

Paragons of inequality: Challenges associated with online learning at a selected rural university in South Africa¹

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ABSTRACT

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions (HEIs) globally were forced to abruptly transition from traditional face-to-face classrooms to online classrooms in order to salvage teaching and learning. This was especially tougher for HEIs in the Global South where little to no infrastructure and technologies had been rolled-out prior to the pandemic. Navigating this 'new normal' was even tougher for poor rural institutions and students who were already grappling with several inequalities. Against this background, this study explored the challenges associated with online learning at a rural university in South Africa. The study was grounded in the connectivism learning theory and was underpinned by a qualitative approach. To this end, data were collected using in-depth interviews and analysed thematically. The findings revealed that students and staff were grappling with connectivity problems, lack of technological skills, academic dishonesty, and poor attendance, among other things. Because online learning will remain a feature of HEIs for the foreseeable future, the study thus recommended that governments and non-government actors work together to ensure that learning technologies filter to students in least technologically accessible areas to create a genuinely inclusive pedagogy. The study also recommended that additional support be provided for students and teachers to ensure effective participation, and that universities actively promote the creation of online communities where students can connect so as to avoid isolation and solitude that have been known to be features of online learning.

Keywords: Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), higher education institutions, learning challenges, online learning, technology

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

With the rapid emergence of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), developing countries are increasingly being challenged to exploit the exponential potential for growth and development that comes with this transition (Aboagye, 2020; Sutherland, 2020). The place of digital technologies in Africa was especially magnified by the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic which caught most institutions and governments in Africa unprepared (Dhawan, 2020; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). This revived the argument that although developing countries are earmarked to benefit from the 4IR, most governments continue to play catch-up with the fast-moving pace of the digital revolution (Ayentimi & Burgess, 2018; Kayembe & Nel, 2019). In short, the developing world has had to continually react to the widening inequalities between the haves and have nots, as opposed to being proactive. The lack of regulation policies and laws in the digital domain has been a critical weakness of governments and education institutions in the developing world (Ayentimi & Burgess, 2018; Sutherland, 2020). In addition, it has also been argued that the lack of funding to finance the transition into the 4IR has also resulted in a somewhat failed capitalisation on the prospects

presented by the digital revolution – this was especially brought to the fore in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic which emphasised the place of digital technologies in all sectors of society (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021).

Reeling from inequalities and endemic poverty that are extant in most African communities, the sudden requirement for non-contact learning modes that were necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic threw most institutions into a state of panic, forcing them to urgently transform their methods of teaching, learning and assessment. This meant that several institutions had to adopt online technologies, forcing staff and students to use digital technologies on the go (Mutongoza, 2021). Inevitably, this rushed adoption of online learning was fraught with challenges which widened inequalities in learning, particularly for the rural and poor communities that had almost nothing to fall back on (Ro'fah et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021). Unlike their richer and more urban counterparts, the poor and rural communities in South Africa were battling with poor or no internet signal which had the consequence of isolating and discriminating these communities from the new mode of learning necessitated by the 'new normal' (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020). The adoption of online technologies also had the effect of systemically excluding students from low-income homes who lacked access to technologically advanced gadgets and the funds to purchase Wi-Fi or mobile internet data (Adarkwah, 2020; Dube, 2020). Over and above these issues, HEIs were faced with academic dishonesty, lack of training for this online pedagogy, low participation and attendance rates, the digital divide, psychosocial challenges, disruptive learning environments, and lower student outputs, among others.

Academic dishonesty

Studies reveal that the rushed adoption of online learning raised questions about academic integrity in the wake of remote assessments that did not have the traditional invigilation procedures that were being used during contact-based assessments (Gamage et al., 2020). Reported instances of academic dishonesty include plagiarism, utilisation of ghost-writers, and contract cheating among others (Fontaine et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2020; Chala, 2021). Compounding the lack of invigilation was the lack of training for faculty on how to conduct remote examinations in a manner that upheld academic integrity (Raaheim, et al., 2019; Mutongoza & Olawale, 2022). In revealing the motivations behind the surge of academic dishonesty in South Africa, studies reveal that principal factors included the desire to get high marks, the lack of thorough teaching leading to examinations, poor assessment security measures, among other factors (Daniels et al., 2021; Khan, et al., 2021; Reedy et al., 2021). Opportunities for academic dishonesty were increased because the pandemic found the university communities lacking in competencies necessary to navigate the digital landscape (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020).

