

# ‘Swim or sink’: Student and lecturer experiences of emergency online learning at a rural university in South Africa

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## Abstract

While education institutions around the world are attempting to salvage teaching and learning operations, the most debilitating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been in the global South countries which have little or no resources at their disposal. South African higher education institutions are not exempted from the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though attempts have been made to ensure the continued delivery of education in the present circumstances, there remains protuberant challenges to access and equality in education. As such, this paper sought to explore the experiences of university students and lecturers at a rural South African university concerning the attempts made to rescue education during the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this, the study utilised a qualitative research approach in which data were collected from students and lecturers using an online survey. The study revealed that although emergency online learning was implemented at the institution in this study, this online pedagogy did not become automatically accessible due to a variety of constraints such as the lack of technology-enabled devices, infrastructure, policies, and digital illiteracy among other factors. The study, therefore, recommends among other things, that a good starting point to address the lack of equitable access to education in the new normal would be for rural institutions to adjust their learning models to suit the unique needs of their rural environment.

**Keywords:** access, COVID-19, emergency, inclusivity, online learning

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected education institutions globally, and the developing world has been worst hit by these effects. This is because while the developed world was largely equipped with technologies that eased the transition from traditional contact-based learning to online learning, the developed world was confronted with fraught challenges which made this transition difficult to navigate (Mukuna & Aloka, 2020; Daniel, 2020). Evidence reveals that most institutions in the developed world were not prepared for the abrupt transition to online learning in the hope to combat the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic (Mncube et al., 2021; Dube, 2020). Education institutions in the developing world were replete with frailties such as lack of internet coverage, exorbitant data costs, lack of internet-enabled devices, lack of appropriate online teaching and learning material, and lack of electricity (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Mncube et al., 2019). It, therefore, became apparent that students and institutions in the poorer underdeveloped world were left in a precarious

position where they needed to institute drastic measures to rescue the academic project and complete the requisite programmes in time (Muhuro & Kang'ethe, 2021).

Due to the abrupt transition to online learning, the new mode of learning which had been adopted to necessitate the continuation of teaching and learning became known as emergency online learning (Ferri et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021). Institutions rushed to equip staff and students with internet-enabled devices, data for connectivity, and also adapted their teaching and learning programmes to suit the new environment (Mncube et al., 2021; Omodan, 2020). Studies however reveal that African countries continue to face challenges of delivering emergency online learning regardless of these attempts that were made. These persistent challenges include costs of delivery, lack of internet-based devices, lack of prior knowledge, etc. in the case of Ghana (Aboagye, 2020; Adarkwah, 2020); unequal access, lack of ICT literacy, lack of funding, etc. in Ethiopia's case (Belay, 2020; Tamrat, 2020); inconsistencies in curricula and course coverage, limited access, negative perceptions of online learning, etc. in the case of Kenya (Mabeya, 2020; Ngari & Ndung'u, 2020); and inadequate preparation, inadequate access to ICT infrastructure, etc. in the case of Zambia (Sintema & Singogo, 2021). This study, therefore, sought to explore the experiences of university students and lecturers at a rural South African university with regards to the attempts made to rescue education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following subquestions guided this study:

- i. How has the COVID-19-induced emergency online learning affected the social well-being of students and lecturers?
- ii. What technical challenges do students and lecturers in rural institutions grapple with since the onset of the COVID-19-induced emergency online learning?
- iii. What are the wider structures that affect the effectiveness of the COVID-19-induced emergency online learning?

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Research paradigm, approach, and design

To explore the experiences of university students and staff with regards to the attempts made to rescue education during the COVID-19 pandemic, this study was informed by a constructivist paradigm. This is because this paradigm allowed for a multi-layered and socially created reality that can be discovered using meaning-oriented methodologies which allow for flexibility in the collection of data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study was therefore underpinned by the qualitative approach because this approach allowed the researcher to interrogate the experiences of students and lecturers with regards to online learning within the confines of their rural institutions in South Africa (Leavy, 2017). The study sought to examine the experiences of students and lecturers with regards to online learning, thus to achieve this, the study took a case study design because this design allowed for an in-depth understanding of these experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

### 2.2. Sample, and sampling procedure

The researcher purposively selected a rural institution in South Africa where the transition to online learning faced considerable challenges. At the selected institution, the researcher also purposively sampled students and lecturers who were best suited to contribute to the study.

