Students provided feedback on the challenges and suggestions presented in the videos on classroom management. The students also presented their lessons virtually to their student groups. After each lesson presentation, individual students commented on it.

Discussion

In this article, I have outlined some of the strategies used during the online teaching practice program associated with student's limited exposure to real classroom experience. In particular, I have argued that the different modes of online teaching practice ensure student resilience through the use of digital tools. Specific reference was made to the asynchronous and synchronous modes, as they were used for student preparation. In this section, I have reflected on the use of videos for reflective practice and how it can benefit students during teaching practice.

I also reflect on contextual diversity and the use of the 3 Es as constructivist theory that promotes teaching and learning in teaching practice.

Using Videos as Reflective Practice

The use of technological apps is in accord with the argument of Ray (2020) and Hrastinski (2008) that students and mentor lecturers can engage with the videos asynchronously at any time. The use of technology and the apps replaced the usual school-based teaching practice. The analysis of the videos assisted students in providing a systematic reflection that strengthened them as pre-service teachers and built on their resilience to complete their teaching practice course. In teaching, reflective practice is valued when students are learning to teach (Rusznyak, 2022), and the viewing of videos and reflecting on them was used to stimulate reflective practice and helped student teachers to see teaching from different perspectives (Penny & Coe, 2004). It allowed them to recognise aspects of teaching that they had not previously noticed.

The videos thus gave students an opportunity to correct their mistakes without having a tutor present to inform them of their mistakes (Bryan & Recesso, 2006). Video viewing and reflections thereof provided an effective feedback strategy that helped students to improve their teaching (Penny & Coe, 2004). Video analysis is also discussed by Hone & Riper (2016) as a modified instructional approach for apprentice teachers. This is in agreement with Jin (2022), who refers to video viewing as systematic reflections that strengthen pre-service teachers.

Furthermore, Nagro (2017) asserts that video analysis enables pre-services teachers to increase their knowledge of essential components of classroom interaction, challenge their existing knowledge and helping them make favourable decisions regarding their teaching skills. He further affirms that, when pre-service teachers watch and analyse the teaching of others, this forms part of their reflective practice for improvement.
The use of video analysis asserts that when pre-service teachers reflect, their observations prepare them for the real classroom experience.

The viewing of videos and reflecting on them promoted the achievement of student resilience during the pandemic. However, one needs to ask how students see the “critical consciousness of the relationship between school, society and students” that Robinson and Rusznyak (2020) refer to. Teachers must have knowledge and experiences of diverse school contexts (Rusznyak, 2015) which can be experienced only when they are physically present in the classroom. Online teaching practice was an alternative method used for students to accomplish learning outcomes of teaching, instead of working with live bodies in a contextually diverse classroom setting (Rusznyak, 2015).

Contextual Teaching

Online teaching and learning miss out on "learning about the different contexts" in which they are confronted by the diverse challenges children face (Rusznyak, 2021). Schools are built in diverse communities and contexts, and when a student attends a school for teaching practice, they are exposed to the different communities and contexts that MRTEQ (2015) refers to. However, during the online teaching practice, students' homes became the teaching context, because of lockdown rules, therefore the online teaching practical did not expose the students to the complex and differentiated nature of South African society, as recommended in the ITE policy (MRTEQ, 2015).

The use of online group teaching and student group presentation and feedback solidified what Gilakjani (2013) refers to as "cooperation and active involvement" among students. However, it did not allow the students to demonstrate specific competencies, such as classroom management, control of learner behaviour or the application of practical pedagogical knowledge acquired during the methodology classes (Yan & He, 2010). Teaching is a social construct, but the online program refutes socially constructed learning. However, the use of online teaching practice did provide a platform for student social engagement (Jikakjani, 2013). Constructivism and technology both centre on the formation of learning situations and atmospheres. The online learning settings used tools of knowledge to build on students understanding of team work through the media. The social engagement that Jikajani (2013) refers to can be equated with the presentation of lessons to the group, and to the feedback of students in the group. It also provided a means for students to support one another as they utilised different tools and learning resources (Jikakjani, 2013).

