STUDENTS' AND LECTURERS' EXPERIENCES OF DIGITALLY TRANSFORMED OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING AT HIGHER EDUCATION LEVEL

F. M. Teane
Department of Community and Continuing Education
University of South Africa
Pretoria, South Africa
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7141-7127

ABSTRACT

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lock-down restrictions forced higher education institutions to move towards a fully online mode of delivery. The study explored the teaching and learning experiences of both students and lecturers within such a digitally transformed higher education space. Concerns have however been raised about this sudden move towards the fourth industrial revolution due to the levels of readiness of higher education institutions. A qualitative research approach was followed, and I purposeful selected ten masters' course work students and two lecturers. One-on-one interviews and a focus group discussion were utilised for data generation. The Saldana's thematic method was employed to analyse data. The findings of my research point to both positive and negative experiences of students and lecturers, following the shift to online teaching and learning. Negative experiences highlight the need for support systems to be put in place in a digitally transformed educational milieu.

Key words: Covid-19, higher education teaching and learning, lecturers, online teaching, Open Distance Learning, students

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Online teaching became an indispensable teaching tool when the outbreak of Covid-19 resulted in unforeseen circumstances and the need for immediate change (Boeren, Roumell, and Roessger 2020; Ersin, Atay, and Mede 2020; Kim 2020). A range of literature confirm the use of online teaching and learning at institutions of higher learning in the past, even though most of these institutions have relied on this mode of delivery as supplement to the traditional methods of face-to-face interactions (Fedynich 2013; Ersin et al. 2020, Barbour et al. 2011). For example, Kuh et al. (2011) propose such introduction of new technologies in learning situations on a more regular basis to support effective educational practices and prepare students for the (digital) future.

Past research concerned with online teaching has however often focused on students' experiences and the facilitation of online learning communities (Ouyang and Scharber 2017),

with little emphasis on the effect of this mode of teaching as experienced by both higher education students and lecturers. In undertaking my research, I attempted to address this apparent gap in existing literature by investigating the experiences of both students and lecturers, of the full online teaching mode that came into effect as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, making this the "new normal" in terms of higher education tuition, since the outbreak of the pandemic (Bao 2020).

The context of my study was that of a higher education institution of South Africa. Masters' students who were doing course work at the time of this research and had been exposed to a blended learning mode of teaching and learning during the early years of their study at the institution participated, as well as the two lecturers involved in their training. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, this Open Distance Learning (ODL) university followed a blended learning approach to teaching and learning, using some traditional methods of face-to-face teaching and learning, such as students submitting hard copies of assignments and having face-to-face meetings with their lecturers per appointment. Learning centres were created in various locations where students were able to access the internet and collaborate while sharing information with each other about the learning content. As such, students had access to both a physical and online platform where they could engage with peers as well as lecturers. Libraries also provided spaces for collaboration and gave students access to resources in the form of hard copy books and other material as well as resources in a digital form.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown restrictions that followed however resulted in the access to physical contact being closed to both students and lecturers. Against this background, I attempted to gain insight into the voices of some of these students and their lecturers, regarding their experiences of the move to online learning and reliance on technology as the only instrument of teaching and learning, following the outbreak of the pandemic. In order to address the primary aim of the study, I was guided by the following secondary research questions:

- How do students and lecturers feel about a fully online teaching and learning approach?
- Which challenges were experienced by students and lecturers at a higher education institution in South Africa when forced to adapt to a fully online teaching and learning approach during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- Which coping strategies did the students and lecturers relied on to embrace the "new normal" of online teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic?

THE USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) CONTEXT

Globalisation and the promotion of lifelong learning have strongly contributed to the development of distance education, more specifically ODL (Ng 2016), which has improved access to higher education for adult students and those who would like to study but need to work for a living. The move to technology-oriented teaching and learning by teaching and learning institutions do not only allow institutions to respond positively to globalisation and rapid technological development but also to prepare students who enrol for future uncertainties and a world-of-work characterised by digital technology (Panagiotakopoulos 2012). While ODL practices at universities have gained prominence over recent years and are used as avenue to address challenges related to access, quality and equity (Oladejo and Gesinde 2014), institutions of higher learning continue to face the challenge of quality assurance in terms of the ODL programmes on offer (Latchem 2016).

