



Sink or swim: Exploring resilience of academics at an education faculty during Covid-19

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Abstract

There is a proliferation of local and international research focusing on Covid-19 and its impact on teaching and learning practices in higher education. However, there is considerably less focus on the resilience of academics in higher education during the pandemic in South Africa. To consider this gap, a group of curriculum officers at an education faculty based at a university of technology in the Western Cape set out to explore how resilient academics were during Covid-19. Thirteen academics who teach in and across the Foundation, Intermediate, and Further Education and Training phases participated in a focus group interview. Data was analysed thematically using content analysis and three themes were identified: creativity through complexity; embracing challenge through resilience; and connecting with self. The implications reveal that universities as a contextual environment for promoting resilience need to engage with the social and physical ecology of staff by providing support and resources to facilitate resilience during times of crisis. The dominant nature of the hierarchical dynamics of the university's management also needs to be considered as part of a social-ecological perspective in valuing academics' wellbeing during emergencies.

Keywords: resilience, academics, higher education, Covid-19, teaching and learning

Introduction

In recent years, teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa has been a rough road to traverse. This was evident during the #FeesMustFall protest actions that forced academics to stop face-to-face teaching since disruptions were rife and students' academic performance was negatively impacted (Gon, 2016). In 2020, the global race for technological advancement was unexpectedly accelerated by the Covid-19 pandemic. This resulted in higher education institutions all over the world making major adaptations related to teaching and learning. One of these was the transition from face-to-face teaching to online teaching. Academics had to familiarise themselves with up-to-date online technologies and evaluate their success to align with students' demands in the arena of teaching online.

In South Africa, academics were allowed to resume classes only from June 2020. By this time, they were highly stressed because of uncertainty regarding new ways of teaching and assessing online. Innovative and creative online teaching tools had to be used. Although most academics were trained on Blackboard, it was not effectively used as the sole medium for teaching and learning as was gleaned from the data in this study. Along with the need to familiarise themselves with online technologies, academics also had to keep up with the increased need to bridge time and space for educational purposes and goals (Garrison, 2011). The relentless and fast-paced advancement of information and communication technology had an intense impact on academic discourse by affecting the daily practices of teaching, research, and scholarship (Peimani & Kamalipour, 2021).

While there is a proliferation of local and international research focusing on teaching online during Covid-19 and its impacts on teaching practices, there is a dearth of research that focuses on the resilience of academics. Considering this gap, curriculum officers, who represent all curriculum matters and are responsible for strengthening curriculum through

weekly seminars and workshops in the Education faculty, set out to explore the resilience of academics during the Covid-19 lockdowns. It is necessary to explore the resilience of academics since they face rising stress levels and declining levels of mental health and wellbeing, both of which have a huge impact on their work performance. This study is pivotal since it showcases the complexities of online teaching compounded by the lack of institutional support to facilitate resilience. Despite these complexities, academics used their personal resources to develop resilience as is highlighted in the data. The literature review is presented below and is followed by a discussion of the theoretical framework and the methodology. We conclude the paper with some discussion and offer the implications for further research as well as addressing its limitations.

Literature review

Understanding resilience

Resilience emphasises the strengths and abilities of organisations and individuals to cope during challenging times. Resilience is a pivotal element of an individual's life. However, the term resilience is a complex one, and there are many different definitions associated with it. Some concise definitions offer an understanding of resilience as a process that enables an individual to adapt to any situation despite the challenging and threatening circumstances they may have faced (Pratiwi, 2011). According to Hendriani (2018), resilience is the capacity of an individual to implement stress-coping behaviours and the ability to adapt after negative emotional experiences. Some researchers refer to resilience as self-esteem and self-efficacy, while others refer to resilience as being related to internal and external risk and protective processes (Wagnild, 2009). Resilience is also understood to be a personality trait that controls the negative impact of stress and that promotes adaptation (Jacelon, 1997). Similarly, Khanlou and Wray (2014) have agreed that protective factors that influence resilience can emerge on a personal and contextual level. We deepen this discussion on resilience in the following sections by considering what resilience entails during a crisis and considering resilience as a contributor to wellbeing.