This meant that participation in the study in the students' sample was limited to only students who had been at the institution for at least three (3) years, while participation in the lecturers' sample was confined to faculty members who have been lecturing at the institution for at least five (5) years. This allowed the researcher to make use of richer experiences from students and lecturers who had sustained experiences of teaching and learning at the institution thus allowing the participants to reference the changes experienced and challenges emerging from the adoption of online learning. The researcher sent emails to an initial sample of seventy-two (72) participants which was evenly spread across the university's six (6) faculties (comprising of sixty (60) students and twelve (12) lecturers) but after repeated efforts to reach the selected participants the final sample for the study comprised of fifty-one (51) students and eight (8) lecturers thus making a cumulative total of fifty-nine (59) respondents.

### **2.3. Data collection and data analysis**

Out of the data collection tools available for qualitative research, data for this study were collected data using a qualitative survey which was distributed to participants using Survey Monkey. Questions were generated based on the Hexagonal E-Learning Assessment Model (HELAM) which was developed as a model to evaluate online learning experiences (Ozkan & Koseler, 2009). The qualitative questions of the survey were thus formulated to satisfy three broad aspects which were drawn from the six dimensions of the HELAM, namely: (i) Technical Issues; (ii) Social Issues; and (iii) Supporting Issues. Once the data had been collected, the data were analysed using thematic analysis because the thematic analysis was useful in the examination of different participant perspectives and it also helped the researcher to summarize the key features of the collected data (Nowell et al., 2017; Saldana, 2014). The first phase of thematic analysis involved familiarizing with the data. To achieve this, the researcher prolonged the engagement with data and documented thoughts on the potential themes and codes arising from the data. This was followed by the generation of initial codes where the researcher utilized peer debriefing and reflexive journaling. After this, the researcher searched for and reviewed themes arising from the data, this was achieved by vetting the themes and testing them for referential adequacy through returning to the raw data. The final two steps involved defining and naming themes and producing the report. To establish trustworthiness at this stage, the researcher made use of member checks and peer debriefing.

### **2.4. Ethical considerations**

During data collection, ethical considerations such as confidentiality, anonymity and privacy were respected except for the information that alluded to harm being done to an individual. These were communicated and agreed to before the start of data collection and consent was sought from all participants.

## **3. Results and Discussion**

This study sought to explore the experiences of university students and lecturers at a rural South African university with regards to the attempts made to rescue education using emergency online learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The following themes arose from the responses given by the participants as they detailed their experiences of online learning:

- Social challenges
- ICT support challenges
- Support structures

### 3.1. Social challenges

To prompt participants' perspectives with regards to social challenges associated with the transition to online learning, participants were asked about how the COVID-19-induced emergency online learning has affected their social well-being. Participants revealed that a host of social issues made it difficult to cope with online learning as a strategy to salvage the academic calendar in the wake of the pandemic. Some of the uncomfortable experiences revealed by the participants included social isolation, home environments unsuitable for remote learning, mental health challenges, and difficulties in planning and discipline. Participants lamented the loss of a sense of community and identified social isolation which came with the transition to online learning. This concern can be summarised in the response of a student who bemoaned:

*I have lost the bond with friends and peers that came with physical classes. We used to sit down and talk between classes, but now we are all alone you know. I think these learning platforms...and our lecturers must try to make learning a social activity again. Because we are apart, maintaining social contact using online platforms is also difficult. Yes, the institution provides us with a monthly mobile data allocation, but it is not enough to use for anything beyond classes... (Student 39)*

A lecturer corroborated these sentiments, adding how social isolation affects the psychological well-being of both students and staff. The lecturer argued:

*Yes, we have tried to rescue teaching and learning but there are still some problems that we have not yet managed to deal with. Sometimes because we are not properly trained on online pedagogies, navigating online teaching and learning platforms is stressful both to students and educators...the lack of interaction has dealt us a huge blow in terms of mental health. Traditional support structures which helped us all to cope are non-existent now...these are some of the social costs of emergency online learning. (Lecturer 7)*

Students and lecturers noted that the adoption of emergency online learning was made difficult because they often battle with stress, anxiety, depression, and general boredom among other mental health-associated challenges. This was not helped by the fact that most students and lecturers have the burden of home environments from which embarking on online learning becomes difficult. The challenges of the home environment were more aptly revealed in the sentiments of a student who decried:

*When it works, it works like a dream...but let us not forget the context where this learning must take place. Some of us are not from urban areas where they have the luxury of big houses and personal space – I come from a rural setting where I cannot get a quiet and private space at home to work from...my siblings are always interrupting me, and there are also household chores that I must do. I am often tired so even making use of recorded content later at night is difficult...by night-time, I am*



*usually tired and just want to sleep...managing learning timetables is very challenging and it requires additional discipline. (Student 13)*