Limited training

Although implemented as an alternative to the disruption to learning necessitated by COVID-19 pandemic, the effectiveness of this new form of delivering learning content was greatly affected by the lack of training for both students and staff (Mayer, 2019; Moralista & Oducado, 2020). Studies conducted on the efficacy of emergency online learning reveal that during the pandemic, education institutions failed to harness the potential of this new pedagogy because faculty members and students were not ready for online classes owing to lack of digital skills and computer illiteracy in some instances (Ogunkola, et al., 2020; Zahra et al., 2020; Mutongoza, 2021). This lack of the requisite skills led to a lot of scrutiny of universities in the Global South as they were blamed for implementing measures that did not consider the grim reality and condition of their universities (Gamage et al., 2020; Ngari & Ndung'u, 2020). The reality on the ground was that some students (especially those from poor rural communities), were suddenly required to learn how to use technology-enabled devices simultaneously with course content (Žižek, 2020; Mutongoza, 2021). Further, the resources to finance efficient support services were simply not at the disposal of poorer institutions in the global South whose finance reserves and funding partners were already significantly more limited than their counterparts in the developed world, even prior to the pandemic (Belay, 2020; Mncube et al., 2021).

Low participation and attendance

Studies have demonstrated that in times of transitions, university populations are at a higher risk of failing to cope owing to heightened anxieties, fears, and losses in social aspects of university lifestyles (Poalses & Bezuidenhout, 2018; Cvetkovski et al., 2019). Research done in this regard also reveals that low participation and attendance rates in classes have been the inevitable result of students' failure to understand non-interactive classes (Laher et al., 2021), poor time management strategies, and disruptive home dynamics which meant that students would regularly be disrupted due to their responsibilities at home and limitedness of working space, especially in poorer households (Mpungose, 2020; Laher et al., 2021). In the same breath, studies revealed that the attempt to transition from face-to-face learning modes to online ones would inevitably result in burnout among students and staff owing to the increases in workloads (Makhubela, 2021; Ntshwarang et al., 2021). The failure to connect and participate in classes thus affected students and lecturers alike – lecturers were left lecturing to screens with minimal interaction with students, while students were restricted to being passive participants who often only attended classes asynchronously through recordings (Adeyon & Soykan, 2020; Mukuna & Aloba, 2020; Ro'fah et al., 2020). Low participation and attendance rates were thus reported as significantly impacting on the quality of online learning delivery across universities in the developing world.

The digital divide

E-learning has brought to the fore the high level of inequality that still exists in Africa compared to other parts of the world. Czerniewicz et al., (2020) express that South Africa is the most unequal country worldwide, these inequalities were highlighted through the pre-existing digital divide caused by income and wealth inequalities. Students from rural/marginalised backgrounds were mostly affected by the migration to online learning as their digital expertise are not at the same level as their peers from affluent/urban backgrounds who had no trouble adapting to e-learning. The emergence of e-learning prompted inequalities, geographical location, socioeconomic factors, race and income level as the major causes of the digital divide amongst students in South African universities (Hasan & Bao, 2020).

The digital divide amongst students centre on access to several features of information communication technology (ICT) comprising physical access, enthusiasm, technology proficiencies, and the institutional training available on digital technologies. When conceptualizing the digital gap, the emphasis is primarily placed on the lack of impartiality in accessing online technologies (Belay, 2020; Mutongoza & Olawale, 2022). The difference also highlights the disparity between the affluent and the underprivileged in terms of resources and access to online learning platforms (Gamage et al., 2020; Barrot et al. 2021). Thus, access to online technologies and inequality are at the centre of e-learning success/failure rates. Azionya and Nhedzi (2021) state that related inequalities can take three forms, namely: unequal access to technologies (first-level digital divide); unequal development of the necessary internet navigational skills and information literacy skills (second-level digital divide); and unequal socioeconomic benefits of technology use (third-level digital divide).