Online teaching practice during Covid thus became a technicist exercise (Rusznyak, 2021) to complete the required weeks of teaching practice, rather than the students having gained the experience of real classroom teaching, for which they must be physically present (Merisi *et al*., 2022). The online teaching practice program was based on the philosophy that learners need to apply constructivism to build their own understanding of new ideas. The constructivist theory and the implementation of three of the 5Es was used. The use of the 3Es, engagement, explanation and evaluation, showed the connections between what learners knew and how the students would engage with their learners. For the explanation of the lesson plan, students had to demonstrate how a lesson mediating new concepts and skills would be introduced. Finally, students had to demonstrate their competency by evaluating the learners through an assessment.

Using the constructivist theory in online teaching, students were able to draw on their existing knowledge, beliefs and skills. With a constructivist approach, students were able to synthesise new understanding from prior learning (lectures prior to Covid) and new information when they developed their lesson plans (Bybee,2009).

Kanuka & Anderson (1999) further expand this notion of constructivism in online teaching by indicating that the students they observed created knowledge dissemination; this occurred when students exchanged knowledge on individual development rather than a physical social setting (Kanuka & Anderson,1999).

When students planned their lessons, they used the lesson design and the rationale for lesson preparation that was used for on-site, school-based teaching practice. There was no adaptation of the lesson plan for online teaching. When presenting their preparations, students did not include the use of online tools such as discussion boards or online boards to demonstrate the content, as one might do in an actual class.

Robinson & Rusznyak (2020) emphasise that at the core of teaching, knowledge-focused interactions must occur between students and teachers. This is consistent with Shulman's (1987) pedagogical reasoning and constructivist teaching. However, students were unable to consider the various knowledge bases that were possible through focused course content because they were teaching to a computer screen with live people connected online. Teaching online, students did not need to make immediate changes to their pedagogy, as they were not engaging with learners in a real classroom or catering for their needs. In contrast, Jaleel & Verghis (2015) confirm that the integration of a multimedia approach within constructivist theory creates a dynamic knowledge production system.

The table below demonstrates how knowledge is constructed during online teaching practice in relation to face-to-face onsite teaching practice. The table shows how both methods of teaching practice are similar. I compare the school-based teaching practice guide and the online teaching practice guide to show the similarities between the two modes of teaching practice.

Table 2: A comparison between school-based teaching practice and online teaching practice, based on their guides.

Onsite school-based teaching practice	**Online teaching practice**
Planning – Student plans and prepares up to sixty lessons. The number of lesson plans per cohort of students differs, based on the year of study	Student develops three lesson plans due to limited time constraints
Lesson presentations to tutor: Presentation of two lessons onsite with learners Tutor observes and assesses.	Three lessons presented through MS Teams, Google Classroom and the LMS of the university.
No pre- or post-discussions held on classroom management skills. Student required to observe and learn	Pre- and post-discussions held with tutor on classroom management skills, once videos were watched. No

these skills while they are onsite	application of this to the classroom due to lockdown confinement.
Student teacher observes mentor teacher teaching, to learn pedagogy	Student observes peers teach and watch videos to provide feedback
Mentor teacher and university supervisor observe student for summative evaluation	Mentor tutor observes student for lesson presentation credit
Assessments: Summative assessment of lesson presentation. Assessment for teaching	Formative assessment of lesson presentation. Uses assessment of practice
Reflective journal: Student keeps a reflective journal to record teaching practice experiences	No reflective journal kept.
Submission requirements: Student had to assemble a teaching-practice file, submitted after teaching practice, recorded as part of their lesson delivery mark.	No submissions required. Student required to participate in the program and contribute to the discussion forums.

From the above table, it is clear that the online teaching practice program was a toned-down version of the school-based teaching practice used to promote student resilience. The online program focused on key aspects, such as classroom management strategies, lesson planning and lesson presentations. The viewing of videos compensated for the lack of mentor-teacher observations.

Conclusion

This article drew on literature from different countries, learning theories and the relevant educational policy to show student resilience in the Education faculty toward Covid 19. This was a period of time when the global pandemic affected many teacher education programs. In order for pre-service students to meet the prerequisite for teacher qualifications, they were required to complete their teaching practice online. The online program was of particular value to students who were located in various parts of the country. Tutors were able to assess the practical course components online, through the delivery of lesson presentations, group interactions and lesson planning. The use of videos and video analysis played an important part in the students' development as teachers.