These thoughts were corroborated by a lecturer who opined:

*I hate online learning because you sit in one place for a long time...I hate sitting so delivering lectures is a challenge. Balancing family life with the academic demands is a difficult task – your family sees you there (at home) and you have to give them time while you are also expected to provide support for your students and deliver lectures. It is a nightmare! (Lecturer, 3)*

In addition, the transition to online modes of teaching and learning was also stalled by a poor technological culture at the institution under study. These sentiments were captured in the opinion of another student who argued:

*Our institution has not been very accepting of technology until this point. Unlike my former institution where some things had already moved online, for example, registration, applications for enrolment, and other such operations, here we relied on paperwork. There is a joke that used to make rounds here – that if you apply for anything online, no one will bother looking at it. Now changing our mentality to doing things online is difficult...for us to embrace technological changes was just a huge problem. It is not surprising that both students and lecturers are averse to technology...breaking that mental barrier is very difficult. (Student 27)*

The sentiments from the participants in the study suggest that although emergency online learning was implemented at rural institutions, this online pedagogy did not become automatically accessible. This can be substantiated by studies that demonstrate that the COVID-19 pandemic has engendered inequalities in such a way that institutions in rural areas are severely undercut in comparison to their urban counterparts (Mncube et al., 2021; Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020). Critical aspects of learning which have been compromised by the pandemic include the loss of the sense of community at institutions, mental health pressures, and precarious home environments which make online learning almost impossible. It is thus plausible to posit that the COVID-19 pandemic has inordinately widened inequalities between the haves and have nots in South African higher education (Dube, 2020; Omodan, 2020). Furthermore, a study conducted in the domain of online learning contends that while online learning helps students and staff to develop critical 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills, the ability to develop such skills relies on the environment in which learning happens (Birbal et al., 2018). As such, because the adoption of online learning was abrupt, it is not surprising that rural institutions were the hardest hit as they did not have sufficient resources to ease the adoption of online learning in the COVID-19 emergency (Muhuro & Kang'ethe, 2021).

### **3.2. ICT support challenges**

To determine students' and lecturers' views concerning technical challenges associated with the transition to online learning, participants were asked about the technical challenges which they grapple with since the onset of online learning. Findings revealed that there exist a variety of technological deficiencies which complicate the adaptation of online learning at rural institutions. These deficiencies include the lack of skills and training for online learning, policy gaps in the digital domain, and compromised academic integrity, among others. One of

the leading concerns for students and lecturers was the lack of training and skills development to ease the transition. A lecturer from the institution argued:

*...there are two main challenges which I have observed – first, the lack of technology-enabled devices, then secondly the lack of the requisite training and skills development. We are a rural institution and some of the students have never used laptops before coming to the university, our students are mainly coming from the poor and disadvantaged demographic...Assignments were always submitted as hard copies and sometimes we used to ask students to submit handwritten work. But how do you suddenly tell everyone that we are switching to technology? Yes, we have an ICT department, but they have just been overwhelmed by requests. Laptops have been provided to students, but there isn't any training on how to use these devices. I think there is a need to have training programmes for students and staff to acquaint themselves with technology. (Lecturer 8)*

Students also highlighted how the lack of training and constant support with ICT continues to affect academic performance. A case in point is a student who lamented:

*I come from a rural area...I came to university without having previously used any ICT gadgets. Since the start of this coronavirus, we were forced to adapt to online learning as a method of instruction...but we had never really used laptops. I used to write my assignments by hand and then ask a friend to type if the lecturer required a typed one...but most of the time we used to submit handwritten things. Now I have to learn to type and to use the laptop...I'm slow, so it disadvantages me a lot in timed assessments...it is not that I do not know the answers, it is just that it feels like those privileged enough to own laptops before I have a better chance, even when I am more knowledgeable than them in a module. (Student 45)*

The lack of policies governing online conduct has also been an issue that confronts students and lecturers at rural institutions. Participants revealed that students and staff were also apprehensive about transitioning to online learning due to an absence of policies regulating online interactions. A case in point can be drawn from a student who noted:

*I understand the need to rush the adoption of online learning to rescue learning, but at least there must be policies to govern this...there is a lot of privacy concerns, a lot can happen when you have sensitive data flying all over the place. We are not even aware of what has been done to prevent potential data breaches. I'm not only referring to policies at the university level, even nationally, it was only recently that we started seeing movement in this regard. Recently, there was a case where scammers were targeting university emails...emails contain some very personal data. Let's say my research is stolen through scams and published elsewhere, what do I do? What procedures do I follow to reclaim ownership of this unpublished work? These are some of the things which we take for granted. (Student 19)*

