

Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times

Special Edition: A collection of papers from
the Revitalising Universities in
(Post-)COVID Times Symposium held at
University of Tokyo 2022

Guest Editor: Naomi Berman



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REVITALISING UNIVERSITIES IN (POST-)COVID TIMES
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ABOUT THE e-JOURNAL

The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.

Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.

UNESCO OBSERVATORY MULTI DISCIPLINARY eJOURNAL IN THE ARTS

REVITALISING UNIVERSITIES IN (POST-)COVID TIMES
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INTRODUCTION This special Issue presents a selection of papers presented at the Revitalising Universities in (Post-)COVID Times Symposium, held at the University of Tokyo, November 2022. This hybrid event gathered academics, educators, and experts from Australia, Japan and other regions to discuss the future of higher education as universities navigate pathways out of the pandemic. The experience of the pandemic may vary between countries based on cultures, expectations, and social organisation, therefore exploring a diversity of experiences and expectations as universities reopen offers a fruitful point of differentiation and comparison between globally diverse educational spaces.

Echoing Connell's original call to rethink the 'good university', COVID has thrown into question taken-for-granted notions about the position of universities, forcing a reframing of understandings around their social purpose. The pivot to online during the pandemic has highlighted the potential for digital technology to transform the way we teach and learn. Yet it has also become clear that such transformation does not come without its social, economic and wellbeing costs. Indeed, questions around whether the response measures introduced by universities across the globe early in the pandemic are still valid and viable need to be asked, as institutions decide what gets kept, thrown away, amplified, or diminished. The symposium provided a space for reflection on these questions as well as broader philosophical and theoretical deliberations on the 'good university'.

Naomi Berman
Guest Editor

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 AND LOCKDOWN ON STUDENTS' LIVED REALITIES AT A SOUTH AFRICAN UNIVERSITY: ADOPTING A PEDAGOGY OF HOPE TO REALISE THE SOCIAL PURPOSE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has unmistakably changed how learning and teaching should be conceptualised, conducted and executed globally. Global lockdowns resulted in a move from traditional face-to-face and contact learning to online and remote learning. This paper addresses three questions: (i) What was the impact of Covid-19 and the national lockdown on the students? (ii) What did we learn from the impact on the students? (iii) How can we use the lessons learnt to become inclusive and socially responsive institutions of higher learning?

A group of first-year students at a historically Black university in South Africa in 2020 was asked to reflect on the impact of COVID-19 and the lockdown on their studies. Permission from the students was obtained to share their stories and experiences. Following Kuh et al. (2005), we argue that focusing on student engagement and Freire's (2005, 2014) Pedagogy of Hope could assist universities to realise the social purpose of higher education in a post-Covid-19 dispensation. Freire challenged us to transform oppressive conditions and expand possibilities for social justice, by becoming change agents in rethinking and reshaping higher education's future.

KEYWORDS

First-year students, university, learning, Covid-19, impact, Pedagogy of Hope

INTRODUCTION

Not only was the African continent victim to colonial invasion and slavery, which deprived the Africans of their freedom and prosperity, but these actions also resulted in poverty, illiteracy and a largely unskilled Black workforce. South Africa, one of the countries in the Sub-Saharan region of the African continent, is considered the world's most unequal society due to colonialism and apartheid governance (World Bank 2018). Colonialism and the apartheid ideology followed by the previous government in South Africa resulted in violating fundamental human rights and severe discrimination against the Black South African population (that is, the African, Coloured and Indian races) until 1993.

The apartheid government privileged the white population. It oppressed the Black population even though the white population was in the minority (8%) and the black population in the majority (91%) (Ministry of Finance 2001). Access to education was a right for whites but not for blacks. The result was that only 12% of the Black inhabitants completed high school, compared to 39% of the white inhabitants. Moreover, the whites had the best jobs, lived in the best areas, and were cared for in the best possible way. On the other hand, the Blacks received the least of everything, lived on the outskirts of towns and cities, and had low-paying jobs confined to factory, domestic, and farm work (Hlatshwayo 2000). Thus, most Black people were poverty-stricken and unskilled (Liebenberg 2014; Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development 2008).

In addition, not only was the majority of the Black population poor, but 24% of the adults were illiterate, compared to 0.3% of the White population (Ministry of Finance 2001). Hence, White parents could provide academic support to their children at school and university, but many black parents could not do so. Similarly, White children grew up with storybooks and other reading material in their homes that assisted in developing their reading and literacy skills from a young age. This, however, was not the case for most Black families. The availability of sufficient food and money for living expenses was already an uphill battle for most Black households; there was no money to

buy storybooks or newspapers to expose the children to reading material and, in so doing, instil a reading culture in them (Pretorius & Klapwijk 2016). Also, Black children were subjected to a schooling system challenged by inadequate infrastructure and resources, unqualified educators, huge pupil-educator ratios and biased curricula that left them disadvantaged and underprepared for post-school education (Department of Education 2005; Kros 2002). It is no wonder that the Black student cohorts experience multiple challenges to learning and, as a result, have high failure and dropout rates at higher education institutions nationally (Council on Higher Education 2013, 2016; Letseka 2014).