Some challenges identified by researchers on the digital divide include: digital infrastructure, affordability of gadgets to access online learning management systems, constant price increases for internet cost, and skills accessible to students (Hasan & Bao, 2020). Students in rural HEIs on the African continent have been gravely disadvantaged by the adoption of e-learning. Some of the challenges they face are power outages (load shedding), cost of data/Wi-Fi, connectivity issues in rural areas, and lack of proper training on online learning management systems.

Isolation and solitude

Institutions of higher learning foster a culture of interconnectedness and socialising amongst staff and students. The inability to connect and interact with peers during the pandemic brought about feelings of isolation and solitude for the majority of students and staff. Psychosocial wellness of students took a plunge

upon commencement of online learning. Students and staff grappled with navigating their way through understanding online learning technologies and stringent deadlines for assessment submissions. Mental health challenges amongst students intensified during the pandemic, specifically the attention and expression of problems (i.e., mood swings and ambiguous responses), these resulted from remoteness, financial constraints, escalation of health problems, and uncertainties (Barrot et al., 2021). Further student concerns were overwhelming workload, technical constraints, and quarantine. The transition to e-learning came with a loss sense of community resulting from isolated learning environments which lead to increased levels of anxiety and depression in students (Mutongoza, 2021).

Disruptive learning settings

Students reported acute anxiety, depression, poor connectivity, and unfavourable home environment as some of the challenges faced by students from poorer backgrounds (Barrot et al., 2021). Despite efforts to aid students in accessing online learning management systems there is little that can be done regarding issues such as insufficient electricity supply and poor network coverage. Rural universities have limited resources to support their staff and students, the pandemic exposed challenges with infrastructural resources in well-resourced HEIs like the University of South Africa (Unisa). Unisa as a remote university providing distance learning for years battled to provide their staff with laptops that have the Intelligent Transport System (ITS) for capturing of students marks which led to the institution offering all modules as annual modules and removing semester modules (Hedding et al., 2020).

Compromised student output

Many universities changed an array of modules from traditional examinations to continuous assessment creating a new range of administrative problems. These include marking the work of large classes in a short frame of time, experimental laboratory assessments, limited to no practicum placements and less comprehensive assessments which were provided to students just to make throughputs to submit to the Council for Higher Education (CHE) (Hedding et al., 2020). Whilst focussing on moving teaching and learning online the neglected 'elephant in the room' that was highly affected by the pandemic is research supervision and outputs. Research supervision of postgraduate students, departmental research outputs, applying and acquiring research grants, and meeting deliverables for research funding were also majorly affected by the sudden switch to online platforms due to poor network and connectivity, and limited training on how to use e-resources. Many research projects were compromised by lockdown social distancing regulations. Final year students complained that online research supervision was inefficient, and they had to do most of the work without guidance and received minimal marks for their research projects. Some data on final year student research marks captured by Hedding et al. (2020) revealed very minimal scores for research projects especially in rural HEIs. While those in Science-related disciplines were affected by limited laboratory work, those in the Humanities and Social Science disciplines grappled with limited access to collect data and conduct qualitative research studies using interviews, participant observations, and focus group discussions. Such staff and students complained that online data collection did not espouse rich information compared to face-to-face data collection methods (Hedding et al., 2020).

Theoretical perspective: A case for the connectivism learning theory

In order to understand the foundational aspects of online learning, it is important for one to consider the lenses provided by connectivism learning theory. Connectivism is a learning theory that was developed by George Siemens in 2004 specifically for the digital age/4IR (Siemens, 2017). The theory of connectivism advanced from the concept 'situated learning', which recognized the command of technology for the purpose of learning and the social networking process consisting of online information sharing and creation of knowledge. In the digital era, information and knowledge is disbursed through networks where connection informs learning (Utecht & Keller, 2019; Corbett & Spinello, 2020). Connectivism includes learning through "information databases, social media platforms, online networks, blogs, podcasts and online learning management systems" (Siemens, 2017:17). This theory is very prominent and most befitting to the online learning environment that most institutions of higher learning adopted since the

commencement of the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowledge forms a major part of problem solving, intellect, enthusiasm, attentiveness, and reasoning rather than tasks, that is what the concept connectivism is constructed on (Zraggen, 2021; Sousa et al., 2022). Over the past 30 years technology has improved the learning environment both formally and informally. Thus, 'connectivism describes the interconnection between human learning and the universal access to knowledge enabled by the current technological environment' (Siemens, 2017: 16). Finally, connectivism yields a technological examination on recent trends, the evolution of e-learning, the source of information and knowledge production, and changes in institutions (Corbett & Spinello, 2020; Owolabi, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

