



Rurality of Rural University Students, Using Technology for Teaching and Learning During the Covid-19 Pandemic: Echoes from Kwazulu-Natal Province of South Africa

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Abstract

Covid disease was first identified by scientists in 1965 as a human coronavirus associated with a common cold. However, the virus that first appeared on a small scale in November 2019 in Wuhan, China soon translates into a global pandemic that resulted in a global loss of life, social disorderliness, disruption of states' economies, decelerating sustainable development, as well as a threat to diplomatic relations. Amid this pandemic, students of tertiary institutions were conditionally forced to switch over to an online school system which is quite challenging for most students, particularly those living in rural areas. While trying to explore the experience of students in tertiary institutions located in the remote areas of Kwazulu-Natal Province of South Africa, this paper further highlights the inadequacies and inequalities in South Africa's educational system. The paper used the theory of social and behavioral science which explain that moral decision-making during a pandemic involves uncertainty. Using the purposive sampling method, this work provides an understanding of the challenges of students in higher institutions living in the rural areas of Kwazulu-Natal Province of South Africa during the pandemic. The study was piloted on samples from the University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa campus, using students and lecturers who resides in Esikhawini, Ngwelezana, and Vulindlela areas of KwaDlangezwa. Thus, the researcher was able to carefully assess the perceptions and the experiences of South African students living in 'rural' areas.

Keywords: Pandemic, Technology, Modules, Moodle, South Africa

Introduction

As the world becomes progressively more connected because of globalization, so is the interconnectedness of socio-economic crisis that trickles down to health risks. The most dreaded Covid-19 was first reported to have originated in Wuhan, China towards the end of December 2019 and soon spread to other parts of the globe thus, on 11th March 2020 it was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic affected people regardless of nationality, status, education, gender, or income.

The outbreak of Covid-19 had a devastating impact on human life globally. To Xiang et al. (2020) the super-rich economies around the world were shattered by a massive blow to the global educational systems both in advanced and developing economies. The hardest hit were the most vulnerable economies in Africa. The pandemic within a short period of time quickly led to the closure of tertiary institutions [as well as high schools and primary schools] globally.

The most important pandemic precaution, social distancing, was introduced while trying to attempt to reduce interpersonal contact and thus minimize the kind of community transmission that could develop quickly in dense social networks like the university campus. In response to the devastating consequences of Covid-19, lockdowns that eventually interrupted conventional schooling were

introduced (Weeden and Cornwell, 2020). While the educational community made concerted efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period, students have had to rely more on their own resources to continue learning remotely through the internet, television, or radio.

Within a short period, the crisis exposed the many inadequacies and inequalities in South African education systems – from access to the broadband and computers needed for online education, and the supportive environments needed to focus on learning, up to the misalignment between resources and needs. University lecturers had no choice but to adapt to the new pedagogical concepts and online modes of teaching, for which most have not been trained. Thus, students in the most marginalized groups, who don't have access to digital learning resources or somewhat lack the resilience and engagement to learn on their own, were at risk of falling behind. Those from privileged backgrounds and supported by their parents easily find their way past closed school doors to alternative learning opportunities, and those from disadvantaged backgrounds proverbially, remained shut out when their schools shut down.

For many students in rural areas of Kwazulu-Natal Province of South Africa, the years of Covid-19 have been marked by many challenges. Many institutions that [were traditionally used to having contact classes] were forced to identify and implement various strategies to sustain the academic project, these include engaging in remote learning and teaching using various, working-from-home arrangements for staff, and finding alternative ways to support students. Unarguably, the pandemic changed the lives of these students in many ways, emotionally, some lost the sense of belonging while engaging in group studies, some have had to struggle financially, lost internships, the need to learn and the use of new technologies in addition to the content of their subjects (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020).

In geopolitics, places provide the settings of people's daily lives. By interpretation, people's daily social and economic experiences, whether it be full of enjoying the wealthy accouterments of the gentrified cities [of Durban or Cape Town in South Africa] reflect where they live. To a certain extent life-chances are still very much determined or dictated by where one is born and grows up. Such is the life of South Africans living in the rural areas where the experience of students in the rural areas during the Covid-19 pandemic underscored the inadequacies and the inequalities in South Africa's educational system.