Developing resilience during a crisis

Liu et al. (2019), found that stress in the workplace can lead to either trauma and the destabilising of individuals or to growth and resilience. Resilience used to be seen in relation to heavy workloads and stressors such as role overload or conflict in terms of impacts on personal, social, and organisational resources (Kuntz, 2020). She pointed out that distinct trajectories can be distinguished during a time of crisis. These include a survival trajectory that may develop into an upward recovery one or slip into a declining one. The recovery trajectory can be enhanced through the necessary support from different sources, such as personal context, workplace, governments, or even global support. This point resonates with that of Holmes (2005), who identified a positive working environment with a strong communal identity, respectful and professional treatment, participation in decision-making,

regular interactions with colleagues, and recognition for efforts as factors that contribute to resilience.

Even before the Covid-19 pandemic, Morrish (2019) found rising stress levels, occupational health referrals, and declining mental health and wellbeing among university lecturers. An example is clearly illustrated in a study carried out by Van Niekerk and Van Gent (2022) in the Eastern Cape who showed that male staff members with comorbidities were more likely to exhibit signs of psychological distress along with female staff and administrative and service staff in general. Female staff members with comorbidities were at least twice as prone to being at risk for psychological distress and mental ill-health. Covid-19, a pandemic and major disaster, affected the entire planet and changed drastically what was thought of as the normal way of life in unanticipated ways (Li et al., 2020). Li et al. (p. 203) described the pre-Covid concept of resilience as “germane” compared to the current situation. Kuntz (2020) pointed out that the Covid-19 pandemic will have long-term consequences that will “test individuals, organisations and communities in unprecedented ways” (p. 188).

Resilience as a contributor to wellbeing

In the field of education, teachers’ wellbeing affects the learning environment and students’ wellbeing. Wellbeing is experienced when an individual feels valued and cared for, is not overloaded, and experiences job stimulation and enjoyment (Roffey, 2012). Collie and Martin (2017) found that the ability to adjust under stressful circumstances positively influences the wellbeing of pre-tertiary teachers. This was tested in context by Holliman et al. (2020), who examined the influence of personal autonomy support (PAS) and adaptability on organisational commitment and psychological wellbeing of university lecturers. They found that PAS positively linked lecturers’ adaptability, organisational commitment, and wellbeing. PAS was found to prevent burnout and act as a positive influence in the workplace, thereby pointing to the important role of the individual-supporting competencies of employees.

When institutions closed as a result of lockdowns, lecturers had to adapt to emergency online teaching and learning and had to invent ways to support students who were struggling because of their circumstances at home, such as lacking devices and support. It became clear that lecturers could support students adequately only once they had ensured their own strength and resilience. Many lecturers experienced alienation from their institutions, felt isolated, and could not cope with the new demands. This resonates with the findings of much earlier research by Bourdieu (1993) and Putnam (2000), who stressed the importance of social capital and belonging. Wike and Fraser (2009) pointed out that inclusive belonging promotes wellbeing in a teaching and learning context.

From our own experience as academics and from the experience of our colleagues, in addition to the sense of loss and isolation we all struggled to balance work and personal lives; the boundaries between these two worlds had now been blurred. Lecturers suddenly had to balance their personal lives with the changing demands of students. Many students had access only to inexpensive night-time data and began contacting lecturers after hours, which was previously uncommon. There were no longer consultation hours at institutions and lecturers

were overloaded with workshops and meetings that were meant to provide the necessary support and simultaneously ensure quality (Li et al., 2020). An additional burden was the call for no student to be left behind; this demanded many assessment opportunities, flexibility, and constant support for all students. Apart from the logistical and technical support lecturers suddenly needed, many had to seek professional psychological support to cope because of their sense of being overwhelmed (Wright, 2020).

Since wellbeing involves the psyche of a human being and could affect their overall survival in an alien world, it speaks to the core of being human and should therefore be treated with great care and consideration. First, no employee will be open to support or to any discussion of wellbeing if the context is not regarded as being a safe space. Therefore, mutual trust is the first requirement if quality is not to be compromised (Berinato, 2014). Second, it is important to understand the context of employees, who they are, and how their diverse individual contexts and circumstances differ. Resilience cannot be limited to how individuals cope in one specific circumstance; it needs to be flexible to include different contexts (Kiesler & Cummins, 2002).