To unearth the challenges associated with the abrupt transition to online learning at a rural university in South Africa, the study employed a qualitative research approach because this approach allowed the researchers to get a rounded understanding of the diverse experiences (Leavy, 2017). At the selected university, the sample consisted of students and lecturers who were selected using purposive sampling because it allowed us to get rich information from a small sample and reach valuable outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Having distributed invitations in the Department of Social Work to 40 final-year students and 10 lecturers that were selected based on their self-proclaimed acute challenges with online learning, only 10 students and three lecturers consented to participate in the study. Data were collected from the consenting participants using in-depth interviews in English which lasted approximately 20 minutes and were recorded with the consent of the participants. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed by a professional naturalized transcriber who captured the whole sentences with as many details as possible as prescribed by Nascimento and Steinbruch (2019). After transcription, data were analysed using the six steps of qualitative thematic analysis namely: becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing and revising themes; defining themes; and writing-up themes from those responses (Braun & Clarke, 2014). The researchers obtained ethical clearance and gatekeeper permission to conduct the study at the university, and embarked on data collection in a manner that ensured that no harm was done to the participants.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings from our study suggest that the inception of online learning was fraught with several challenges such as low participation and attendance rates, the systematic exclusion of poorly networked communities, isolation and solitude, and disruptive home environments that made it difficult to learn. Below is a detailed analysis of the responses offered by the participants when they were asked: What challenges affected the transition from face-to-face classes to online learning?

Low participation and attendance rates

The participants revealed that although online learning had been introduced to bridge the learning gaps instituted by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the abrupt adoption of online learning platforms resulted in lower participation and attendance rates in online classrooms when compared to traditional ones. An example can be drawn from a student who noted,

Online learning comes with costs of data, which is something that has been very challenging, at some point you may find that some of the works you do online need you to have a good network connection and if not, then there will be some complications or unfinished work. Data expenses are high and sometimes not having data have made me miss some of schoolwork, and because poor network connectivity it wasn't easy to check daily announcement made by lectures and I missed a lot of classes and failure to submit schoolwork in time. (Student 25)

Some participants also believed that when initially introduced, the online learning intervention was nongermane to the university population and members of the university community were finding it difficult to accept it. This can be captured in the sentiments of a lecturer who contended,

Look, the very same skills transfer in so far as being taught how to do these things is Webinar driven. One is alone in his/ her own corner trying to deal with this foreign intervention. Students avoiding online classes by blaming non availability of data and network challenges. In my first online class I had only 5 attendees from a class of 42 students. (Lecturer 10)

Students were generally of the view that online learning was causing challenges for those in areas without network connectivity. One can consider the view of a student who noted,

Network connectivity and data where the major problems I had encountered during online learning reason being, my house is in the villages, and you have to stand in a certain area for you to be connected. In terms of data the institution has struggled for a very long time to provide for data and that lead to the classes taking a long time to commence that time the work is piling up. (Student 19)

The findings revealed that while online learning was meant to rescue education projects, its rushed adoption resulted in the widening of learning inequalities. It is imperative for one to reiterate that the differentiated access to the internet meant that online learning systematically discriminated against those from rural areas. This position is confirmed by the connectivism learning theory which predicates that without connection in the digital age, no learning can take place (Corbett & Spinello, 2020). The consequence was that students were absent from online classes and often playing catch-up, especially during the periods where the universities were closed and both students and staff were working from home. Siemens' connectivism learning theory is helpful in this regard because it demonstrates that for online environments to thrive, students need to be actively engaged and participate for them to develop connections and acquire knowledge (Utecht & Keller, 2019; Sousa et al., 2022). The connectivism learning theory can be used to explain how challenges such as lack of motivation, feedback inadequacies, technical difficulties, distractions, and isolation, among others hinder the active learning process (Owolabi, 2020; Zraggen, 2021). These findings are validated by studies that conclude that some students resorted to not participating in online classes because of the non-interactive outlook of online classes (Laher et al., 2021). Studies by Mpungose (2020) and Mutongoza (2021) further attest that students from poorer households often grappled with untenable workspaces, inability to manage time owing to chores and disruptions, and failure to access dependable internet services, among other factors. This in essence had the unintended consequence of sidelining these students from the much-lauded mode of learning. As such, HEIs are therefore called to create an engaging and interactive learning environment to motivate students to participate and attend online classes regularly because the post-COVID-19 pandemic classrooms have demonstrated the necessity of fusing digital technologies into learning systems.