This work provides an understanding of the challenges of students in higher institutions living in the rural areas of Kwazulu-Natal Province of South Africa during the pandemic. Within the discourse of Covid-19 vis-à-vis education in the rural areas, the possibilities of having quality education are considered limited as a result of limited access to the use of technology to access teaching materials. Thus, suggesting that there is urgent need to lessen the impact of the pandemic on students, both on their academic learning through technology and the psychosocial effects. Parker and Alfaro (2022) added that it is very important to also address the impact of the pandemic on education professionals to mitigate the risks to health and mental well-being that they face during the pandemic. These are very important steps in response to the pandemic and for post-Covid-19 recovery and resilience. The study was piloted on samples from the University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa campus and its environs in the province of Kwazulu-Natal.

Method

Generally, the research method is defined as a strategy of inquiry, which moves from the underlying assumptions to research design and data collection (Masoga, 2022). It is therefore, appropriate for a researcher to select that paradigm whose assumptions are best met by the phenomenon under investigation. The present research uses purposive inquiry (PI) as a method. Purposive sampling is intentional selection of research participants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon. In line with this, researchers often utilize a purposeful sampling technique to select informants based on their particular knowledge of, and/or experience with, the focus of empirical inquiry (Robinson, 2014). Thus, the researcher utilizes this method, to ensure that participants provide in-depth and detailed understanding of the challenges of higher institutions students living in the rural areas in the Province of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa during the pandemic. Two groups of informants [from the University of Zululand, students and lecturers who resides in Esikhawini, Ngwelezana, and Vulindlela] were involved. Data collection was done by the researcher using semi-structured interviews

with the participants. Thus, the researcher was able to carefully assess the perceptions and experiences of South African students living in rural areas of Kwazulu-Natal Province.

Literature/Theoretical Explanation

It is crystal clear that the Covid-19 pandemic brought with it unanticipated destruction that no one would have predicted. The outbreak of the pandemic has resulted in the loss of jobs by millions, with millions of families losing their breadwinners, and increased global inequality, apart from exposing the vulnerability of governance in developing states to poverty and the challenges of managing the crisis associated with the pandemic. The pandemic also put a significant strain on and exposed the weakness of the health sector in developing states. Schleicher (2020) contends that as governments grappled with the spread of the disease by imposing a total lockdown on the entire economic sectors as well as imposing restrictions on mobility, the pandemic evolved into a major economic crisis expected to burden societies for years to come.

In response to the lockdowns imposed by governments, conventional schooling was interrupted with nationwide school closures in South Africa. While the educational community has made concerted efforts to maintain learning continuity during this period, students have had to rely more on their own resources to continue with their studies where their school is unable to provide or reach the areas where they live remotely using the internet, television, or radio (Schleicher, 2020). Lecturers and teachers alike had to adapt to the new pedagogical concepts and modes of delivery of teaching [for which they may not have been trained].

While the school and classroom environments are important places for students to have social experiences, during the pandemic, students' homes became the new educational setting without physical social interactions with their lecturers and peers. Thus, paving the way for the introduction of digital learning that represents a paradigm shift in the way [quality] education was delivered. Notwithstanding, the probability that students in rural areas, may not have access to digital learning resources or lack the resilience and engagement to learn on their own is very high as well as at the risk of falling behind their classmates.

Although higher education institutions were quick to replace contact lectures with online learning, but the closures of institutions of learning in no measure impacted learning and examinations negatively. The most affected are the poor students whose rurality was defined by their inability to quickly adapt to the use of technology for teaching and learning. To Schleicher (2020), the Covid-19 crisis raises fundamental questions about the value offered by a university education which includes networking and social opportunities as well as educational content.

Hence, to remain relevant in the academic space, universities have had to reinvent their learning environments where technology is giving a place to expand and complement student-teacher relationships. Thus, many quickly developed online lessons, remote-teaching plans, and concrete strategies for meeting students' basic needs though with some profound challenges. Arguably, the opening of tertiary institutions undeniably will bring benefits to students and the wider economy and families since it will enable some parents to return to work. However, these benefits must be carefully evaluated vis-a-vis the health risks they may likely pose to the public. By implication, the need for such trade-offs calls for a sustainable and well-coordinated relationship between education and public health authorities at different levels of government, enhanced by full local participation.