Within the above context, this paper reports on the impact of Covid-19 and the national lockdown on students' lived realities at a historically black university in South Africa. We proceed by contextualising education in South Africa. After that, we discuss the impact of Covid-19 and the national lockdown, and the paper's theoretical underpinnings. The methods section is presented next, followed by the results and a detailed discussion thereof. We conclude the paper by identifying the findings and proposing recommendations for the higher education community based on Freire's Pedagogy of Hope.

CONTEXTUALISING EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA PRE-1994

The primary cause of inequality in South Africa is linked to educational systems and practices. Jansen (1990: 195-196) states that the history of education in South Africa can be categorised into five key phases, "Traditional, Slave, Mission, Native and Bantu education".

Traditional education referred to local tribal chiefs and elders who transmitted information verbally to the members of a particular community during the sixteen century (Mwiria 1991). The day-to-day experiences formed the basis for communicating in the communities' mother-tongue languages. The communication included the communities' culture, customs, values, norms and standards (Lekgoathi 2006).

Slave education was introduced by the Dutch to the Cape, colonising South Africa in the mid-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Molteno 1984).

The natural-born inhabitants of South Africa were marginalised regarding socio-economic living conditions and their political and educational rights. Slave education was based on Westernised Christian religious instruction to indoctrinate, inculcate and cultivate a submissive slave mentality (Molteno 1984).

Mission education was established in South Africa by various Christian missionary organisations and the Glasgow Mission Society during the mid-1700s (Molteno 1984). The Glasgow Mission Society was key in establishing the former Lovedale Seminary in the Natal Province in 1834. A liberal arts curriculum characterised this education period within South Africa from a more secular perspective to allow girls access to education in 1805 (Cross 1986). By the 1850s, pupils at the missionary schools were trained and equipped with practical skills mainly for domestic manual labour purposes, for example, in households, mining and farming, which were low-ranked occupations (Cross 1986).

In addition, the split between rural and urban education was also notable during this period. Rural communities held onto the conservative Christian teachings through the various missionary churches, whereas the urban communities were more open and welcoming to a more industrialised and secularised education (Cross 1986; Jansen 1990). This more progressive secularised form of education later became contested by the apartheid government in 1948 as it was viewed to be offering the blacks more instruction than needed for low-ranking vacancies within society (Cross 1986).

Native education began in the 1920s after South Africa became a Union in 1910 (Plaatje 1982). During this period, black schools were gradually and systematically dismantled as the country's first state-mandate of segregated policy and curriculum was introduced. The minimal liberal education blacks received from the British Christian missionaries and related organisations during the slave education period was steadily rejected and ruled out (Plaatje 1982). The White leadership at the helm in the 1910s argued that it

was 'senseless' to educate a black person if they were not going to use the education received (Jansen 1990). It was envisioned that Black people's sole purpose was to serve the White minority's greed and need (Molteno 1984). Hence, White learners received a much superior quality of education than Black learners in South Africa (Molteno 1984).

Bantu education was introduced in black schools by 1953 when the National Party apartheid's government came into power in 1948 (Horrell 1964). This system came into being after the Eiselen Commission on Native Education was established in 1949 to investigate curriculum change within the education system of South Africa at the time (Horrel 1964). Consequently, the Bantu Education Act of 1953 was established. The Act also saw the elevation of Afrikaans as the Nationalist Party government's preferred language, which automatically subjected English to a more inferior language of the state at the time (Mamdani 1996). The Christian National Education Act of 1962 for White South Africans followed, then the Education for Coloured People's Act of 1965 and the Education for Indian Act of 1969. Schools' locations were racially defined and could only accommodate a specific race (Hlatshwayo 2000). Racial segregation meant blacks were being schooled for domesticity and inferior societal positions. The White population had access to education that allowed them to be professionals and partake in the labour market (Carrim 1998).

The same apartheid laws and rules were applied to higher education institutions (Chetty 2010). The introduction of the University Education Act of 1959 promoted the Bantu Self Government Act, which governed black (African, Coloured and Indian) higher education institutions (Council on Higher Education 2010). The segregation of different languages proceeded with establishing an institution for the coloured group at the end of 1959, which became the University College of the Western Cape in 1960, followed by the opening of the University College of Durban-Westville for the Indian racial group. Towards 1970, technikons were also established to serve a specific purpose (Bunting 1999; Council on Higher Education 2001). The White population had ten universities and seven technikons, the Coloured and Indian people had one university and one technikon, respectively, and the African population had five universities and five technikons (Cooper 2015).

The White universities and technikons received the most funding. They were also privately funded, while the Black universities and technikons, similar to the Black schools, received very little funding and support from the apartheid's government (Bunting 1999). The division of White vs Black higher education institutions resulted in the terms 'historically White universities' (HWUs) and 'historically Black universities' (HBUs) (Cooper 2015).

EDUCATION IN A POST-APARTHEID DISPENSATION

In 1994, the democratic government inherited racially divided departments that had to be restructured. The first task towards educational reconstruction was to dismantle apartheid's created structures and practices by creating a unified education system and a more equitable financing system and establishing a policy framework with inherited values (Department of Education 2001). The democratic government proceeded with educational reforms and drafted the constitution. The interim Republic of South African Constitution (1993) made provisions for establishing a national department and nine provincial education departments. Education administration was no longer determined by race, but by geographical differentiation (Department of Education 2001).