Exclusion of poorly networked communities

Although the integration of online learning is generally viewed as the way forward for education, most of the students that participated in the study were of the view that it was an unfair means of teaching and assessing. This was because most students in areas that had limited internet access were being unfairly taught and assessed based on their ability to access the internet, rather than merit – thus, the adoption of online learning was viewed as unfair and exclusionary. A student lamented,

I think it's not really knowing how to use it and to find certain features and network problems are the worst sometimes in our respective areas that we come from. The challenge that affected me the most at times is the network, it throws a person totally out of learning, especially if you were already logged and you lose network. I have learnt to use online learning and no longer a problem, especially with receiving a laptop. (Student 10)

This was also evident in the perspective offered by a lecturer who opined that although they were recording online classes to circumvent the loss of learning, some students would still find it difficult to access these recordings. This was because of network challenges or exorbitant data costs associated with online learning. The lecturer said,

Connection issues and access to Wi-Fi/data are the two main problems. Without proper coverage and funds to buy data it is impossible for students/lecturers to participate when using online teaching and learning technologies. I had to work with my students to find a cheaper platform that they can all access for teaching. However, due to connection issues, I record every class and email them the clip. This was done to accommodate those that lose connection during class. For communication and exchange of teaching and learning material, we decided that blackboard and emails were still the best options. (Lecturer 2)

Other participants also gave an unfavourable outlook of online learning based on their experiences in rural communities. Poor network sometimes meant that some of the participants had to struggle to connect and work on assessments and this was impacting on their scores. One can consider the views of a student who noted,

As I have mentioned living in the rural areas and having to login on blackboard for a class has been one of my biggest challenges as a result, I wasn't able to attend any online class in all my modules because of network problems...Most of the schoolwork I had to catch up when I got to school because of the above reasons. I submitted most of my work late, I was at the verge of deregistering because I saw no point of studying this year at all. (Student 18)

The findings above revealed that inaccessibility of online learning platforms greatly disadvantaged students from rural areas. The findings suggest that seclusion became synonymous with rurality, and this was causing a lot of distress and frustration for rural-based students who felt that online learning was not geared to take their rurality into consideration. Although proponents of online learning praised it for being a panacea to the COVID-19-induced learning crisis (Dhawan, 2020; Thompson & Copeland, 2020), experiences of participants in our study suggest that this was not true for all students. These findings become clearer when looked at in light of connectivism learning theory which argues that the technological environment is central to the access and quality of learning that happens at an institution of learning (Siemens, 2017; Corbett & Spinello, 2020). The connectivism learning theory argues that maintaining connections is a prerequisite for effective learning (Utecht & Keller, 2019; Sousa et al., 2022) – this means that in the absence of stable internet connection, the potential to learn and remain connected is heavily compromised. The findings of this research can be substantiated by studies that contend that students from poorer backgrounds were often faced with insurmountable challenges with regards to access to the internet for learning purposes (Mpungose, 2020; Laher et al., 2021). As such, the abrupt adoption of online pedagogy had the consequence of widening inequalities in learning, particularly for the rural and poor communities that had almost nothing to fall back on (Ro'fah et al., 2020; Rahman, 2021). Unlike their richer and more urban counterparts, the poor and rural communities in South Africa were largely battling with poor or no internet signal which had the consequence of isolating and discriminating these communities from the new mode of learning necessitated by the 'new normal' (Fernandez & Shaw, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020). One can thus contend that the adoption of online learning inexorably widened the gap between the haves and have-nots owing to poor network connectivity. To reduce the digital divide, universities will therefore need to create synergies with government and non-state actors to help tackle the problems of poverty, low education level, and poor infrastructure (Sutherland, 2020; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021). This may take the form of increasing affordability, empowering users, and infrastructure development, among other strategies.