Ojo et al. (2021), used the Conservation of Resources theory to outline how employees are likely to be impacted by stressful circumstances, what those circumstances could be, and how they could protect those resources. Resource loss (psychological stress and anxiety) is seen to be a critical component of stress compared to resource gain (family and friends' support, self-efficacy, and facilitating conditions). These influence resilience during stressful situations. The research of Oje et al. showed that employees cope better when resource loss, in this case that caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, is lower than resource gain. Similarly, Gibbs (2011) found that self-efficacy is very important in resilience but is subject to social and cultural influences that impact self-belief, attribution, and motivation.

Staff members bind an institution together. Lecturers are the backbone of the academic process, and they are only as strong as their weakest link. If staff members are not well, this filters through the students and permeates the institutional culture. Research in the field has shown that resilience is a skill that can be nurtured and enhanced through careful planning, collaborative efforts, and visible commitment from the institution (Li & Zehr, 2020). If adequate and appropriate support is not available, the institutional context becomes toxic and this filters through to colleagues, influencing their wellbeing and, consequently, their resilience, thus impacting the institutional culture and students' success.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that underpins this study is the theory of resilience theorised by Ungar (2005, 2008) who, in 2005, defined resilience in terms of the services and structures individuals receive to help them overcome adversities and help them plan their way towards resilient wellbeing. This definition was expanded in 2008 in Ungar's claim that in the context of significant adversity whether psychological, environmental or both, resilience refers also to the capacity of individuals to pave their way towards health-sustaining resources. These

include the opportunities to experience feelings of wellbeing and the capacity of the individual's family, community, and culture to provide these health resources and experiences in culturally meaningful ways (Ungar, 2008). Ungar (2013) emphasised that the features of both individuals and the environment lead to resilience. Research carried out by Ungar et al. (2007), identified seven tensions of resilience: access to material resources; relationships; identity; power; control; cultural adherence; and social justice and cohesion. They indicated that these tensions are prevalent in all societies, but individuals will resolve these tensions in culturally relevant ways. They suggest that each tension be treated independently and caution researchers to be aware that there is an interaction between and among the tensions and an interplay between context, culture, and each individual's strength as people pave their way through the tensions.

Ungar (2011) identified the four main principles of decentrality, complexity, atypicality, and cultural relativity. Decentrality is the ability of individuals to move the focus from themselves and to place a stronger focus on the environment. By decentring the individual, it becomes clear that, when someone is faced with adversity, the locus of change does not reside with the individual or environment alone but is, rather, the process by which environments provide resources for the individual. One needs to understand that Ungar is not suggesting that the individual has no role to play in resilience. Instead, the focus should first be on the nature of the social and physical ecology rather than on the interaction between environment and individual.

The second principle is complexity that emanates from prior efforts to identify simple relationships that result in resilience. Ungar (2011) indicated that the effort to simplify the notion of resilience has failed to take into account an individual's capacity to use opportunities, the capacity of the environment to stimulate growth, and the interactional patterns between the environment and the individual or changes across physical and social worlds; all this is necessary if we are to hold a holistic picture of resilience.

Atypicality, the third principle of Ungar's (2011) resilience theory refers to the openness to processes that work for individuals but that are not usually identified as resilience. He argues that context can change the usefulness of different protective processes. Therefore, there needs to be less emphasis on predetermined outcomes in judging the success of growth trajectories and more focus on understanding the functionality of behaviour.

Cultural relativity is the fourth principle. Ungar (2011) postulated that positive growth is embedded culturally and temporally (historically). Culture is defined as the everyday practices through which individuals clarify their shared values, beliefs, languages, and customs. Individuals need to negotiate programmes to ensure that they fit each culture's needs. Additionally, culture and contextual features change over time and interventions by institutions for their employees should account for these changes and consider how each environment supports growth.

We use Ungar's (2011) principles of resilience to explain the data for this study. We were interested in exploring how academics were resilient during Covid-19, considering that they

had to transition from a face-to-face work environment to an online one. Furthermore, there is a conceptual connection between Ungar's theory of resilience and the notion of wellbeing since experiencing a sense of wellbeing is a result of being resilient.