Formal education was categorised into three bands. The General Education and Training (GET) band incorporates a reception year, learners up to Grade 9 and an equivalent adult essential educational qualification. The Further Education and Training (FET) band comprises Grades 10-12 in school education, out-of-school youth, and adult learners. Technical, youth, community colleges, and other industry-based and non-formal providers also fall into the FET band. The Higher Education band incorporates a range of national diplomas, certificates and degrees (Department of Education 1995). The three divisions were integrated within a National Qualifications Framework (NQF) provided by the South African Qualification Authority Act (Department of Education 1995).

The establishment of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 laid the foundation for the improvement of education quality, raising awareness among the teachers in public schools in terms of their employment, restoration of governing bodies and learner's representation councils, restoration of

discipline, and ensuring access to all public schools for learners (Legodi 2001). In addition, a quintile system was introduced in public schools in South Africa to address the low socio-economic status of the majority of the Black population. Quintiles 1 to 3 schools are no fee-paying schools, while quintiles 4 and 5 are fee-paying (Department of Basic Education 2011).

According to Chetty (2010), it became more critical to drive the transformation reforms in the higher education sector to undo the damage done by apartheid. The National Commission on Higher Education (1996) envisages a transformed higher education sector with increased access and participation for the Black population to address equity and marginalisation. The National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) was introduced in 1999 to address the Black population's lack of finances for post-school education (Department of Higher Education and Training 2013).

The minister of education appointed a commission to investigate the state of higher education provision in South Africa (Council on Higher Education 2010). The commission recommended that the higher education sector must be able to increase participation to address equity; it must respond to societal challenges to change the apartheid's legacy; and finally, higher education should increase partnerships with other sectors (Chetty 2010).

The year 2022 marks 28 years of democracy in South Africa, where the democratic government attempted to transform education provision in South Africa. However, challenges remain within the public schooling system and at public higher education institutions in South Africa because of colonialism and apartheid. In the public schooling system, the challenges range from learners' lack of literacy and numeracy skills, a language barrier, learner absenteeism, overcrowded classrooms, high dropout rates, the National Senior Certificate (NSC) bachelor's pass rate, and learners' under-preparedness (Spaull & Kotze 2015; Department of Basic Education 2010). There are also challenges relating to the teachers, such as a lack of qualified teachers, teachers' absenteeism and professional development challenges (Legotlo 2014; Mashau, Mutshaeni & Kone 2017). Curriculum changes and implementations, schools' infrastructure and a lack of resources and technology integration, inequalities in school

funding, and the increase of dysfunctional schools are further challenges in the South African public schooling system (Department of Basic Education 2019; United Nations Children's Fund South Africa 2018).

Challenges in public higher education institutions ranged from under-prepared students, learning in a second or additional language, the transition from school to university, students not having the financial means to provide for their daily basic needs (for example, transport and food), not having cultural capital (being the first in the family to study further), a lack of parental involvement, not having adequate accommodation, and social and environmental challenges (alcohol and drug abuse, gangsterism, taverns and noise level in the communities, and crime) (Chutel & Kopf 2018; Leibowitz & Bozalek 2014).

Within the above context, in 2015, 16% of African students and 15% of Coloured students who completed their public schooling in South Africa arrived at tertiary institutions (Council on Higher Education 2017). The national statistics on students' pass and failure rates in higher education reflect that 15 to 20% of the student cohort of 16% who are in higher education complete their degree programmes in regular time, 30% take 5 to 8 years to complete their degree programmes, while the remaining 50% dropout during the course of their studies (Council on Higher Education, 2013, 2016). Therefore, the biggest challenge in higher education in South Africa is to find enabling factors that would assist in retaining Black student cohorts and helping them succeed in their respective study programmes.

COVID-19 AND THE NATIONAL LOCKDOWN

The 2020 academic year started as usual, with the intake of new first-year student cohorts and senior students returning to the universities. Lectures and tutorials commenced in February 2020, and the academic project was underway. During this time, news spread globally about a new and highly infectious virus called Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), causing a disease called COVID-19 with high mortality rates (World Health Organization 2020). The coronavirus 2's rapid spread resulted in a national lockdown enforced on the 26th of March 2020, which continued

for the rest of the 2020 calendar year in South Africa (Ramaphosa 2020). The lockdown regulations have impacted South Africa on many different levels with devastated effects on its citizens. Many businesses could not function, which resulted in thousands of people losing their jobs. The informal food sector was closed, and people's movement to acquire food was restricted, which worsened the hunger crisis (Hanisch, Malvido, Mewes, Reigl, Hanssman & Paganini 2021). The Sustainability Development Goals Report (2021) noted that an additional 119 – 124 million people worldwide became part of the extreme poverty bracket due to the lockdowns (United Nations 2021). Hence, COVID-19 and the global lockdowns have increased the number of people globally who experienced hunger and extreme poverty.