Isolation and solitude

The findings of the study also revealed that the abrupt transition to online learning resulted in invisible costs as evidenced by comments about mental health. Students and staff reported feeling overwhelmed and unable to cope with the stresses associated with the 'new normal'. A student said,

I get overwhelmed when I have to write a test online, afraid not to finish on time and not able to submit the test, even the submission of assignments online got me scared. My level of passing has dropped, the interaction that I use to have with my lecturers has been affect negatively, the participation in class also have been affected because sometimes there would a problem with mike so you ended up just listening without an input in class. (Student 34)

One can consider the perspective of a student who spoke about the effects of isolation, arguing that learning is meant to be interactive. The student noted,

Unfortunately, I have no success story as to using the online way of learning. They had affected me tremendously and negatively because I felt like a failure. Not being able to engage in a class session when everyone else was very stressful. I'm one person very afraid of failing so it taken a lot of strain on me psychologically and emotionally. I couldn't cope especially when I was at home during the lockdown. (Student 11)

Participants also revealed that lack of interaction between students and staff was hampering the effectiveness of learning. Being physically away from one another meant that the university community was suddenly left to grapple with minimal socialising and classes were reported as being mechanical and often not delivering as expected. A lecturer added,

The attendance and the impersonal nature of online learning was a challenge because the interaction is limited and sometimes hindered because of connectivity issues. (Lecturer 3)

The findings of the study revealed that online learning resulted in the isolation of students from poorer communities as they were left isolated from their peers. This was because the transition to online learning, particularly during the period of the hard lockdown in South Africa, relegated socialisation to being internet-based thus only available to a few that had access to resources to fund this (Adarkwah, 2020; Dube, 2020). While the connectivism learning theory argues for the importance of connectivity as being an essential pillar of learning (Zraggen, 2021; Sousa et al., 2022), the experiences of our participants revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic led to broken bonds and ultimately resulted in isolation and solitude. In essence, the move to online learning fractured the existing social networking process that is critical to knowledge creation and information sharing as contained in the connectivism learning theory (Siemens, 2017). Due to the financial costs associated with web-based communities, poorer students were often left grappling with isolation (Motala & Menon, 2020). It was also reported that owing to the lack of human contact, online learning was often associated with the invisible cost to mental wellness (Mpungose, 2020). On the one hand, some had to grapple with the pressure associated with learning online technologies on the go, and on the other, they had to do this under stringent deadlines owing to losses of learning time during the initial lockdown period. If anything, the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us that online classrooms are here to stay in one way or the other, as such, HEIs need to be intentional in their efforts to reduce isolation and solitude. Such efforts may take the form of encouraging collaborative work and increasing the interactive elements of online classrooms (Dhawan, 2020; Moralista & Oducado, 2020). It will also be essential for lecturers and teachers to connect with their students in smaller groups, or even in the form of one-on-one meetings to discuss progress and challenges (Dube, 2020; Mncube et al., 2021).

Disruptive learning settings

The findings of the study also revealed that online learning was found to be tough for students as they had to grapple with constant disruptions that were absent from the traditional classrooms. Those learning from home reported that in some instances, family members disrupted the learning process by designating chores during learning time. This was captured in the views of a student who noted,

During the day studying was impossible one had to wait till everyone sleeps for some peace, sometimes I would end up too tired and couldn't study sometimes I would be successful and study till the early hours of the morning but would wake up late and miss all the morning classes. Being at home doing assignments means you don't have any access to the library which means work was very limited and I could not elaborate more on my given topics, that made my research to be very limited. (Student 5)

Other students also revealed that daily routines at home were proving to be invasive to online learning, especially in poorer crowded home environments. An appropriate example can be drawn from a student who lamented,

House chores, as much as parents understand but at the same time, they expect things to be done in their house as they wish and if it's your turn it's your turn. So many times, I have been asked to go to town and I always end up missing some classes, lack of privacy sharing a room with your siblings when you want to study the want to sleep vice-versa and kids running around playing others playing loud music all of this made it very hard to fully concentrate because there is just so much going on. (Student 29)