Central to students' academic performance is a meaningful interaction [in a typical classroom setting] that build relationships between teachers and their students. Face-to-face interaction with students allows lecturers to measure the level of motivation, engagement, and understanding of the content aspects of learning which can be more difficult to establish from the perspective of distance learning (Liberante, 2012, Quin, 2017, Zweig & Stafford, 2016).

Hodgman et al. (2021) comment that educators have had to transit from classroom instruction to remote or hybrid models, psychologically, it was very difficult to embrace since it reduced the opportunities for interaction in-person with their students, and sometimes educators who were not familiar with remote teaching have had to undergo several workshops to enhance their performance. Notwithstanding, the outbreak of Covid-19 paved the way for the initiation of digital learning as an emergency alternative education system at all levels of education (Noor et al. 2020, Pokhrel & Chhetri,

2021). Thus, more innovative, and interactive online learning strategies will help to make education systems more resilient and robust while preparing against possible future crises and uncertainties.

Nevertheless, while the transition to remote instruction paves the way for preparation against possible crises and uncertainties of this nature in the future, there is evidence that suggests that teachers and students in high-poverty rural areas were particularly affected by this shift. In his work Malkus (2020) found out that high-poverty rural areas were less likely than low-poverty rural areas to expect one-on-one teacher-student contact. In other words, rural and high-poverty schools faced stark challenges during the pandemic in maintaining one-on-one contact and regular check-ins between teachers and students in a virtual setting.

Godber and Atkins (2021) contends that recent publications on the impacts of Covid-19 on teaching and learning [globally], is a big challenge and it includes provision of comparable assessments and examination conditions to the pre-Covid-19 face-to-face provision. Sintema (2020) concurred that the reduction in the number of contact hours for students and seemingly lack of consultation with educators when facing difficulties in learning and understanding to a certain level has resulted into lowered performance on year-end summative assessments outcomes.

With uncertainty and confusion that occurred among the educators, university management, and students, the required online assessments though were documented but were rather with a lot of trial and error. The level of plagiarism was found to be very high owing to large population of students that are involved. In other words, the lockdown of schools not only affected internal assessments and examinations, it also led to the cancellation or postponement and shifting of academic semesters for some weeks or months in some cases.

As indicated in literatures Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) comments that there are socio-economic and psychological consequences on the life of students while they are away from their normal schedule of study where they can easily relate with their course mates and their lecturers. Godber and Atkins (2021) argued that the increased in and unstructured time spent on online learning platforms practically exposes students to potentially harmful and violent content and possibly greater risk of cyberbullying. Ravichandran and Shah (2020) contributed that school closures and the strict containment measures suggests that families have had to rely on technology and digital solutions to stay engaged in learning and remain connected to the outside world during the period of the Covid pandemic. In South Africa for example, the increase of time spent on virtual platforms to a certain extent impacted domestic violence, child abuse, and resulted to increase in teenage pregnancies.

Godber and Atkins (2021:3) are of the opinion that the Covid-19 pandemic has forced governments and educational policy makers, at all levels to take immediate action to optimize implementing e-learning systems during the Covid-19 global pandemic. This has forged a strong connection between educators and their [students'] communities. However, the use of online platforms such as Google Classroom, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, virtual learning environment and social media and various group forums that were explored and tried for teaching and learning, to continue education through digital platforms although good but there were a set of students that felt neglected during this period. These are students from the rural areas who find it difficult to access online teaching and learning during this period.

This is supported by Ferri, Grifoni and Guzzo (2020) that during school closures [because of the pandemic], existing inequalities connected to different socioeconomic situations increased as a result of lack of resources, including access to educational technologies and the internet; and lack of physical spaces to carry out home-based learning among families from poorer backgrounds, who lack the basic skills to support their children. Hence, the possibility of producing significant losses in educational achievement, most especially for disadvantaged students.