Although the online program did not meet the requirements of CHE or MRTEQ and was not ideal for teacher training, it suited the need for the completion of students' qualification. The online program offered students a unique opportunity to experience a distinctive type of teaching practice other than that of the normal school situation. While the online program attempted to mimic the real classroom, cognitive and face-to-face aspects of teaching with digital tools, it will never be able to match the direct involvement of classroom management and classroom teaching in reality.

Recommendations

1. Curriculum designers need to ensure that the practical components of teaching qualifications are embedded in the methodology of the teaching specialisations.
2. Methodologists should share the practical components in such a way that it becomes part of the summative assessment for qualifying students.
3. More simulated on-campus teaching practicum needs to be practised to overcome adversities such as pandemics.
4. Since school-based teacher training involves working with humans directly, there should be limited online teacher-training practicums.

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EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL MANAGEMENT TEAMS IN IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL FEEDING PROGRAMS IN PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA DURING COVID-19

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Abstract

The implementation of school feeding programs has been elevated to an international concern. The challenges of Covid-19 have intensified and deepened discussions about the significance of school management teams in the implementation of school feeding programs in Nigeria and around the world. In the face of the novel Covid-19 pandemic, school feeding programs that are intended to alleviate short-term hunger, improve learners' nutrition and cognition, and transfer income to families are being cut short. However, millions of school learners in Nigeria missed out on regular school meals during the lockdown, which impacted negatively their health and well-being. Using the findings of reviewed literature from over 67 publications, the purpose of this paper was to examine the challenges that school management teams faced in providing food to learners during the pandemic and the kind of management choices that enable them to do so even during the time of an emergency. This review was carried out to enlighten developing countries, including Nigeria, regarding the significance of taking precautions and using alternative ways to implement school feeding programs during school closures by governments and non-governmental organizations, such as the World Food Program (WFP).

Introduction

The purpose of the implementation of school feeding programs in Nigeria is to provide one meal per school day to all primary school learners to improve their health and increase enrolment, retention, and completion rates. In Nigeria, these programs, which have been renamed National Home Grown School Feeding Program (NHGSFP) and officially launched on June 9th, 2016, aim to address specific economic issues. An assessment of the NHGSFPs, implemented in Nigeria's public primary schools, has revealed that it is an effective mechanism for improving school enrolments and attendance, academic performance, and health of learners, including those that are socioeconomically vulnerable (Bosah, Obumneke-Okeke, Bosah & Onyemelukwe, 2019). Recognizing the critical importance of the NHGSFPs, the Federal Government of Nigeria has increased funding for school feeding programs in low-income states (Bosah et al., 2019). As a result, with the assistance of school management teams in each school, the provision of school meals in low-income communities has increased significantly over the last decade, translating to 45% more learners enrolled in school feeding programs between 2016 and 2020 (Issa, Willy & Mohamed, 2019).

Adekunle and Christiana (2016) argue that despite the significant impact of school feeding programs, the programs have encountered numerous challenges which prevented them from meeting all of the requirements set by the World Food Programme.

In the face of the novel Covid-19 pandemic, school feeding programs were suspended as a measure to curb the spread of the pandemic, harming a significant number of learners in developing countries in a variety of ways. For instance, Zar, Dawa, Fischer, and Castro-Rodriguez (2020) state that school closures caused by the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the normal distribution of school feeding operations, leaving learners in many public primary schools without this essential source of nutrition. This was a major project given that, for some learners, school is not only a place to learn, but is their only source of a hot meal(Colón-Ramos, Monge-Rojas, Weil, Olivares, Zavala, Grilo, & Duran, 2022). In Nigeria, millions of learners in public primary schools rely on food provided by school management teams. In this regard, many scholars maintain that school feeding programs, implemented with the assistance of school management teams, improve educational and nutritional outcomes, resulting in higher attendance rates and micronutrient balance for learners (Zar et al., 2020; Colón-Ramos et al., 2022). Thus, school feeding programs provide a critical, widespread safety net for vulnerable school learners through the school management teams.

Specifically, the school management teams are in charge of the quality of food distributed to public primary school learners (Awofeso & Irabor 2020). Obayelu, Obayelu, Bolarinwa, and Oyeyinka (2021) contend that the management responsibilities of school management teams include ensuring that food vendors cook according to the feeding menu, manage the feeding of vulnerable learners and monitor the quality and quantity of food distributed to learners. Particularly, school management teams must oversee school feeding programs and appoint nutrition coordinators to assist them (Federal Government Nigeria, 2016). In this paper, school management teams are head teachers, assistant head teachers, and nutritional coordinators. School management teams are also in charge of budgeting, managing funds provided by the federal government, and sourcing, purchasing, transporting, and storing food (Aduloju, Bako & Anofi, 2022). School management teams, therefore, bear a significant amount of responsibility for ensuring the effective implementation of school feeding programs, even under difficult situations, for instance, as caused by the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic (Ogunbayo & Mhlanga 2021).