In addition, the prolonged lockdown did further damage. It increased the already high unemployment rate in South Africa as many workers were laid off. Small businesses had to close their businesses because they could not sustain themselves without regular income. The Institute for Economic Justice (2020) reported that the expanded unemployment rate for the second quarter of 2020 was 43.2%. Non-essential services were forced to close temporarily, while workers were requested to take leave and, sometimes, unpaid leave (Institute for Economic Justice 2020). The NIDS-CRAM survey estimated that between February and April 2020, close to 3 million jobs were lost (Institute for Economic Justice 2020). Similarly, Statistics South Africa (2020) noted that 2,2 million people in South Africa lost their jobs in the second quarter of 2020. These statistics illustrate the severity of the consequences of the lockdown and why poverty and hunger in households escalated to the extent they did. What was clear to everyone, nationally, regionally and globally, was that COVID-19 elevated the inequalities within societies between the rich and the poor, and those who have and those who don't (National Institute for Communicable Diseases 2021; The World Health Statistics Report 2021; Valodia 2021).

The national lockdown meant face-to-face and contact learning and teaching could not continue. Higher education institutions had to move to online learning and teaching using technology and smart devices. It also meant that students staying in university residences and private accommodations had to return home and be provided with laptops and data to continue their studies.

Moreover, being home meant that the students had to deal with family members contracting the COVID-19 virus, parents and other family members being retrenched with no other income, and living in home circumstances and communities that were not conducive to learning. Based on the context described, the paper attempts to answer three questions: (i) *What were the impact of COVID-19 and the national lockdown on the students?* (ii) *What did we learn from the impact on the students?* (iii) *How can we use the lessons learnt to become inclusive and socially responsive institutions of higher learning?*

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

We use Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt and Associates' (2005) five benchmarks for effective educational practice for student engagement and Paulo Freire's (2014) Pedagogy of Hope as the paper's theoretical framework. Kuh et al. (2005) conducted research on student engagement among higher education institutions in the United States based on the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). They argue that student engagement consists of two key factors. The first has to do with how much students put into their academic work and activities to achieve academic success, while the second is about how and what institutions do to motivate and encourage students to actively participate in and benefit from what is offered to them. Based on the findings of the NSSE, Kuh et al. (2005) suggest that higher education institutions can use the five benchmarks for effective educational practices as a guide to assess and improve their students' retention and success rates. The five benchmarks are:

1. **Level of academic challenge** focuses on whether students find their academic work intellectually challenging and creative since this is regarded as central to student learning and quality.
2. **Active and collaborative** learning is based on the premise that students learn more when they are intensely involved in their education and are required to reflect on their learning.
3. **Student-staff interaction** (student-faculty interaction) asserts that by interacting with staff members inside and outside the classroom, students learn how experts think first-hand and how to solve practical problems.

4. **Enriching educational experience** focuses on the number of complementary learning opportunities students participate in that augment their academic programmes.
5. **Supportive campus environment** asks students about how they experience the campus environment and the quality of their relationships with other students (Kuh et al. 2005:11-13).

Freire's (2014) *Pedagogy of Hope* was in response to his earlier work published in 1970, titled *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire argued against the banking model of education, which was about teacher-centred education, where the teacher holds the knowledge that should be transmitted to the learners who passively receive the knowledge. He argues that learning and constructing new knowledge should be a reciprocal process where the teachers and learners learn from each other and become co-creators in the learning and teaching process (Freire 2005; 2014). He advances three important interrelated learning principles: critical consciousness, dialogue and reflection, and problem-posing. Critical consciousness involves becoming aware of contradictions and an understanding that contradictions should be viewed as challenges that can be overcome through dialogue and critical reflection. He suggests that educators should be opened-minded so that they can 'open up to the thinking of others' and work collaboratively with others, including students.

Freire's proposal of problem-posing instead of problem-solving directs us to develop our thinking ability to reflect critically on how we exist in the world to realise that the world is not 'a static reality but a reality in the process of transformation'. He urges us to become transformers in a world that normalised oppressive conditions so we can move to social justice through critical thought, dialogue and reflection (Freire 2005, 2014).

Lastly, Freire (2005, 2014) challenged us to transform oppressive conditions and expand possibilities for social justice by starting to effect change within ourselves as educators and academics, and in how we relate and build knowledge with each other and our students. He uses the concept of 'ourselves' in a collective sense because he views the 'selves' 'as unfinished beings who cannot be without others'. Hence, the change should be about how we relate and build knowledge with others instead of 'about others' (Freire 2005; 2014).

We argue that Freire's (2005, 2014) three interrelated principles of critical consciousness, dialogue and reflection, and problem-posing can assist the management and staff at institutions of higher learning to achieve the five benchmarks for effective educational practices as proposed by Kuh et al. (2005). A willingness to be opened-minded and allowing the students to be co-creators of knowledge through dialogue, critical reflection and problem-posing will raise the level of academic challenge for the students, they would be actively engaging with lecturers and their peers, which should happen both inside and outside of the lecture halls, and in so doing, would stimulate and provide a conducive and enriching learning experience for the students, and a supportive campus environment.

Based on Freire's three principles, we asked our first-year students at the end of the first semester of 2020 to critically reflect on what the impact of COVID-19 and the national lockdowns were on their studies, and what the different role players could do to support them and create a conducive learning environment so that they could be retained and succeed in their respective degree programmes.