Such discrepancies are more apparent in developing countries like Ghana according to Owusu, Koomson and Hanson (2020) where the majority of students do not have access to the internet and adequate learning environments. Yusuf (2020) however, suggests that institutions should provide more adequate e-learning platforms to increase access to the internet as well as develop an interactive learning approach while trying to navigate these difficulties through the provision of training for educators and students to improve their technological and pedagogical competencies in online learning.

In their opinion, Ferri, Grifoni and Guzzo (2020) believe that central to the emergence of remote teaching is the question of inclusion which may have different characteristics across countries. Omodan

(2020) argued that in South Africa for example, inclusion is directly connected with processes of decolonisation where there is the need to decolonise rural universities in the country to be able to respond to every unforeseen emergency, as an outcome of coloniality.

The existing evaluations of using social and behavioral science explain that moral decision-making during the Covid-19 pandemic response believe that moral decision-making during a pandemic involves uncertainty. Hence, it is not certain whether social interactions will infect others (Gino et al. 2016 and Garcia et al. 2020). It thus means that people may be less willing to take risks for others when the cost benefits are doubtful. For example, in hypothetical scenarios [for a university student in a rural area who is not sure of the potency of the health system] may decide whether to go to school while sick, the probability of staying at home is very high when it is uncertain, they would infect a co-student.

However, when going to school risked infecting a fellow student who might suffer a serious illness, they would be more willing to stay home. Thus, when people make moral decisions, they habitually, consider how others would judge them for their selfish behavior. Contrariwise, harmful actions are likely judged more starkly than harmful inactions (Barclay & Robb, 2007, Milinski et al. 2002). Thus, the decision to carry on with academic business as usual during a pandemic as an active decision, rather than a passive decision by higher institutions of learning may make such behaviors unacceptable. This explains why higher institutions have had to adopt learning remotely during the pandemic, although it came at a cost, particularly for students in rural areas.

Hence, Holzer et al. (2021) submit that the psychological well-being of students in higher education institutions amidst the pandemic is fundamentally important. The resilience to flourish in the face of challenges and to activate resources, including taking chances to experience feelings of well-being has consistently been associated with basic psychological need satisfaction, underpin by self-determination. The basic psychological needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness represent core conditions for personal growth, integration, social development, and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Fundamentally, psychological need satisfaction can act as a buffer in times of stress, while reducing appraisals of stress and promoting adaptive coping.

Unarguably, universities are social spaces, that enable social and psychological interaction while offering the opportunity to build networks and new friendships and generating a sense of identity and belonging regarding the institution (Tonon, 2020). Convincingly, universities represent a very important developmental context for [rural] students to develop and unfold their potential and to experience a sense of belonging in the wider society. Thus, the closures of universities due to Covid-19 represent a unique challenge for students' quality of life particularly those from rural areas. In response to the pandemic, universities have had to switch to distance learning technologically, marked by a quick transition from contact classes to online learning systems.

As stated above, what is peculiar to distance learning is the lack of physical presence and the lesser extent of informal discourse and spontaneous interaction (Holzer et al., 2021). Moore (1993) believes that this bears the risk of transactional distance, a communication gap that psychologically, creates negative emotions, gaps in understanding, and misconceptions. It, therefore, means that it is crucial to unequivocally address learners' individual needs, feelings, and difficulties in distance learning environments (Richardson et al., 2015). Considering this and bearing in mind the academic success of students whether, in contact or distance learning settings, interaction among learners in any learning setting should be explicitly supported.

Findings and discussion

Rurality, rural university students, and technology

It is common to describe Covid-19 as a deadly ravaging pandemic that has changed and still defining the way of life of many people across the globe. Handling the pandemic requires a drastic measure that must be pursued as a way of curtailing the rapid spread of the virus. In other to nip the spread of the virus in its bud, the South African government [like every other state] prohibit public gatherings, enact social distancing, and closed schools, and thus required a move to online teaching and learning. While the move to online/Multimodal platforms of teaching and learning, as opposed to traditional face-to-face classes.