According to Latchem (2016), unlike the conventional methods of face-to-face teaching and learning and regular contact with students, information and computer technology (ICT) forms an integral part of ODL. In this regard, Flores, del-Arco and Silva (2016) foreground the difference in terms of preferences to learning that is generally displayed by distance education students, pointing to their need for a variety of didactic devices that can stimulate their curiosity, creativity, abilities, teamwork, and knowledge acquisition. Programmes that allow for flexibility are preferred by these students, to compensate for the lack of physical contact between practitioners or lecturers and their students. In the absence of flexibility higher drop-out levels may occur among distance learners when compared to learners engaged in face-to-face teaching (Ng 2016), with the former group also not comparing well during assessments due to them not receiving face-to-face tuition.

Current literature supports the view that the use of technological tools by an experienced ODL practitioner can create a conducive learning and teaching environment for ODL students (Oladejo and Gesinde 2014; Tarusikirwa 2016; Cant, Wiid, and Machado 2013). However, it seems evident that both students and lecturers may experience some challenges to effectively integrate technology in the teaching and learning milieu due to limited technology skills (Usher 2019). Other challenges that may be experienced by distant education students include distractions caused by family and daily chores, difficulty to understand the material, lack of sufficient supporting resources to complete their work, and limited motivation (Aguilera-Hermida 2020). According to Downes (2007), strategies that may support effective online learning include the connections for continued learning and the creation of a learning environment where group interactions are possible that may enable students to collaborate and

gain a deeper understanding of the learning content.

ONLINE TEACHING AS A RESULT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was sudden and forced many institutions of higher learning to launch live online programs without delay. A wide range of literature affirm that online teaching spearheaded by the outbreak of Covid-19 has become an indispensable tool to be applied in unforeseen circumstances (Boeren et al. 2020; Ersin et al. 2020; Kim 2020). The changing landscape of teaching led to a sudden move to the online system without sufficient preparation of lecturers as well as students, resulting in lower levels of student motivation, self-efficacy, and cognitive engagement in many cases (Ali 2020). Various questions arose about the suitability of the online courses, sufficient engagement of students and the belief that online teaching is a transmissive and passive mode of pedagogy, with these questions being left unanswered (Bao 2020). In general, online teaching may result in various challenges for both students and lecturers (Gazza 2017; Brown 2016).

One of these challenges, according to Barbour et al. (2011) relates to the past support received from the governments of African countries for a move towards online teaching and learning as a result of the financial implications that such an approach could cause. Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the work of Boeren et al. (2020) confirmed this assertion by indicating that access to the internet and data was a challenge experienced by specifically poor communities around the world. According to Boeren et al. (2020), most African countries would in addition not be able to fund the development of proper online study material and incur the cost of using the internet for students at higher education institutions. On the other hand, the supply of resources in the form of funding, staff and time could support the adoption of an online teaching and learning approach during times of challenge (Poon 2014). In addition to financial restrictions limiting the uptake of an online teaching approach, research by Andrade (2015) indicate that individuals may be reluctant to engage in online teaching due to their fear of change, limited technological expertise, a possible general belief that traditional methods are more effective, or simply just personal preference for face-to-face instruction.

Challenges such as these may in turn disrupt personal connections and affect people's beliefs, or even emotions (Naylor and Nyanjom 2021; Bennett, Agostinho, and Lockyer 2015; Perrotta 2017). In an attempt to counter this from happening, Ersin et al. (2020) suggest mentoring by experts in order to strengthen individuals' technological skills and confidence. In addition, Bao (2020) suggests the embracing of the high-impact principles of online education, referring to the importance of emphasising the high relevance between online instructional design and student learning, effective delivery of online instructional information, adequate

support provided by faculty and teaching assistants to students, high-quality participation to improve the breadth and depth of student learning, and contingency plans to deal with unexpected incidents and challenges caused by online education platforms.