METHODS

The questions this paper attempts to answer are qualitative in nature, which places the content and context of this paper in a qualitative research paradigm. Babbie and Mouton (2007), Creswell (2014) and Yin (2015) explain that a qualitative research paradigm provides a lens to describe, analyse and interpret human behaviour from their personal contexts and situations within their natural settings. They further state that an essential characteristic of qualitative research is its attempt to view the world through the eyes of the participants themselves. Our intention with this paper is to discuss and interpret the students' responses through their eyes so that we can learn from them, which is what Freire's Pedagogy of Hope advocates – students should be equal partners in the learning process and be encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning.

The student data used in this paper was collected at a historically Black university in the Western Cape Province of South Africa. As was discussed in the section where we contextualised education in South Africa before 1994, historically Black universities were established during the apartheid's governance for specific racial groups. However, this university resisted the separation ideology and opened its door to all the racial groups in South Africa. In addition, the university also admitted and is admitting students from working-class and poorer communities (Council on Higher Education 2010).

The student cohort consisted of 398 first-year students registered for an academic literacy module in the university's business faculty during the 2020 academic year. Because of COVID-19 and the national lockdown, these students, similar to all the other students, had to vacate the university's residences and their private accommodations and return home to their families and communities. We wanted to know their experiences and how they were coping with their studies under those stressful and unusual circumstances. Thus, their selection was convenient due to their accessibility and proximity (Silverman 2016).

In the two main assessment tasks of the module, the term test and the examination at the end of the first semester, we asked them to reflect on the impact of COVID-19 and the national lockdown on their studies. We also asked them to make suggestions on what they could do, what their households could do, what their communities could do, and what we, as lecturers, could do to support them. The students' explanations and suggestions provided rich data. We asked their permission to share their stories with the rest of the faculty and in our presentations at seminars and conferences.

RESULTS

The students' explanations and suggestions were qualitative in nature and hence, were analysed through content analysis using a three stage open-coding process. Creswell (2014) explains that an open coding process forms part of qualitative analysis and is effective because it assists in the pattern-matching process and identifying themes and sub-themes.

A general reading through their essays was done, and similar responses were grouped together to reduce the data. This was open-coding stage 1. In open-coding stage 2, the data were grouped into five broad themes based on the instructions of the essays, which were (i) what their experiences were; (ii) what they did to help themselves; (iii) what their households could do; (iv) what their communities could do; and (v) what their lecturers could do to assist them. The data were further divided into sub-themes in open-coding stage 3. These are summarised below.

THEME 1: THE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19 AND THE NATIONAL LOCKDOWN

Eight sub-themes were identified.

Sub-theme 1: Living under poor conditions

Twenty percent of the students explained that they were living under poor conditions (not in a brick house and not having basic sanitation and water in their homes).

Sub-theme 2: Not having a conducive home environment to learn and do their work

Sixty percent of the students explained that they did not have their own bedroom or a quiet place to study in their homes. They were at the mercy of their households and could only do their academic work late at night when everyone was asleep.

Sub-theme 3: Noise level due to living close to taverns in the townships

Twenty-five percent of the students described the noise levels in the community due to living near taverns and house shops.

Sub-theme 4: Not having the infrastructure for internet connectivity

Twenty-three percent of the students explained that they could not do their academic work online because they lived in rural areas without internet infrastructure.

Sub-theme 5: Feeling lonely and a sense of helplessness

Seventy percent of the students expressed loneliness and felt isolated or helpless because they were worried about contracting the virus, the uncertainty of the lockdown and the fact that their lives were disrupted and restricted.

Sub-theme 6: Having to juggle chores and study simultaneously

Eighty percent of the students reported that they had to do household chores during the day and sometimes had to look after their siblings, which meant that they could only do their academic work at night.

Sub-theme 7: Having to deal with family members who were infected with COVID-19

Thirty-eight percent of the students reported that they had to deal with family members who were infected by the virus, and fifteen percent had to deal with the death of a family member due to COVID-19.

Sub-theme 8: Not being familiar with technology and online learning

Fifty-eight percent of the students wrote that they were unfamiliar with technology and struggled with online learning and teaching as they needed training and assistance to navigate the online learning environment.

THEME 2: WHAT DID THEY DO TO HELP THEMSELVES

Six sub-themes were also identified.

Sub-theme 1: Remain focused and kept the end goal in mind

Seventy percent of the students said they should remain focused on their studies and keep the end goal in mind - to successfully complete their studies.

Sub-theme 2: Ask for help from CSSS

Forty percent of the students suggested asking for help from the Centre for Student Support Services (CSSS) (CSSS offer free counselling and support services).

Sub-theme 3: Self-study and engage in discussion forums with peers and lecturers

Fifty-six percent of the students indicated that they should self-study and engage in discussion forums with their peers and lecturers to stay connected and not feel lonely.

Sub-theme 4: Use the WhatsApp platform to engage with lecturers, tutors and peers

Sixty percent of the students suggested using the WhatsApp platform to engage with their lecturers, tutors and peers.

Sub-theme 5: Get earphones to block out the noise

The students who reported the noise level suggested using earphones to block it so they could concentrate on their academic work.

Sub-theme 6: Ask to be allowed back to the residences on campus

The students who reported living in poor conditions suggested that the university should allow them to come back and provide on-campus accommodation to them despite the lockdown regulations.