Within the context of rurality, many learners in rural areas soon find themselves excluded from schooling while finding it difficult to access online resources. This is partly due to the unavailability of laptops and other electronic gadgets apart from the epileptic supply of electricity in some areas. This challenge is not peculiar to students alone, some lecturers who were not familiar with the use of multimodal online platforms were forced to learn the use of teaching through technology. A third-level student at the University of Zululand in KwaZulu-Natal commented . . . *when the school introduced online teaching . . . my major challenge was how I am going to survive because I have never for once been taught online and there was no computer, situation however forced me to use my smartphone but not without its obvious challenges of network problem. Although my university tried its possible best to ensure that we get study materials by bringing them to us using police stations as a point of collection . . . but because of the intense spread of the virus and lockdown rules that must be obeyed, my university was unable to bring the study materials to us again. This means that those of us in the rural areas bear the brunt of the virus most.* Thus, justifying Dube's (2020) comments that it appears that online learning favours urban and to some extent, well-privileged learners, consequently, widening the gap between the rich and the poor.

Globally, there has been a sharp increase in inequality, manifested within territorial proximity and intra-national inequalities which have continued to grow with various evidence that suggests these wide disparities between urban and rural populations (Horner et al., 2018). As the Covid-19 pandemic continues to rage throughout the globe, there are also sharp rural-urban divides. This appears as a paradox because, instead of uniting the nation [as in South Africa] in the fight against Covid-19, the division between the rural and urban wouldn't let go.

In as much as higher education moved online [in the interim] inequalities for those living in rural areas, in terms of digital access, including internet connectivity, social support and access to resources also become even more austere (Timmis, 2020 and Mohamedbhai, 2020). This is in addition to the fact that in rural areas paying for data necessary to participate in online learning cannot be prioritized over having sufficient food to eat. Answering a question, a second-year student at the University of Zululand laments . . . *I and my friend sometimes must go to the top of a mountain very close to our village because of the lack of connectivity . . . that is if our classes are between 8 am and 2 pm in the afternoon but after that time, it becomes very difficult to get a connection.*

The complaints about access to and the use of technology as a medium of teaching students during the Covid-19 pandemic are not limited to students in the rural areas alone, it is a peculiar problem with lecturers as well. Justifying the inability to use technology during the Covid-19 pandemic, a lecturer lamented that . . . *I never thought it will result in this . . . not because I don't want to teach but all this while I never thought of a situation where I will be overtly forced to use technology to teach my local language . . . I virtually forced myself to learn the use of these technologies which eventually paid off for me.*

Arguably, rurality can be a useful instrument to investigate life vis-à-vis education in rural areas with reference to the pandemic period. Students from the rural areas of Kwazulu-Natal, South Africa [the majority of whom are black] experienced a high marginalization during this period, hence its adverse effect on their academic achievement. Responding to a question, a supposed third-level student lamented that . . . *I had to deregister when I discovered that there is no way I could catch up with my classmates who has access to the use of internet, the meager earnings of my mother as a domestic worker aren't enough to cater for me and my younger sister, so I couldn't get a laptop . . . even if I had one there is no access to electricity to power it . . . I, therefore, decided that the best thing is for me to deregister and continue the following year.*

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic has made online teaching and learning unavoidable. Realistically, the Covid-19 pandemic made it a workable alternative to face-to-face schooling. Suggesting, the need for an inclusive approach that accommodates both the learners in the rural areas in consonance with those in the urban areas. Policymakers must institute measures that would not isolate but cater for every section of the population without being deprived of access to electricity, network connectivity, and expertise, which is an integral part of successful online teaching and learning. Responding to a question, a lecturer is of the view that . . . *no classroom practices during the pandemic should undermine the fundamental human rights of learners in rural areas.* Hence, policymakers must put strategies in place to improve the living conditions of people living in the rural areas of Kwazulu-

Natal, South Africa. This, to some extent, will ensure a better future for and development of human capital stemming out of the rural areas.