Research design

This study took place at the Education Faculty of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology. A qualitative approach located within an interpretivist paradigm was most suitable for a study of this nature since we sought to explore what academics' perceptions of online teaching were, the challenges they faced, and how resilient they were while teaching online during Covid-19 as aligned with Ungar's (2008) theory of resilience. Qualitative researchers choose research sites that provide diverse, interrelated data (Holliday, 2016), so this study was located in the Education Faculty's campuses in Mowbray and Wellington. Thirteen academics from these campuses participated in this study.

Sampling and participants

Purposive sampling was considered to be most appropriate, and the criterion was that participating academics had to be teaching in departments of the Faculty of Education. Ethical clearance was secured by the ethics committee of the faculty.¹ Each participant agreed to participate by signing a consent letter that ensured confidentiality and their anonymity and assured them that they could withdraw at any time. While thirteen participants participated in this study, data is drawn from only six since their responses were most appropriate to the research questions explored in this study. The academics lectured in Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase, and Further Education and Training. While we invited academics who teach in the Post Graduate Certificate in Education phase, none of them forwarded an intention to participate. Below is a table that outlines the demographics of the participants.

Participants' demographics

Table 1

The table below describes the participants, the phase they taught in and their gender

Participant	Phase teaching in	Gender
Participant 1	Foundation Phase	Female
Participant 2	Intermediate Phase	Female
Participant 3	Intermediate Phase	Female
Participant 4	Further Education and Training Phase	Female
Participant 5	Intermediate Phase	Male
Participant 6	Foundation Phase	Female

¹ Certificate number EFEC 4-4/2021

A focus group interview took place via Microsoft Teams, lasted for approximately 90 minutes, was recorded via Microsoft Teams, and was later transcribed. Using Microsoft Teams proved necessary since the health and wellness cluster of the institution advised that all data collection that required individuals making contact during Covid-19 should be done online.

This study was limited because it was based at only one higher education institution and involved a small number of participants so its findings should not be generalised across all higher education institutions in South Africa. Such limitations could guide future work on academics' resilience during a crisis. Conducting larger cross-context surveys to validate the findings of smaller studies such as this one would be useful.

Data analysis

Content analysis was used to analyse the data (see Creswell, 2012). The first author and three of the other authors analysed the data manually; they first organised and then categorised it into different codes and categories. The codes were later collapsed into three main themes. The themes are discussed in detail below. Data was analysed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2012) six-step recursive process. This included transcribing, reading and re-reading to become familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying, reviewing, and naming of themes, and writing up the research findings.

Presentation and analysis of findings

The interviews held with the participants revealed that they experienced many challenges in relation to teaching online during Covid-19. While these findings were important, they are not discussed in this paper since the focus here is on the resilience of participants during Covid-19. Thus, a discussion of the three themes of creativity through complexity, embracing challenge through resilience, and connecting with self follows.²

Creativity through complexity

P1 said,

What was valuable to me was the fact that I found my lectures to be much more creative because I did a Blackboard presentation. I usually started my lectures with some kind of, I don't want to say, like meditation, but something different, something that [was] not related to the content so much [like] a nice quote, and then I would talk to them about that a little bit and ask them how they were. So, I was more creative. I was able to think a little bit more out of the box. I learned a new way to [begin] a lecture that brought in some fun things that I don't know I would have done if I were on campus.

² These transcripts have been lightly edited.

P2 said,

And then from there on, I just learnt a lot from the webinars that we had. I could still use the PowerPoints that were given to me and . . . we started getting more creative, and [made] new PowerPoints and what I did, which was nice, . . . [was] place my YouTube videos on for them, and they could watch [these] in their time and when they had data, and I would place the notes on for them and then also afterwards the PowerPoints. And ja, . . . the impact on the teaching was positive because not a lot [had] changed. And now I have the first-years back on campus [and] I started doing [what I had done] during the lockdown . . . a little five-minute mindfulness exercise which I did [on] Tuesday with the first years. It's something that I learned while . . . I was online.