THEME 3: WHAT COULD THEIR HOUSEHOLDS DO TO ASSIST THEM

Three sub-themes were identified.

Sub-theme 1: Parents should be flexible and support them

Ninety percent of the students suggested that their parents should be flexible and understand that they were studying, so they should not give them so many chores but rather support them so that they can concentrate on their academic work.

Sub-theme 2: Parents could use the money saved from not buying alcohol to buy data and laptops for their children

Twenty-five percent of the students suggested their parents could use the money saved from not buying alcohol to buying data and laptops for them.

Sub-theme 3: Parents and siblings could go to bed at a certain time so that the house is quiet to do their academic work

The students who reported that they did not have a quiet space to do their academic work suggested that their families could go to bed at a specific time at night so that the house would be quiet and they could do their academic work.

THEME 4: WHAT COULD THEIR COMMUNITIES DO TO ASSIST THEM

Two sub-themes were identified.

Sub-theme 1: The community members could lower the noise levels and support them

The twenty-five percent of the students who reported the noise suggested that their community members should show their support by lowering the noise levels so that they could concentrate on their academic work.

Sub-theme 2: The communities should ask the government to re-open the local libraries

Fifty-five percent of the students suggested their communities should ask the government to re-open the local libraries so that they could do their academic work at the library. Some of the students indicated that a rotating schedule could be used so that all the students in the community get a chance to work and study in the libraries as there is WIFI and the libraries are also quiet and peaceful.

THEME 5: WHAT LECTURERS COULD DO TO ASSIST THEM

Four sub-themes were identified.

Sub-theme 1: Lecturers should care about students and motivate and support them

All the students suggested that the lecturers should care about them and motivate and support them on an ongoing basis so that they could remain focused on their studies.

Sub-theme 2: Lecturers should know their students' backgrounds and be patient

Sixty-four percent of the students suggested that the lecturers should get to know their backgrounds and be patient with them. They explained that some lecturers think students are lazy when they do not submit assignments on time, which, in most cases, is not true. The circumstances and challenges they faced prevented them from adhering to due dates.

Sub-theme 3: Examination times should be set later and not in the mornings

Forty-two percent of the students suggested that lecturers should set the examination starting time later in the day and not at 09:00 am because of needing a quiet space to write the examination.

Sub-theme 4: The universities should liaise with public clinics and libraries to open early and allow the students to use the facilities for their academic work

Forty-six percent of the students suggested that the university should liaise with public clinics and libraries to open early and allow the students to use the facilities for their academic work (that is, to sit and do their work and use the free WIFI).

DISCUSSION

As discussed in the fourth section about the impact of COVID-19 and the national lockdown, all the students returned home, and the mode of learning and teaching was changed from contact to online. Thus, the students needed a laptop or other smart device and access to data or WIFI to log on to the online student learning system to continue their studies. They also needed to be familiarised with technology and the online learning platform. That was the first requirement. Online tutorials on how to navigate the student learning system were provided, and data. Laptops were also provided and had to be delivered to the students' home addresses. This process took longer as the students had to verify their home addresses. The university had to secure a vendor to deliver the laptops to their home addresses or the closest point where the students could collect them. Sub-themes 1 and 4 under the first theme speak to this matter. The students explained:

We live in a shack with no electricity or running water.

I am from a rural area, we do not have internet connectivity.

Most students are unfortunately living under poor conditions where their parents live way below the poverty line.

The quotes reflect the students' lived realities. When students do not have a proper house and no internet infrastructure, they cannot connect to log on to their online lectures and tutorials or access the study material and work they need to do and submit. Similarly, if students live in rural areas, it would be difficult to reach them and deliver their laptops, which means that they will not have a device and no internet to connect to even if they received data from the university. Rural students are also not technology savvy because of not having technology infrastructure. The students' suggestions under theme 2, sub-theme 5, that they should be allowed back into the on-campus residences; theme 3, sub-theme 2, that their parents should use the money saved to buy laptops and data; theme 4, sub-theme 2, and theme 5, sub-theme 2, that their local libraries and clinics be opened so that they could use those facilities, all speak to this matter. The students knew they could not participate in online learning and teaching without a laptop, a smart device, and data/WIFI. Their circumstances of living in poor conditions and rural areas resulted from South Africa's past, as discussed in sections two and three above.

Secondly, as theme 1, sub-themes 2 and 3 indicated, the students' home and community environments were not conducive to learning even though they might have had a laptop, internet connectivity, and data/WIFI. One student explained it aptly:

There is no structured learning space with silence, a table, a computer and a chair for most learners. They are completely at the mercy of the family to provide them with these resources. For some learners, this is a non-negotiable right in their homes, but for others, it is nothing but a dream.

Another student said:

Learning is more exciting in a clean, quiet and an open space, but how will it be conducive in an environment surrounded by drug addicts and alcoholics who will distract students with noise and taverns next door?

Another student explained:

Living in a township needs some emotional intelligence to understand that we cannot always control the actions of other people.

These responses show that, due to COVID-19 and the national lockdown, the students were back home where their living circumstances were not conducive nor supportive of their studies. As the first quote illustrates, students were 'at the mercy of the family'. They had to negotiate 'quiet time' to do their work as the students had to share their living spaces with their parents and siblings, and often in especially the African households, with their grandparents and extended families (Parker 2018).