For others, another significant technological deficit that compounds the challenges confronting rural students and lecturers is the absence of policies safeguarding academic integrity. Participants were of the view that because the transition to online learning was abrupt, the lack of safeguards for academic integrity has resulted in an increased incidence of academic dishonesty practices. A student contended:

*The student is confronted by several challenges and burdens with regards to online learning...you are still adapting to online learning and yet the assignments and tests keep flying from every angle. We just started this whole thing under pressure because we were behind in terms of the academic calendar. My friends and I started writing these online tests together...we log in using laptops then we text or sometimes call one another for answers to the tests. There's so much stress out there and we just cannot afford to leave others behind...it is our way of coping. (Student 51)*

A lecturer added how technological deficiencies make it more difficult for science classes that have practical components. The lecturer opined:

*...online learning has its limits, particularly in courses that have practical requirements. It is just not possible for us to do lab work virtually. We have had to resort to sending videos for students to observe the experimental aspect, but it is just not feasible. The beauty of science is in doing experiments...this gives students the confidence needed out there. We are preparing students not just to write exams at the end of the semester, but we are preparing them for the world of work. Theory alone is simply insufficient...we are in a do or die situation but learning and assessment must continue. (Lecturer 1)*

Findings from the study revealed that although emergency online learning presents a substantial lift to rural institutions, its rushed adoption resulted in several technical aspects that pose significant challenges for rural institutions. Factors such as policy paralysis, lack of adequate training for digital skills, the inability to adapt systems for practical courses, and lack of technology-enabled devices, are prominent in the perilous academic environment from which students and lecturers at rural institutions operate. Studies reveal that utopian online classes are difficult to achieve during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in poor communities where technology is not readily available (Ogunkola, et al., 2020; Zahra et al., 2020). Concerns have similarly been raised with regards to assessment in the digital age which has raised questions on the ultimate quality of graduates produced by institutions due to the lack of quality training and support (Gamage et al., 2020). The lethargic adoption of online technologies in rural higher education reveals the worrisome state of South Africa's adoption of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR). In fact, before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Mncube et al. (2019) argued for the adoption of online technologies equitably, yet the pandemic has widened the digital divide thus relegating rural communities in their quest for access to education. Furthermore, Sutherland (2017) posited that there remain concerns over the general lack of policies that govern the adoption of internet technologies in African countries, and this oftentimes results in data breaches. The lack of policies would especially be concerning for South Africa where losses of as much as ZAR 5.8 billion have been recorded at the hands of cybercrimes (Sutherland, 2020). While securing digital security will go a long way in easing the adoption of online technologies, the present circumstances reveal that students and lecturers in rural settings still face considerable challenges in shifting from traditional pedagogical practices.

### 3.3. Support structures

To appreciate the support issues affecting the adoption of online learning, participants were asked about how the wider structures affect the COVID-19-induced emergency online learning. Findings reveal that the adoption of online learning was hampered by the lack of

consideration of diversity in the university community. Prominent issues which were highlighted by participants included disregard for the unique needs of students and lecturers with disabilities, differences in age, the financial circumstances of students, levels of online literacy, and other factors. Lecturers and students revealed how navigating online learning is difficult for them, for example, a student argued:

*...online learning is just a learning mode for the rich. It can never work in some of our rural communities where we have problems like the lack of electricity, expensive data, and some of these devices from the university aren't working well. Last month my laptop just froze while I was writing a test...I'm not the only one complaining about this problem. But the rich don't have such problems because they can afford devices that are appropriate for online learning. I honestly feel like the university doesn't care at all because why would they provide devices which are not fit for online learning? Are we being punished for being disadvantaged? (Student 23)*

These apprehensions were also corroborated by a lecturer who highlighted:

*The pressure to perform is just unbearable. Some of our students are coming from homes where they live below the poverty datum line, and they come to university carrying hopes and aspirations for the betterment of entire families. They arrive here and the lucky ones obtain funding that subsidizes their living expenses, but to maintain these bursaries and scholarships there is a demand for academic excellence. It is like being caught between a rock and a hard place...How can a student that is facing difficulties related to internet connectivity be punished for not meeting the required passes? It is ridiculous. The pandemic has its stresses, and the students' academic pursuits must be supported if we are serious about developing this country and lifting historically disadvantaged populations out of poverty. (Lecturer 5)*