P3 explained,

But then, somewhere along the line, when I had to bring in a new kind of assessment, I taught the third-year students the basic things about the theme that I was doing. [I gave them] some more interesting articles that they could look up. And so I divided them into small groups and . . . I gave them . . . titles that they had to go and do research on. They had to report back, and then I sent out . . . a form of communication [like a] Google Forms sort of rubric, where they had to assess each other on their basic report back and [on] the PowerPoint voiceovers that they did, and what they've learnt, and what the new things were that they [had] learnt about the subject. And . . . they enjoyed [this]. So, this new way of doing it [brought] in new ways of assessment, new ways of learning for the students, and I start[ed] thinking about how . . . I [could] do it differently so that I [could] involve them more and that was . . . very successful . . . for me.

The above excerpts reveal how these academics enhanced their creativity through what they learned from the e-teaching support webinars offered by the university. In addition to using different types of technologies in order to engage with students during the learning process, they also had to think of creative ideas to strengthen assessment techniques during online teaching. The initiative to involve students more actively and afford them new ways of learning was also important, as P3 indicated. Her acknowledgement, "I had to start thinking about how I could do it differently" shows us that she was willing to be creative and innovative. While trying to be creative, she also ensured that she found new learning methods for her functional students. Runco and Jaeger (2012) have reminded us that creativity involves outcomes that are at the same time functional and innovative. The participants also showed how resilient they were in being creative during a complex situation. Ungar (2011) highlighted that resilience is the capacity of the individual to use opportunities while the capacity of the environment is to stimulate growth and stressed the importance of the interactional patterns between the environment and the individual.

Waghid (2021) argued that teaching and learning is an active process during which students are encouraged to engage meaningfully with the presented content. When students are thus

encouraged as were P3's students when she encouraged them to read, engage, and report back on journal articles related to the subject matter. This highlights how she views her students as active participants in the teaching and learning process rather than as passive recipients. Waghid warned that if teaching and learning are perceived in terms of teachers holding all the power and transmitting information to students, both have to perform in particular ways, with students being passive recipients. This brings us to Ungar's (2011) defining resilience as the need of individuals to exercise agency to navigate as many accessible resources as they can. These may be psychological resources like feelings of self-esteem as well as opportunities to display their talents to others.

Embracing challenge through resilience

The data revealed that academics demonstrated concern in relation to students' success and how they learnt. The following excerpt from P4 illustrates this.

I found that also that it's not so much the teaching approach that I use but also the learning styles of the students. Of course, if they have connectivity and [are] online, they can form a group [of] three [or] five and then there were some [for whom] I also allowed individual work. And then one . . . student touched me because she performed poorly in this particular assessment. When I asked her about it, she admitted that she could not work, she misses the classroom [and] the dynamics of being in a classroom with the other students. And . . . I talked to her . . . and it made me realise that ja, we can do what we can from our side of the screen but how the students receive it and perceive it on their side of the screen, is something different.

P4 went on to say,

I want to mention . . . that one of the challenges I had was not to alienate students . . . When I caught on two occasions, I caught out students copying from each other. So, I had to come down very hard on them, penalise them . . . and make them understand that even though tests are online, it doesn't mean that you need to share answers. It's not a group activity as such. So that was another challenge, and then. . . I got through to them, and they admitted that they'd done it, [and] they accepted the penalisation.

P2 added,

So, you cannot just ask them to name or list or compare. Now you give them a scenario, and they have to apply that knowledge in front of them. So, they find it difficult, and then the response in the chat from the centre for innovative educational technology was then we have to teach them differently, and we have to think about those things to teach them [and] how to apply their knowledge because they don't know [how]. And so, in the end, we will have students who think more critically, have more critical thinking, and apply their knowledge better, and . . . in the end, it would be better as we are learning. Still, I felt that I prepared them better because of this year.

P4 was more concerned about students' learning styles than her teaching approach. She allowed for flexibility for both group and individual work. Ungar (2011) highlighted how complexity arises from previous efforts to recognise simple relationships that lead to resilience. He also indicated that positive growth is culturally embedded, and that culture is understood as the everyday practices individuals make visible through shared values, beliefs, language, and customs. P4 also showed us how she negotiates the programme to ensure that this fits the student culture's needs. Waghid (2019) drew our attention to the fact that teaching and learning calls for teachers to provoke students to make sense of teaching and learning materials and entice students' potential for a credible teaching and learning experience in higher education.