Convincingly, the Covid-19 pandemic characterizes a huge global health crisis, which requires a large-scale behavioural change, this is because it has placed a significant psychological burden on individuals. Given the place of education in the socio-economic development of a state, the onus is therefore on schools which are the bridge that is required to align the psychological behaviour of students to mitigate the effect of the absence of contact classes where students often meet to share experiences in terms of their academic expectation apart from counselling they receive from their lecturers. To this end, a student comments that . . . *associating with classmates has always been the only way to ease the burden of loneliness at home as an orphan . . . I often thought that there is nothing in this world that can take the place of friendship which has been the bedrock of my academic achievements up until the coming of the pandemic.*

From the economic point of view, South Africans have been battling with uneven distribution of socioeconomic resources which has impacted student access to higher education. Because of the rural background of many of them [the blacks in particular] their choice of career is often affected. To mitigate this, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has taken the role of assisting students from low-income households through their higher education. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many lost their jobs but for the NSFAS many students have been able to continue with their education. *As of the time I started my higher education in 2020, I thought I will never be able to complete my degree because of my poor background in addition to my mother whose job was affected because of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, but with assistance from the NSFAS, I am sure of completing my degree this year* commented by one of the respondents.

Predominant amongst measures to fight the onslaught of Covid-19 in South Africa were ensuring social distancing, self-isolating, prohibition of people from gathering in large numbers, in addition to curtailing the movement of people. These measures to a certain extent were a blow to learners in the rural areas, who are used to teaching using a traditional classroom setup, where a lecturer is visible to students, as well as monitors the students at a very permissive close range (Dube, 2020).

It, therefore, means that at the height of the pandemic, the traditional approach to teaching and learning is no longer permissible, and hence the need to invent new ways of teaching, and learning management systems such as Blackboard, Moodle, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, etc. Unfortunately, these new teaching and learning tools are new to many students and lecturers alike, hence, the fear that this system of online teaching and learning may likely serve a few privileged students who have maximum access to these resources during the Covid-19 pandemic period. Attesting to this, a lecturer lamented that . . . *although I can use most of these tools what about our students who do not have access to a good learning environment and good equipment such as a laptop talk less of internet facilities . . . I believe, those who will suffer most are those students from rural areas where there is no electricity and other social amenities that can ameliorate the impact of this pandemic. I can say that most of our students from rural areas are somewhat helpless on how to approach online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic that culminates in the total lockdown of the entire system thus the cleavage between the rich and the poor is further widened.*

In every democratic state, successful socio-economic reforms are introduced and initiated from the grassroots (bottom-up) given the fact that those at the grassroots are the most affected, in this context, the most affected are the students who have first-hand experience of the realities of online teaching and learning in the context of Covid-19 pandemic (Oloruntegbe, 2011). It thus means that social justice that values an inclusive socio-economic approach but rejects the conservancy of an oppressive status quo through social transformation can be achieved by taking into consideration the realities of the impact of Covid-19 on students living in rural areas.

Echoes from Kwazulu-Natal Province of South Africa

While the Covid-19 pandemic ravaged the length and breadth of the globe, many governments also implemented countermeasures to limit the spread of the virus by limiting the number of people gathering in public places. To a certain extent, such measures had a disruptive implication for normal functioning of schools and universities. Thus, forcing schools to put in place alternative teaching and learning methods for students and educators while ensuring that teaching and learning continue in a

safe environment. This, however, brought along with it some challenges that call for the South African government to put some measures in place to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor in the country of which some of the respondents testified. This sentiment was echoed by a third level student commenting that . . . *although I had unlimited access to internet facilities, coming from an averagely rich family but my biggest concerns was my friends who does not have such opportunity because of their poor background . . . I wish our government can do something to mitigate the challenges of poverty in South Africa.*

Connell (2012) put forward that an inclusive approach to teaching and learning is fundamental to the success of online teaching and learning. This approach revolves around quality in the distribution of education services, apart from the nature of the service itself and its impact on society through time. This statement is echoed by a respondent who lament that . . . *though our school brought study materials to us at the beginning of the lockdown . . . but a month into the lockdown, those of us in the rural areas feel a bit neglected not because we couldn't participate in the learning process but our classmates in the urban areas who have access to teaching and learning materials online were far ahead of us by the time we got back to school . . .*

Given the challenges of the closure of educational institutions and the problem of having to navigate through the complex realities of the Covid-19 pandemic which forced schools to quickly transit to e-learning to mitigate the impact of the crisis on students, the pandemic, however, call for a significant focus on the need for education services that give students the soft skills to deal with some exceptional situations while protecting themselves from associated risks to their health and well-being, and provision of additional support should the need arises.