Research Objective:

To highlight the challenges school management teams faced in providing food to learners during the pandemic.

Research Question:

What are the challenges that the school management teams are faced with in providing food to learners during the pandemic?

Background

The component of school health promotion is the school feeding programs. Every day, school feeding programs in Nigeria feed more than 5.1 million learners (Abay et al., 2021). The programs serve one meal per day to children in public primary schools located in low-income areas of the country. Prior to the pandemic, school management teams faced numerous challenges, including inadequate funding, monitoring and evaluation, and data collection in the implementation of school feeding programs (Aduloju et al., 2022). Actually, the pandemic exacerbated these challenges. Adeoye, Okunola, and Fakunle (2022) support the aforementioned challenges, stating in their studies that the problems experienced include delays in the delivery of meals, lack of resources, and communication breakdown between food vendors and nutritional officers. In addition to these challenges, Delbiso, Kotecho, and Asfaw (2021) have identified poor management and a lack of reporting and evaluation mechanisms. Schools were still facing these problems when the Covid-19 pandemic surfaced.

Many nations, including Nigeria, experienced school closures and disruptions in the provision of school meals during the outbreak of Covid-19. For instance, approximately 310 million school learners in 162 countries missed meals because of school closures (World Food Programme, 2020). The severely negative effects of school closures have raised awareness of the importance of school management teams in the implementation of school feeding programs. As a result of what was experienced during the outbreak of Covid-19, many nations and international bodies have modified their school feeding programs to ensure the least effect in future disasters (WFP, 2020). However, involving school management teams in changing methods of distribution for school feeding programs and aligning them with recently modified school policies was not easy. This change in school policies on school feeding programs has necessitated that the Nigerian Federal Government collaborate with the Ministries of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development to rededicate themselves to this project to protect and provide food to all learners, even if they stay at home (Amusan & Agunyai 2021).

The Ministries of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management, and Social Development had a constitutional and statutory duty to ensure that school feeding programs ensure access to a daily meal for all eligible learners (Amusan & Agunyai, 2021). In this regard, the order issued by the Federal Government of Nigeria required states to develop their plans to ensure that learners received their meals through school management teams.

In this regard, school management teams had to put in place specific strategies to ensure the continued feeding of learners who were learning from home during the Covid-19 pandemic (Anazonwu, Nnamani, Osadebe, Anichebe, Ezeibe, Mbah & Nzeadibe, 2021).

Literature Review

School feeding programs, which can be found across the world, are used to enhance optimal growth for which adequate nutrition is the cornerstone. School feeding programs serve as the cornerstone of healthy living, and help to prevent and reduce the risks associated with current and emerging health issues in learners (Awofeso & Irabor, 2020). Amalu, Amalu, Jack-Rabin and Amalu (2022) state that a child died every six seconds due to interconnected causes of hunger before the implementation of school feeding programs in developing countries. Furthermore, the United Nations Children's Fund (2019) confirms that a quarter of children in developing countries are overweight and are, thus, often weak and undernourished.

Empirical studies have revealed that the implementation of school feeding programs has contributed to the increase in the number of learners enrolled in primary schools, both in Nigeria and other developing countries. In Ghana, Mawela and Van den Berg (2020) concluded in their study that school feeding programs have reduced malnutrition and hunger, increased school attendance and retention, and domestic food production in the country's poorest communities. On the other hand, in Kenya, Kimwele, Ochola and Mugambi (2019) argued in their study that national home-grown school feeding programs have provided meals to learners, assisting in the improvement of academic achievement as well as local agricultural production through the purchasing of food item from smallholder farmers and local food suppliers. Similarly, Acheampong (2022) in South Africa reported that the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) has improved learning capacities for learners from primary and secondary schools in low-income communities. In support of this, the World Food Program (2019) reported that following the introduction of a school feeding program in Pakistan, enrolment, and attendance increased by 70% and 80% respectively. Adepoju and Johnson (2020) stated in their study that the HGSFP in Nigeria has helped to increase learners' enrolment, ensure that retain learners, increase school attendance, reduce dropout rates and contribute to reducing frequent changing of schools by learners.