The latter two responses speak about the communities in which the students lived, which were the former townships that the apartheid government established. The quotes show that the students, again, were 'at the mercy' of the community members, and unlike their homes where they could negotiate quiet time, they could not do so within the townships. The last quote takes it one level further as the student made a comparison with 'emotional intelligence' that was needed to understand their communities. The quote implies that the university staff should (be mature enough) to acknowledge the external factors that impacted their learning and that they should have empathy and patience and be flexible with the students regarding due dates for assessments, and tests and examinations starting times (refer to theme 5 sub-themes 1, 2 and 3). This was also why the students who wrote about the noise level suggested using earphones to block out the noise to concentrate on their studies (theme 2, sub-theme 4), which were taking place at night.

Thirdly, the students reported in theme 1, sub-theme 6, that they had to do household chores while studying, which was stressful as they had to manage and devote time to all their modules, which could have been four or five per semester.

Students can devote all their time to their studies when they are in residences on campus or in private accommodations. Thus, not only did the students not have a quiet space to do their work during the day, they had to work to assist their parents, which meant that they could only concentrate on their studies at night. It also meant that the students could not attend their lectures and tutorials during the day, and had to listen to the recordings at night, which means that, if there was something that the students did not understand, they could not ask the lecturer or tutor to explain in the lecturers or tutorials. It meant that the students had to email or WhatsApp the lecturers to ask for clarification and, in turn, had to check their WhatsApp messages or their emails to see if the lecturers and tutors responded. Explanations were:

For the past two months of term two, every day has been a tough one. It was challenging having to balance all the work for every module and having tutorials as well as submission dates and sometimes online classes.

We were like clowns juggling everything on our plates. The fact that when you miss one day or even an hour you would immediately be behind with work or get to your phone with plus minus 100 WhatsApp messages and tons of emails.

These two responses reflect what eighty percent of the students explained in their essays. The fact that students had to adhere to their parents' instructions to do household chores and look after their siblings, while on the other hand, they had to continue with their studies in an online learning and teaching environment with no quiet space to do so, and had to take cognisance of the surrounding noise levels, was stressful and could have negatively impacted the students' morale and commitment to their studies. The workload at university is regarded as 'heavy' for first-year students transitioning from high school to the university environment. Planning and managing their time effectively is stressful and an adjustment under normal face-to-face conditions (Mahlangu & Fraser 2017). COVID-19 and the national lockdown were not normal – globally, people lived under abnormal and highly stressful conditions (United Nations 2021).

An inference can be made that the stressful learning and teaching conditions led the students to make suggestions to their parents to be flexible and

supportive (theme 3, sub-theme 1), their community members to support them (theme 4, sub-theme 1), and the lecturers to get to know their backgrounds, care about them and motivate and support them, and be patient with them (theme 5, sub-themes 1, 2 and 3).

Moreover, the students reported under theme 1, sub-themes 5 and 7, that they felt lonely and helpless because they were worried about the spread of the virus and had to deal with family members being infected with the virus and the loss of those who died as a result. Worrying about the virus and seeing loved ones battling COVID-19 and some dying resulted in further stress and anxiety for the students and their families. The students wrote:

Each individual had to deal with the sense of frustration, worrying about what will happen next and the sense of feeling helplessness. This could make a person feel alone and have to deal with their negative thoughts alone.

My father got COVID-19 and was hospitalised. We were very worried and I could not concentrate on my academics for weeks.

COVID-19 has led to many people living in fear because of the immense change that this pandemic has brought. Life has changed for everyone, not only students.

These quotes reflect what the majority of the students explained in their essays. The last quote acknowledges that it was not only the students who were affected, but everyone else. Every citizen in every country was at risk of being infected, and we know that millions of people were, and millions died. Statistics and research data about the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact globally at John Hopkins University show that 246 million people worldwide were infected with the virus, and 4.99 million deaths were reported as of 27 October 2021 (John Hopkins University 2021). In South Africa, the number stood at 2,921 million infected people, with 89,104 confirmed deaths as of 28 October 2021 (National Institute for Communicable Diseases, 2021).

Therefore, the fear of being infected with the virus and worrying about loved ones who did was real and intense for the students, which is why the first quote talks about 'frustration', the sense of feeling 'helplessness', feeling 'alone' and

'having to deal with negative thoughts by themselves'. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines helplessness as "lacking protection or support (defenceless), "marked by an inability to act or react", and "not able to control or restrained". Vanheule and Hauser (2009) state that helplessness is linked to depression in psychiatric and psychological thinking and that helplessness and hopelessness are viewed as cognitive symptoms of depression. Accordingly, the definition of helplessness and the idea that it is linked to mental symptoms of depression was real for the students during the pandemic and lockdown in 2020. As the second quote illustrates, concentrating on studies was impossible.

