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Rethinking the “idea of the University” through pandemic-era student experiences

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the upheaval of "the university", as we knew it, and a repositioning of higher education online. By mid-2022, third-year anthropology students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) had experienced two years of online education, followed by a return to select in-person classes under the banner of "blended learning". My research centred on in-depth interviews with fourteen students in order to grapple with, and learn from, this cohorts' unique "university experience".

As the "Idea of the University", conceptualised in academic texts, often contains lofty notions for an imagined future, I chose to retrospectively highlight "the university" as it was experienced, from early 2020 until mid-2022. Grounded in student narratives, I describe the pre-pandemic Liminal University; the Remote University as distance learning commenced and progressed; the Static University as education continued for a second year online; and the Interpersonal University as students returned to on-campus classes.

I found that through destabilisation, the key elements that made an all-encompassing university education possible, came into focus – namely, campus infrastructure and student sociality. Despite the university's dispersal of data and loan devices, students' home environments could not mirror the layered infrastructure nor social connection that had shaped pre-pandemic university education. Yet, upon students' return to the physical campus in 2022, small, in-person classes where discussion was facilitated led students to re-engage with their course material, educators, and each other. As such, I argue that the *full* university education, that students both desired and benefited from, requires robust on-campus infrastructure for living and learning, and facilitated in-person engagement.