In terms of management, governments have used school management teams to manage school feeding programs. In a study by Jacob and Musa (2021), findings revealed that school management teams believed that school feeding programs resulted in more disposable income for learners' families.

Van der Berg, Zuze, and Bridgman (2020), in their study conducted in South Africa, concluded that the involvement of school management teams had assisted with the development of an agreement on a policy and purpose that emphasizes how the program can efficiently contribute to improving education and meeting the nutritional and health needs of learners. In Mali, Borkowski, Correa, Bundy, Burbano, Hayashi, Lloyd-Evans, Neitzel, and Reuge (2021) argued that the inclusion of school management teams in decision-making processes had helped school feeding program agencies to be aware of the program's financial consequences and thus seek ways to raise additional funds. Where this happens, it is likely to ensure that the benefits of school feeding programs are enhanced while keeping costs under control.

Verguet, Limasalle, Chakrabarti, Husain, Burbano, Drake, and Bundy (2020) argued that school management teams are unaware of their responsibilities in program implementation although they are the primary source of information in schools. This suggests that school management teams may be inadequately equipped to implement school feeding programs effectively. In Nigeria, Ogunbayo (2021) reported in her study that when school feeding program agencies implemented the program, school management teams were never involved in decision-making processes. Acheampong (2022), on the other hand, noted that power was centralized and that only the government, in collaboration with school feeding program agencies, participated in decision-making processes regarding the implementation of school feeding programs. In addition, the government often issued instructions and orders without consultation with school management teams (Acheampong, 2022). In Malawi, a study by Musolo (2020) findings revealed that the lack of involvement by school management teams resulted in numerous errors and problems in the implementation of school feeding programs, including failure to implement key recommendations from the research. Musolo (2020) also pointed out that, during the Covid-19 pandemic, this impacted negatively the distribution of food parcels to learners who were at home as school management teams were unfamiliar with their responsibilities, given the fact that they had been excluded from decision-making processes.

Theoretical Framework

The theory of change is used to underpin this study. The theory of change (ToC) for the school feeding programs states that farmers are encouraged to grow agricultural products and sell them to food vendors, who then use these farm products to prepare food for learners in schools, while school management teams are motivated to participate in the distribution of food to learners. As a result of the collaboration between school management teams, farmers, and food vendors in increasing access to the school feeding program, learner retention and regular school attendance are increased, which benefits all parties. For instance, the program brought in profit for the food vendors who prepare meals for learners and an increase in the number of learners attending school.

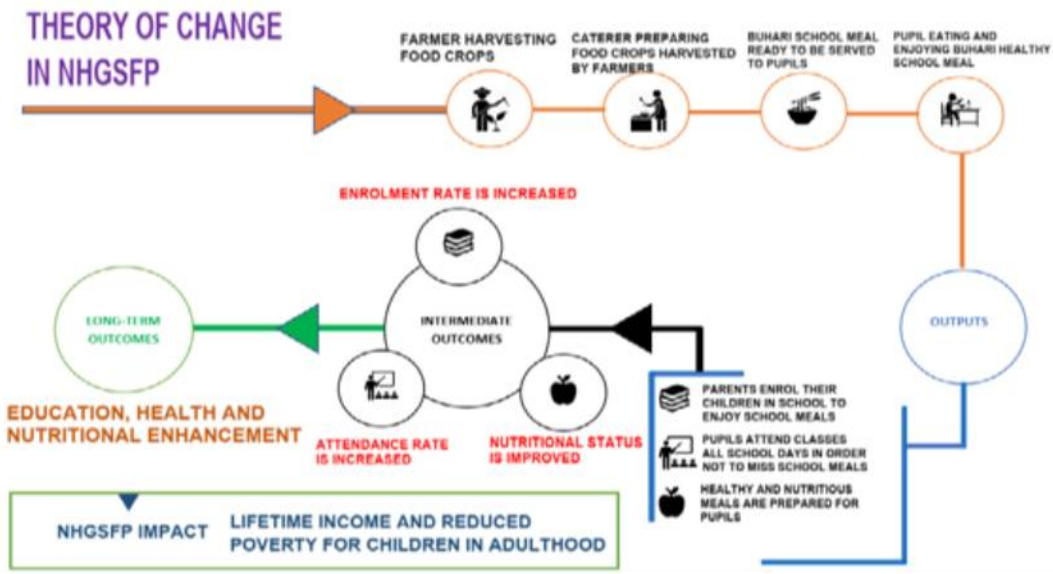


Figure 1: *Theory of change*

Source: Accountability lab (Saint Ville, Hickey, Rouwette, Samuels, Guariguata, Unwin & Phillip, 2022).