While P1 was interested in how students learn and adapted her teaching accordingly, P2 and P4 both showed a genuine concern to not alienate students during teaching and learning. Additionally, P4 expressed concern for why students were not performing well in the assessment that she discussed. Her determination to connect with the students and to seek the reasons behind why they did not perform well shows us how much she values relationships. This also reveals how her interactions with the students helped her to realise the learning predicament with which they are faced in terms of how she as a lecturer is teaching and how the student perceives it. Waghid et al. (2021) postulated that critical moments can arise during teaching and learning. It is often misunderstood that online discussions fail to engage students and teachers compared to face-to-face engagements during teaching and learning. Waghid (2021) aptly stated that online teaching and learning platforms create opportunities for teachers and students to engage meaningfully in a deliberative manner.

Connecting with self

The academics in this study reported on how connecting with the self ensured their wellbeing and contributed to their resilience, as the following excerpts reveal. P1 said,

I would make [myself] a lovely bubble bath, for instance, and light candles and lie in the bath at the end of the day, but that's one example. Or I would take a break and go outside with my cup of tea and just sit there and leave my phone in the house and just gather myself and become more aware of my presence . . . where I was sitting.

P5 explained,

I think being resilient, you know, bouncing back better than before, [means that you try to find ways within yourself to cope and to say you know what, you're a human being, you're a lecturer, you work here [and] there are so many issues that you are not able to fix. You can only do so much, and I think you look for ways to relax mentally and physically. So, it was a case of exercising like my colleague said and doing affirmations, listening to music, and just doing things that boost you or work you up again to [be able to] say, now I'm ready to look at emails again.

For P6,

I always like to empower myself when facing difficulties in life. So, I found that empowering myself to become BlackBoard-savvy was a very big boost for my self-confidence on the one hand, so I enjoyed that, and I learnt more [about] it on Google and so on. And then on the [other] soft side . . . my granddaughter was born [at] the end of June, so I still have the privilege of coming to visit them once a week and just playing with the baby, and that's very good for my soul.

P4 added,

I draw deep from my faith as a Christian, and that helped me last year and at any given time when I find myself in a situation or a period where my resilience is tested.

P5 said,

So, I also made it my duty that you switch your laptop on at the end of the day at a certain time. You switch it off at a certain time, and you now stop looking at WhatsApp messages and then [you] do some physical work to take care of your own personal, social wellbeing, so you do not go crazy.

P1 advised,

Take small breaks, otherwise, it [gets] boring in a way for me. There was the sense of boredom even though [I was] busy preparing interesting lectures or making it interesting [but] to sit and not interact with other people [was hard] because I had to like work with that and ja [deal] also [with] that sense of loneliness. It's a funny feeling; I can't really describe it, but it was ja, just a disassociation in a way from everyone, and so I had to practice a lot of self-care, really radical self-care to get there every day.

Connecting with self is an important contributor to an individual's wellbeing. When teachers and academics feel physically and emotionally well, this contributes to their wellbeing and impacts students' wellbeing. Roffey (2021) warned us that when individuals feel valued and cared for, this determines their wellbeing. A key finding in this study showed how the participants connected with themselves to optimise their wellbeing. This was done through exercising, having a bubble bath, taking small breaks, and listening to music. P4 also related how she spent time with her granddaughter, which was good for her soul. The pivotal need to connect with the self was highlighted by a participant when she indicated how she had to practice "radical self-care to get there every day." This was indicative of self-care's role in determining their functionality through the day.

Participants needed to access their resources to stimulate their wellbeing (Ojo, et al., 2021). Participants found ways to be resilient and adapt to adverse conditions (see Caniëls & Baaten, 2018). While the above findings reveal how participants used their resources to be resilient, the study also found that the university did not provide enough resources for the academics to be resilient, as the following excerpt from P3 highlights.