Participants were also of the view that the pressure to perform has resulted in most students engaging in academic dishonesty to safeguard and maintain their bursaries and scholarships, and to get considered for bursaries in the case where one is not funded. Another student also weighed in by revealing that the disregard of factors such as age and gender worsen the plight of students in rural settings. The student argued:

*I am not promoting ageism, but I've realised that the older students in some of the courses have it tough. You can see for example in WhatsApp groups which we created for discussions that they generally take longer to acquaint themselves with these online platforms. As a class, we have done our best to assist the older students for example checking whether they got emails with the link for a class etc...Another issue is that of gender roles, some of us come from villages where there are traditional gender roles which we are expected to fulfil...When I say I'm attending a class virtually, it just looks like I'm trying to avoid household chores. This might not be the same in urban areas where some of these traditions are being challenged and reversed. The poor rural folks have it toughest, it is just inequality after inequality for us. How can this be effective when it is geared towards those who already have access to resources? (Student 7)*

Another troubling concern that was raised by students and lecturers was that of the neglect of the students and lecturers living with disabilities. This is seen in the views of a lecturer who critiqued:



*The government and the institution are not serious when it comes to issues of inclusivity. There is a lot of talk concerning making sure that nobody is left behind, but this appears to be just lip service...students and staff with disabilities have just been forsaken in this whole drive. What happens to students with physical disabilities which hamper their participation? We must ask ourselves whether this whole drive will not end up systematically alienating those with disabilities. What about those with audio or visual impairments? Learning disabilities too? The system which we currently use just overlooks such concerns, so the lecturer has to plan for this on his/her own, sort of at the mercy of their lecturers and immediate supervisors. This leaves those with disabilities at a huge disadvantage in comparison to their peers. (Lecturer 2)*

For the participants, the lack of support structures in the online learning domain potentially threatens online class attendance and ultimately enrolment in the learning programme. A student remarked on how online literacy is tied to language difficulties:

*Some of the challenges which we face are systemic. I'd say almost everyone in my class comes from schools where we learnt English as a second language...it was not the method of instruction. Now we have to adjust to using English in accessing online learning...these platforms do not have options for our home languages. Sometimes the lecturer has to explain several times before we understand the instructions from the system...it is so frustrating (Student 30)*

These results reveal that while online learning was adopted as a measure to rescue learning, the lack of support structures that inculcate the diversity of the university population makes it difficult to achieve this. Respondents decried the digital illiteracy and language difficulties, the disregard for disabilities which make online learning difficult, age-related constraints, and the lack of financial resources, as prominent factors in the quest for providing education in the face of COVID-19 stringencies. While there have been arguments that the pandemic has merely fast-tracked already existing trends in society and education (Pacheco, 2020), the findings of this study corroborate the view that the pandemic has indeed raptured academic societies by creating untold imbalances (Žižek, 2020). One can thus posit that those living with disabilities remain excluded in the academic programmes and in the instances where they have been assimilated into the learning programme, most of these have been shallow exercises of co-option which have failed to guarantee the principles of accessibility and equity which were somewhat present in traditional contact-based classes (Mahyoob, 2020; Ro'fah et al., 2020). To this end, Ferri et al., (2020) conclude that because the transition to online learning was hasty, institutions of learning need to critically rethink the broader systemic and structural challenges which confront educators and students if they are to ensure equitable access and inclusive education which encourages lifelong learning.

## Conclusion

This study sought to explore the experiences of university students and lecturers at a rural South African university concerning the attempts made to rescue education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study has ascertained that emergency online learning was instituted to ensure that learning can continue while students and lecturers were away from the university. Yet this emergency online learning is confronted by challenges that have led to

questions about critical aspects in the knowledge production domain, for example, accessibility, equality, efficiency, safety, etc. The study has further demonstrated that being in a rural institution presents unique hindrances which make teaching and learning more precarious. Such hindrances include the lack of policies governing online learning, a disregard for disabilities, low socio-economic status of most rural communities, lack of training and skills required in the digital domain, lack of infrastructure which makes online learning accessible and many others. Based on these findings, the study, therefore, recommends that for online learning to be effective, institutions in rural areas need to familiarise stakeholders with the concept of online learning to obtain buy-in as a starting point. Furthermore, educators and students need to be involved in the process of working towards better models which facilitate equitable access to technological resources – marginalised groups such as those living with disabilities need to be at the core of such a plan. It must however be noted that some of these challenges go beyond the immediate influence of the universities, as such, it would be important for external stakeholders like the government to improve on digital access in rural areas where coverage is worrying. Online education is in itself complex, but the pandemic has demonstrated that the future of education is going to be digitalised, as such, rural communities and the global South need to build around solutions that ensure equitable access for all.

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