When income is stable and the impact of poverty on learners is decreased, the overall goal of the school feeding programs can be considered accomplished (Saint Ville et al., 2022).

Methodology

This paper is accomplished through a direct and deliberate focus on school management teams and school feeding programs in Nigeria. The intention is to determine whether or not the existing theoretical frameworks used to understand school feeding programs, as proposed by studies from advanced countries, account for the peculiarities of the Covid-19 pandemic in developing countries. To meet the needs of learners, it is crucial to understand how school management teams implement school feeding programs. Based on this understanding, this paper uses a literature review methodology. This was done by reviewing peer-reviewed journal articles regarding the implementation of school feeding programs during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first step was to identify relevant journal articles on school feeding programs.

The process of searching and selecting the articles comprised two stages. In the first stage, academic databases were chosen. Due to the comprehensive and detailed coverage of high-caliber of peer-reviewed journals in the literature regarding the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in school feeding programs, Scopus, Taylor and Francis, Multidisciplinary Digital Publishing Institute (MDPI), and Transactions on Learning Technologies (IEEE) were chosen for the literature search.

Stage two involved conducting a literature search using the following keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, school management teams, school feeding, school learners, benefits, challenges, and way forwards. The keywords were used to search through the four academic databases mentioned above. The retrieved literature was limited to journal articles written in English. In the preliminary search, one hundred (100) journal articles were discovered. Due to overlap in the coverage by the four databases of the literature on school feeding programs, 33 patents and other invalid articles were removed. 67 articles that directly related to the focus of the paper were subsequently retrieved for additional analysis.

Benefits of School Feeding Programs on School Learners Before and During Covid-19

Globally, the implementation of school feeding programs in many developed countries provides a mechanism for combating poverty and addressing issues, such as low school enrolment, attendance, and academic performance, among others (United Nations Children's Fund, 2019). According to the United Nations (2020) and WFP (2019), nearly 60 million school learners in developing countries go to school hungry every day, with Africa accounting for approximately 40% of this figure. Mwendwa and Chepkonga (2019) contend that school feeding programs encourage better retention and academic performance among learners. In addition, school feeding programs also encourage poor families to send their children to school rather than keeping them at home to work or look after siblings (Bigson, Essuman, Boadu, & Otoo 2019; Mwendwa & Chepkonga 2019; WFP, 2020). For WFP (2019), a full stomach improves learners' concentration levels during lessons. In countries with low school attendance rates, the promise of at least one nutritious meal per day increases enrolment and promotes regular attendance (Wang & Fawzi 2020). Furthermore, the World Bank (2016) and WFP (2020) contend that school feeding programs can double school enrolments in the world's poorest areas in one year.

The United Nations Children's Fund (2019) has argued that the primary purpose of food distribution to l learners at home during the Covid-19 pandemic was to alleviate hunger among learners. In support of this argument, Dunn, Kenney, Fleischhacker, and Bleich (2020) argued that school feeding programs assisted vulnerable school learners during Covid-19 by bringing food to learners, particularly girls, thus, encouraging them to return to school after the pandemic. According to Domínguez, García, Martínez, and Hernandez-Arriaga (2020), the African Union (AU) called for the formation of a coalition focusing on this vision in early 2021, which fuelled the government's decision to launch the School Feeding Coalition in United Nations Food Systems Summit in September 2021. The purpose of the School Feeding Coalition is to reintroduce school feeding to 370 million learners worldwide by 2023 and to reach an additional 73 million learners by the end of the decade, 62 million of whom are in the African continent (Ogunbayo, Aigbavboa, Thwala, Akinradewo, Ikuabe & Adekunle, 2022).

Following the launch of the School Feeding Coalition, African governments presented the Food Systems Summit with an Africa Position, specifically recognizing school feeding programs as game changers in bringing learners to school (Dunn et al., 2020). Figure 2 summarises the benefits of school feeding programs for school learners.