According to INEE (2018), these include Mental Health and Psychosocial Support, Social and Emotional Learning, and Health and Family Life Education. INEE holds that these can help students through difficult experiences, put them in a better position to learn as well as participate in the full range of educational opportunities. By interpretation, these components of education must not be exclusively marginalized by focusing only on the academic component.

Responding to a question, a lecturer in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of Zululand comments that . . . *the Covid-19 pandemic downplayed every role of higher institutions in moulding and structuring of students through the daily routine of class attendance, that give them the opportunity to interact with their lecturers and fellow students in an environment that breeds academic success.*

By interpretation, there is a risk of poor learning outcomes, increase risk of the neglect of students, particularly those in rural areas, deprivation of the use of technology in teaching and learning, inability to adjust adequately or appropriately to the new learning environment as a result students been kept away from the four walls of schools for a long period in addition to losing the opportunity to meet with experts in their various fields of study.

Hence, Parker and Alfaro (2022) comment that students have had to adjust rapidly to the enforced lockdown and their removal from safe and conducive learning spaces and their social networks. Further to this, they comment that for some of these students remote learning was a big challenge, owing to its new demands for self-management and self-study, and thus students [in rural areas] who did not have clear and robust access to e-learning like their counterparts in the urban areas were immediately placed at a disadvantage position with no access to online schooling. Suggesting that, students in rural areas were at risk of being exposed to anxiety, stress, depression, confusion, and other psychological challenges that came with the pandemic.

As university students, one would believe that they are matured enough to cater for their academic needs, however, it's been discovered that these students still need support from their parents, providing them with additional academic supervision as well as psychosocial support. Parker and Alfaro (2022) note that lecturers are trained over many years in pedagogical techniques, subject matter content, and student management techniques and may specialize in subject areas but parents have a shallow knowledge of the required techniques for capacity-building training and preparation. A first-year student's response corroborates this statement . . . *when we were informed that we will be learning from home, I felt very bad because I know that I may not likely get enough academic support from my mum because of her educational background . . . I have had to do everything on my own, my poor background and environment are other factors that affect my study during the hard Covid-19 lockdown.*

Debatably, online teaching and learning require a cultural and mental shift for the lecturers and students as well, however, the Covid-19 pandemic, with its attendant tension and other associated challenges, may not give room for a healthy and psychological environment to navigate this transition (Parker and Alfaro, 2022). Thus, lecturers in the higher institution are faced with the challenge of keeping their students engaged online, apart from the reduced control that some lecturers exercised in the e-teaching and learning environment. In response to a question, a lecturer responded that . . . *one of the challenges to online teaching and learning is the inability of students to respond to online teaching because of the location of some of them thus questioning the effectiveness of online teaching and learning . . . and capacity building for lecturers in e-learning pedagogy.*

The year 2020 to date has been disastrous to the academic fraternity, its devastating effects have doubled the suffering of students from rural areas who sees education as the alternative route to escape poverty. *If anyone asks me whether I learned during the peak of the Covid-19, my answer will definitely be no . . . to me I believe the Covid-19 pandemic has further shown the deep differences between the urban and rural dwellers . . . my course mates living in the urban have quick access to online teaching and learning, sometimes, in fact, this online teaching does not favour those of living in the rural areas,* a third level student lament.

Between 2016 and 2021, South Africa witnessed an unprecedented increase in the level of unemployment, at a time when the South African government is battling to save jobs and create more; the Covid-19 pandemic arrived with its devastating effects of which high job loss among low-income earners [most who resides in the rural areas] was recorded. South Africa's GDP growth slumped from 1.3% in 2017, to 0.7% in 2018, with the unemployment rate standing at 29% in the second quarter of 2019, 32.5% in the fourth quarter of 2020, in the fourth quarter of 2021, it crossed the thresh hold of 35% to 35.3%. – its highest level since 2008 (Mahlakoana, 2022).