This was also corroborated by another student who argued that even in the wake of controlled campus reopening, it was still difficult to participate in online classes owing to the disruptive setting abounding in university student residences. The student contended,

... the disturbance by parents and the sibling, here in the campus the noise from the roommate whilst I am in class, so I lose concentration. Not seeing the lecturer when presenting. I am used to be taught in an auditorium now that I am at home, they are so many things that disturbs me like when I am in class my mother would call so that I can make her cup of coffee. (Student 32)

Unlike the traditional classrooms that were being used by the institution before the onset of the pandemic, the virtual classrooms were found to be prone to disruptions that made for unequal learning opportunities. At the heart of equitable access to quality education is the equalising of learning opportunities and ridding the learning space of any features that threaten learning (Ayentimi & Burgess, 2018; Belay, 2020). Yet, online learning was found to be lacking in this regard, with challenges reported by students in poorer communities that are often associated with larger families sharing very limited resources and spaces, and often associated with several household chores (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020; Ntshwarang et al., 2021). While the connectivism learning theory argues that for learning to happen, there is need for connections and networks that are facilitated through the use of technology (Owolabi, 2020; Zraggen, 2021), the multiple sources of distractions in the home environment were found to compete for the students' attention and made it difficult for some to focus on learning. This position is supported by Barrot et al. (2021) who argue that one of the greatest challenges confronting higher education students is the learning environment at home where they face multiple distractions. As we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, it will be essential for students to reduce the effects of such challenges because globally, online learning will be part of HEIs' learning modes for the foreseeable future (Mutongoza, 2021; Ntshwarang et al., 2021). It is incumbent upon students to set clear boundaries by communicating with family members and negotiating times when they can study without interruption (Adarkwah, 2020; Hedding et al., 2020). Students will also need to prioritise and manage their time more effectively – this may involve the utilisation of downtime and seeking support from family, peers, or lecturers (Motala & Menon, 2020; Rahman, 2021).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

While the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the centrality of digital technologies and online learning in education, there has been a lot of debates and arguments on how this new pedagogy's deeply entrenched challenges militate against its potential to rescue education. We set out to explore the challenges faced by Social Work students and staff at a rural university in South Africa, and by extension, sought to proffer solutions to these prevailing challenges in order to rescue the education agenda. Our findings revealed four broad clusters of challenges that affected the adoption of online learning, namely: low participation and attendance rates, systematic exclusion of poorly networked communities, isolation and solitude, and disruptive home environments that made it difficult to learn. To ensure that online learning is more accessible, engaging, and effective for all students, there is an urgent need for these challenges to be addressed in a sustainable manner.

At the heart of the challenges unearthed in this study was the lack of access to technology and connectivity. To remedy this, we recommend that governments and non-government actors need to work together to ensure that learning technologies filter to students in least technologically accessible areas to create a genuinely inclusive learning platform. A case can also be made for universities to incorporate models that have been known to work at institutions like UNISA where study packs are either collected at designated places nationwide or are sent through courier or post to student addresses. The researchers further recommend that additional support be provided for students and teachers to ensure effective participation – this can be achieved through tutorials, peer mentoring, or dedicated support staff to provide technical assistance in native languages. Because online learning will remain a feature in academic institutions for the foreseeable future, it will also be essential for HEIs to foster the creation of online communities where students can connect with one another so as to avoid isolation and solitude that have been known to be features of online learning. Finally, assessments will also need to be adjusted to engender fairness and reliability – this is because traditional classroom-based assessments are vastly different from the online assessments that are often done remotely.

Although our study was able to pinpoint some of the difficulties that Social Work faculty and students had when implementing online learning, it is crucial to remember that the size of our sample makes it difficult to generalise these findings. Our research can be considered as an exploration of this subject and as a starting point for other academics to look into it further. By disseminating our research, we add to the corpus of knowledge on this subject by providing the unique challenges faced by students and faculty at a rural university. Additional research can build on these by conducting more extensive and representative studies, utilizing various research designs and methodologies to validate our findings, and developing evidence-based interventions to address the issues that students and staff face when implementing online learning.

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