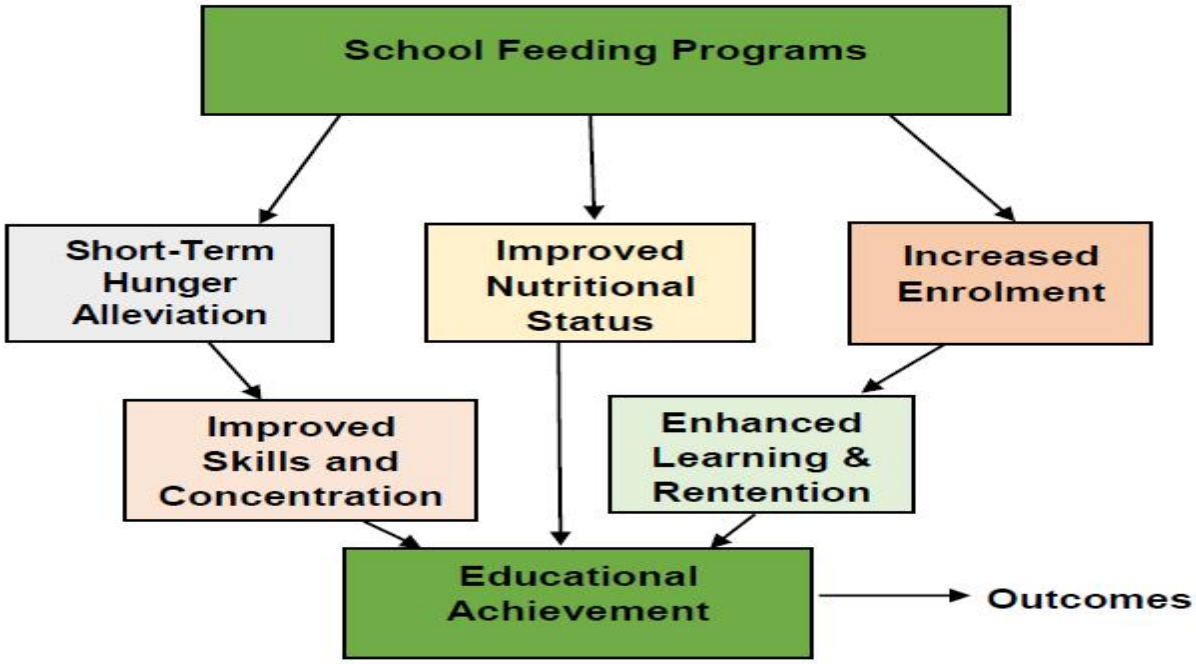


Figure 2: *Benefits of School Feeding Programs for learners*

Source: Authors Review (2022)

Ogunbayo and Mhlanga (2022) contend that the implementation of school feeding programs in public primary schools has benefited learners by reducing short-term hunger, improving nutritional status, increasing learner enrolments, improving concentration levels, enhancing learning and retention, and improving the achievement of educational outcomes.

Responsibilities of the School Management Teams in the Implementation of School Feeding Programs

School management teams play an important role in developing and strengthening learners' eating habits as well as determining their body weight status (Ogunbayo & Mhlanga, 2022). Aside from the contributions of the school management teams in the implementation of school-feeding programs, Ogunbayo et al. (2022) contend that school-feeding programs can provide food with higher nutrient quality than out-of-school feeding.

As indicated earlier on, according to the Ministry of Education, the responsibility of school management teams is to manage and oversee the implementation of school feeding programs and ensure the appointment of competent individuals to help them with the management of the allocated funds, including procurement, purchasing, transportation and food preparation (Barker & Russell, 2020). During the Covid-19 pandemic, the duties of school management teams became critical as they had to find new ways of getting food to learners, such as ensuring that food parcels reached eligible learners who were at home (Domínguez et al., 2020). In this regard, the Ministry of Education believed that school management teams had to ensure the implementation of school feeding programs continued during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This means that school management teams had to ensure the safe storage of food and manage the distribution of food parcels to eligible learners.