Reacting to the level of unemployment vis-à-vis the position of the Covid-19 pandemic that orchestrated the move to online teaching and learning mode, a third-level student reiterates *that . . . though the reason behind online teaching and learning was meant to assist students but to me, it seems we didn't learn much particularly modules that require practicals . . . it was like this for almost two years, imagine someone from rural area like me who have not seen talk less of how to use simple machine which my university offer but was denied the advantage of learning how to use it by Covid-19 . . . I am a bit skeptical if we would be employed quickly for this singular reason.*

The 2020 school closures in South Africa in response to the Covid-19 pandemic without any point of contradiction presented a big challenge to lecturer-student relationships notwithstanding the status of everyone across the country. The belief that positive teaching and learning outcomes can be achieved through online engagement of students was the most important motivation for individuals and higher institutions to participate in the process. However, the opportunity for face-to-face interactions was reduced owing to the transition to remote teaching and learning. As mentioned above, the frequency of online interactions between students and their lecturers differed across social contexts, those in the rural were more disadvantaged compared to students living in urban areas where students had quick access to internet facilities.

Conclusions

This paper has argued that the Covid-19 pandemic vis-à-vis the experience of the students of tertiary institutions in South Africa was at variance in that some students have easy access to online teaching as well as online recourses some find it difficult to access the same because of lack of infrastructure in addition to the level of their poverty. While some students had a good experience of the transition to online teaching and learning, some were lamenting not because they were not taught but because their accessibility to the online platform was somewhat restrictive because of their environment. A third-level student assert that . . . *I was very happy when the South African government announced that Covid-19 lockdown rules will be relaxed to give people the opportunity to move around doing their business . . . I was happy because for the past two years my access to my school's online teaching and learning platform was very poor because I came from a rural environment where internet facility is a luxury and sometimes there may be no electricity. . . sincerely, I am happy that we are back on campus for our studies.*

The findings of this study have shown that there are some universities whose students as well as lecturers are still struggling or unfamiliar with the use of online teaching aids. The major reason for this might be because of the location of the institution coupled with the rurality of the areas where these students reside, notwithstanding this is the age of technology where every institution should embrace blended teaching and learning system.

The face of education has been changed by the Covid-19 pandemic to such an extent that policymakers must be ready to factor its impact on the educational sector [and some of the lessons learned why responding to the crisis occasioned by the Covid-19) into planning in the sector for a quick recovery with its commitment to quality education. The loss of academic structure as provided by institutions, social networks, and safe spaces has affected all students. It, therefore, means that policymakers in education must prioritize the use of technology for teaching and learning, particularly when tackling the persistent intersecting vulnerabilities of those living in rural areas amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In the course of this study, it was discovered that at the height of the pandemic, every higher institution in South Africa device some creative ways of reaching out to their students. For example, the University of Zululand in response to the crisis went as far as going into the rural areas to deliver study materials, although it was not enough to address the loop hole created in the educational sector by the pandemic. From observation, South African universities, particularly, those located at the heart of rural areas have shown their resilience to adapt and transform the educational systems to meet the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic while preparing for the realities of the post-Covid-19 pandemic.

Without much ado, the COVID-19 pandemic represents a massive global health crisis of which its root is yet to be confirmed by the World Health Organisation (WHO). That the crisis requires large-scale behavioural change places significant psychological burdens on individuals. The closure of schools in 2020 in response to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic put a strain on lecturer/student relationships across South Africa. The transition to multi-modal means of teaching and learning eroded the opportunities for one-on-one interactions with educators.

By implication, urgent action by the Department of Health (DoH), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), and possibly the Department of Basic Education (DoBE) are needed to mitigate the potential effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the educational system with focus on rural areas. Emphasis should also be placed on communication with the people living in rural areas. [Good] health is wealth goes the saying, thus, the well-being of the people as well as quality of life must be promoted while trying to prevent the outbreak of “another” disease.

Therefore, the post-Covid-19 pandemic reality will require a comprehensive and robust integration program to address the existing gaps between those students living in rural areas and those living in urban areas while preparing for future emergency response. This work believes that an integrated, multifaceted delivery system to scale up the various interventions adopted during the pandemic is a leeway to creating a strong educational system post the pandemic.

The emergence of Covid-19 has shown that the school is not only a place of learning, but also a social common space that provides socialization, care, facilitation, and coaching. Thus, studies and research in the area of technology/ICT is inevitable as distance learning may become an important part of academic programmes in the future.

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