It is safe to say that the students were under tremendous pressure, which was why they felt lonely and had 'negative thoughts'. Thus, COVID-19 and the national lockdown negatively impacted the students' mental health and overall well-being. Mann (2005) explains that students could feel alienated and alone when they face challenges. In this instance, it was not only learning challenges (not copying with the work and demands of four or five modules, having to navigate their way in an online platform and not having a conducive learning environment), but external challenges beyond their control. A virus that spread rapidly and that was contagious and deadly. One can understand why the students made the suggestions under theme 2 of what they could do to help themselves. Suggestions were:

We need to remain focused, look after ourselves and keep the end goal in mind, which is to complete our studies and graduate with a degree so that we can obtain good paying jobs and rise above poverty.

Some of the alternatives that can be done to this are for us to engage in online learning, stay focused and give it our best as our futures lie in it.

We can self-study and engage in discussion forums and WhatsApp if we don't understand a certain part of a chapter or the work. Also, we should reach out and ask for help from CSSS.

The students' responses demonstrate that they did not give up. It shows that they decided to remain positive and on course despite all the challenges and fears, and worrying about the virus. An inference can be made that their

challenges and fears made them stronger and provided internal motivation to continue. The first quote shows that this student was also driven by a desire to 'escape poverty' – hence the reference to 'good paying jobs' and rising 'above poverty'. This response came from a student who noted they were living in 'poor conditions', which motivated the student to succeed academically.

The student in the third quote suggested that the students should not be shy but dare to ask for help from the students' support services (CSSS). Wanting to request assistance is a bold step that shows the student has realised the need to speak to someone and not to suffer in silence. As the descriptions of helplessness above reflect, when people face challenges that leave them feeling alone and helpless, they could become depressed. The students should be applauded for not surrendering to their circumstances and quitting their studies. What the students have experienced and shared demonstrate what we discussed in the first three sections of this paper. The cohort of students were first-year students who started their academic journeys at the beginning of 2020. They were part of the 16% of Black students (African and Coloureds) who were admitted to post-school studies. Their home and community circumstances reflected that they were part of the disadvantaged and marginalised Black South African population and that the consequences of apartheid were still prevalent and experienced by Black South Africans twenty-eight years after democracy.

As already stated, the COVID-19 pandemic and the national lockdowns have brought inequalities within societies between the rich and the poor to the fore. In this context, Freire's (2005, 2014) Pedagogy of Hope provides hope. He challenged us to transform oppressive conditions and expand possibilities for social justice by becoming change agents for social transformation and the manner in which we relate and build knowledge with others and with our students. His insistence on critical consciousness, problem-posing instead of problem-solving, and dialogue and reflection are pedagogical strategies that we, as academics, could use to create a socially just learning and teaching environment for our students (Freire 2014).

We agree with Freire that students are not empty vessels who should be 'filled' with knowledge by educators. They should be treated as equal and active partners in the learning process and be given opportunities and platforms to contribute to knowledge creation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Six findings can be derived from the discussion and interpretation of the students' results in the previous section. These are:

1. The students needed a working device, access to data/WIFI, and had to be technologically savvy to participate in online learning and teaching.
2. The students' home and community environments were not conducive to learning, even though they might have had a laptop, internet connectivity, and data/WIFI.
3. The students had to plan and manage their time effectively between household chores and focusing on their academic work, which was stressful, and they struggled to cope.
4. The students felt lonely and helpless because they were worried about the virus and had to deal with family members infected by COVID-19 and the loss of those who died from the virus.
5. The students made suggestions for themselves, their households, their communities and lecturers on how to support and assist them.
6. The students' circumstances and what they have experienced can also be attributed to the consequences of colonialism and apartheid.

These findings answer the first question posed in this paper: *how did COVID-19 impact the students' academic work?*

The second question was: what can we learn from the students' experiences? The students' responses and actions taught us that they were resilient; they did not give up or allow their feelings of loneliness and helplessness to derail them from their goal of succeeding academically. It also taught us to have empathy,

patience, and flexibility. Most of all, it taught us that where there is hope, there is a way. Their responses made us reflect on the things that we often take for granted and that, despite the transformation that has taken place in education in South Africa, we still have a long way to go before the damage done by apartheid will be eradicated.

Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of Hope urges higher education institutions to do things differently, especially in a post-COVID-19 dispensation. It provides an alternative path to moving forward in becoming a socially just and caring higher education sector. In answering the last question, how can we use the lessons learnt to become inclusive and socially responsive institutions of higher learning? following Freire (2005, 2014), we recommend that staff at institutions of higher learning should effect change within themselves and implement Freire's three interrelated principles. They should:

- Care about their students.
- Get to know their circumstances so that they will have empathy and be patient with the students.
- Encourage, motivate and instil confidence in them to become independent and lifelong learners.
- Be flexible, willing to listen and co-create the learning environment with the students.
- Know that the students are trying their best and acknowledge that it is a process of what students do for themselves.
- Reassure students that they are not alone.
- Do not enforce choice but rather encourages students to make decisions and choices for themselves.
- Create confidential, safe spaces for students to share vulnerabilities and challenges.
- Have regular 'check-ins' with students to ascertain if they are okay, and if not, direct them to get assistance from the support services offered.

Implementing these recommendations will assist us in providing effective educational practices for student engagement at institutions of higher learning as Kuh et al. (2005) advocate. As educators and academics, we are responsible for walking the journey with the students, learning from them, and allowing them to become independent and lifelong learners, which is a constitutive feature of education for liberation and democratic citizenship.

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