Experiences of School Management Teams in the Distribution of Food During the Pandemic

In Nigeria, school management teams were required to follow three feeding modalities: serving food to learners in schools, coordinating the collection of food by learners, and delivering food to eligible learners (Obayelu et al., 2021). The first option was well-known among school management teams, as they had been serving food to learners at school since the program's inception. In this regard, they had appropriate systems in place to ensure that the program ran smoothly. The effectiveness of the first option was determined by the learners' ability to attend school (WFP, 2019; Ogunbayo, 2021). However, school management teams had never implemented school feeding programs using the third option, which involved sending food to learners at home. This resulted in a range of challenges for school management teams while trying to feed learners during the pandemic.

Adeoye et al. (2022) concluded in their research, after interviewing the head of a school in Ogun state, Nigeria, that some learners could not collect food from their school because of inadequate data from the State government regarding the learners' location. For instance, the information provided on the location of learners was inaccurate, which means that the food could not reach eligible learners. In another study conducted by Amusan and Agunyai (2021) in Oyo State, Nigeria, findings revealed that only 43,678 of the expected 1.2 million school learners went to schools to collect food due to poor communication regarding the collection of food. This created a challenge for school management teams in their efforts to inform learners' parents/guardians to collect food parcels from schools. Stiegler and Bouchard (2020) observed in South Africa that the use of rotational timetables was one of the reasons food could not reach learners on days when they were at home. This challenge was largely due to mobility issues, which affected the ability of school management teams to reach out to eligible learners. Dominguez et al. (2020) confirm that in Mali, learners could not collect food parcels due to inadequate communication.

Abay, Amare, Tiberti, and Andam (2021) concluded in their study in Ghana that the poor state of the infrastructure impacted negatively on the implementation of school feeding programs by school management teams, resulting in the lack of access to food by learners during the pandemic. In addition, Abay et al. (2021) reported that school management teams could not access learners' locations due to poor road infrastructure and permanent dwelling structures for learners.

In Botswana, Anyanwu et al. (2020) reported that school management teams interviewed complained about a lack of transparency in the distribution of food parcels during the pandemic, which impacted negatively the implementation of school feeding programs. In this regard, Anyanwu et al. (2020) concluded that transparency was essential for fostering trust, support, and compliance with the protocols of food distribution programs. In addition, Anyanwu et al. (2020) argued, public awareness campaigns, nutrition education, preparedness for emergencies, and communication systems were important for ensuring the continued implementation of school feeding programs during periods of disaster.

Taking Precautions and Getting Back to School

Alternatives to education and school feeding have been implemented by governments and non-governmental organizations, including the World Food Program (WFP), in many countries, including Nigeria (WFP, 2020). For instance, e-learning was used to deliver lessons and, school feeding programs, take-home rations, cash assistance, and other substitutes were used (Eranga, 2020). The WFP, UN Children's Fund and, Food and Agriculture Organization collaborated to develop guidelines and recommendations for governments on providing services during the Covid-19 pandemic, with a focus on nutrition for learners (WFP, 2020; UNICEF, 2019). For instance, the WFP designed a map and dashboard to track school closures globally, including the number of learners who could not benefit from school feeding programs (WFP, 2020). There is also the most recent information on government programs to assist learners who are not in school. However, well-designed coping mechanisms are expensive and solutions ineffective. WFP data shows that 48% of the 17 million learners who were beneficiaries of school feeding programs before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic are currently being reached by current preventative measures in 78 countries (WFP, 2020).

There is an urgent need for remediation mechanisms to enable countries to safely ensure that all their learners are back in schools, given the fact that COVID-19 containment efforts are anticipated to last for some years (Amusan & Agunyai 2021; Ogunbayo, 2021). The "Framework for Reopening Schools" was developed by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNICEF), World Bank, and World Food Program to provide guidelines for countries and enable continued implementation and provision of services (UNICEF, 2019; World Bank, 2020; WFP, 2020).

Conclusion

The need for food distribution to learners intensified during Covid-19, owing to school closures and the increase in unemployment. This paper focused on the challenges experienced by school management teams in providing food to learners during the pandemic and the kind of management required to enable them to do so even in times of emergency. In this regard, it turned out that to respond to future crises or disasters, new ways and techniques for feeding school learners will need to be devised.

However, as methods were developed in response to the developments, it became clear that the typical methods of distributing food would not be sufficient to fulfill the demands of feeding learners during a pandemic. Essentially, even when learners returned to school, the implementation of school feeding programs had to happen following specific precautions to contain the spread of Covid-19.

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