I don't think that the university made enough effort to have a 'no lecturer will be left behind' approach. I don't think that they worked very much on our support. Maybe that, as we've said before, BlackBoard and the e-Learning Centre did provide as much support as they could, and they were great, but I don't think in terms of resilience the university assisted very much. I think we were all sort of left to be resilient by ourselves, and like I've said earlier, sink or swim. We all decided that we were going to swim, and we made it through regardless of [receiving] support from the university or not.

When Covid-19 struck, the university placed a huge emphasis on ensuring that no student should be left behind. This was ensured through making free data and laptops available to students who did not have them. Each faculty also had a student counsellor for students to contact should they require psychological support. While the university aimed to support students during Covid-19, the university did not offer academics adequate support in relation to resilience and wellness as illustrated in the above extract. Academics faced heightened anxiety during the lockdown that resulted from several factors. For example, some academics with young children had to juggle childcare with work responsibilities. The psychological effects of enforced solitude were extremely important, and this may have been detrimental to academics' emotional and mental wellbeing, especially for those living alone without a partner or family.

It is also important to note that while academics might be able to use resources such as family, friends, and self-efficacy (Ojo et al. (2021), the question of what facilitating conditions could have been provided to support the academics in this study emotionally and mentally during Covid-19 was not well considered. Ungar (2011) confirmed the importance of the environment and proposed a social-ecological understanding of resilience (2013). He stated that resilience is a function of the environment's capacity to facilitate growth rather than a result of individual genetic differences during childhood and adolescence. Considering that academics were not supported to be resilient, it is therefore imperative that institutions engage with understandings of resilience and its vital importance during times of crisis.

Discussion and conclusion

This study aimed to explore the resilience of academics at a higher education institution during Covid-19. Online teaching and learning can be conceived of as a creative and engaging enterprise, as the findings of this study reveal. Universities can, however, play a bigger role in ensuring that academics can teach more creatively with online support, ideas, and tools to ignite academics' resilience and creativity further. Teaching creatively during complex situations and teaching creatively online can be promoted on shared platforms during staff development programmes. This will provide staff with ideas about how to teach creatively and give them the confidence and motivation to use such creative ideas in online teaching.

Our study revealed how academics were very determined to connect with students and strongly considered their learning styles rather than focusing on their previous teaching approaches. As a result, they allowed for flexible student engagements, ranging from individual to group work. The pivotal issue is that academics did not want to alienate students even though they found students cheating at times. There was a strong need from academics to ensure that they teach students critically by encouraging them to apply their knowledge and steer away from simplistic ways of answering such as naming, listing, and comparing. Although some simplistic ways of answering are required, more complex questioning calls for critical thinking, as the academics in this study highlighted.

These findings call for universities to support academics in adopting a positive approach to teaching online and viewing online teaching and learning as an opportunity rather than a risk. Additionally, universities should further support academics to engage deeply with students. This deeper engagement will strengthen academics' approaches to working more closely with students and encourage them to enjoy the online teaching experience. It is also important that academics share their teaching experiences with other academics since this will allow for opportunities to learn from one another.

Finally, an important finding from the study is that academics used their personal resources such as family, friends, and partaking in activities that strengthen wellbeing and promote resilience, such as having a bubble bath, taking small breaks, and listening to music. Resilience can also be considered an important resource, and the findings revealed that academics used resilience in this way. The study also showed that the institution did not provide adequate resources for academics to acquire resilience or strengthen ways of being more resilient.

Universities need to engage with the social and physical ecology by providing support and resources for academics to be resilient. This type of support is essential to academics and all other staff, especially during crises. While the university in this study emphasised the "no student left behind" mantra to ensure that each student completed the academic year successfully, it also needed to consider placing equal importance on the wellbeing of staff members and could have developed a "no lecturer left behind" slogan and programme as well.

The dominant nature of the hierarchical university management structures must also be seen as part of a social-ecological environment that needs to be changed if the institution means to value academics' wellbeing during crises. Top management must move towards closer engagement with staff members. Close and strong interactional leadership from top management is vital during crises. This kind of leadership can promote a sense of self-worth and the recognition of being valued in the workplace.

Finally, the recommendations from this study will also lead us, as curriculum officers, to design an e-teaching support programme that can be developed together with the participants in this study. This e-teaching support programme will be highly informative for academics during crises and will enhance their resilience in relation to online teaching.

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