The question can be raised as to how prepared individuals were and to what extent strategies such as these were in place when both students and lecturers were forced to adopt an online teaching and learning approach as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. With my research, I aimed to address questions such as these by adding insight into the challenges experienced by the students and lecturers of a higher education institution when abruptly forced to adopt an online teaching and learning approach. The findings of my study may build on the existing work as discussed in the previous paragraphs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study I undertook is underpinned by Harasim's Online Collaborative Learning Theory (2012). This theory differentiates between three forms of online learning namely, online collaborative learning (OCL), online distance education that uses a correspondence model of course delivery, and online courseware which is based on individualised learning supported by coursework content (Harasim 2012). Collaborative learning entails an educational theory and pedagogy during which learners discuss and work together to learn and apply the relevant concepts to solve problems in their field, deepen their understanding and create new ideas, products or processes. As such, OCL will encourage students to collaboratively solve problems through discourse instead of merely memorising the correct answers. It provides for a form of constructivist teaching where an instructor-led group participate online, requiring of the teacher (or lecturer) to be knowledgeable and able to facilitate learning (Harasim 2012).

The main difference between OCL and traditional learning lies in the fact that OCL models are generally implemented in environments that are asynchronous in comparison to traditional learning models, which are synchronous. Unlike traditional models, students engage in lessons and discussions at their own time when following an online model and can log on anywhere and at any time when they have internet access. For traditional learning models, textbooks are central to learning, as compared to online models where textbooks would typically serve as supplementary material. Since interactive discussions are not necessarily central when following a traditional learning approach, students may ignore discussions and see them as additional work. Furthermore, unlike in traditional models where lecturers are regarded as the providers of knowledge, online teaching and learning models view teachers as facilitators who need to generate discourse and spark discussions (Harasim 2012).

The success of online teaching and learning depends on the creation of a conducive

learning environment which, according to Bates (2019, 122), is governed by certain principles. These include the use of appropriate technology such as software that can cater for threaded discussions, clear guidelines on student online behaviour such as the formulation and implementation of written codes of conduct for participation in online discussions, as well as proper student orientation and preparation which should include technology orientation and explanations of the purpose of online discussions. Other principles that are important to create a conducive online learning environment relate to the formulation of clear goals for online discussions that are understood by the students, the choice of appropriate topics that can complement and expand issues in the study material and are relevant to answering assessment questions, and setting an appropriate "tone" or requirements for online discussions for example respectful disagreement or that of evidence-based argumentation (Bates 2019).

In addition, it is important to clearly define learner roles and expectations , such as you should stipulate how often students are expected to participate in online discussions and which level of contribution will be expected, and to then monitor the participation of individual learners and respond accordingly, by providing the necessary scaffolding or support in the form of e.g. comments that may help students to develop their thinking around a topics, referring them back to their study material if necessary, or explaining issues in more depth when students seem to be confused or misinformed; Finally regular, ongoing instructor "presence" is important which may be observed in the monitoring of discussions to keep these focused or in the encouragement provided to students who make meaningful contributions to discussions while motivating those who are not yet participating as expected. Throughout, it remains the responsibility of the lecturer to ensure a strong articulation between discussion topics and assessment (Bates 2019).

In support of the principles provided by Bates (2019), Andrade (2015) summarises the criteria for effective online teaching in terms of well-designed teacher training to capacitate students on online skills, the application of new effective teaching strategies, and the utilisation of collaboration to encourage interpersonal support and team building. As all these principles and criteria have been proven as being important when adopting an online mode of teaching and learning, the theory I relied on guided me in exploring the way in which these principles were met when moving to online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. In undertaking my research, I assumed that the criteria that had not been met would have presented as challenges, as experienced by the lecturers and students who participated.

METHODOLOGY

I followed a qualitative approach, in alignment with the research aim to obtain in-depth insight

into the experiences of students and lecturers in terms of the online teaching approach that was followed after the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Although qualitative studies do not aim for generalisation, this type of research can lead to the discovery of new evidence related to a phenomenon under investigation (Neuman 2014).

Following receipt of ethics approval for the study, I purposively selected 10 Masters students and two lecturers coordinating masters' modules. Participants had to meet the selection criteria of having experienced both blended learning mode of teaching and learning and a fully online teaching. Data were generated and documented by means of semi-structured telephonic interviews with 12 participants and one focus group interview with 6 lecturers which I conducted virtually via the TEAMS platform.

I was guided by an interview schedule when conducting the interviews yet relied on the techniques of prompting and probing to clarify and explore what participants had said in more detail (Jensen and Laurie 2016). During the focus group, additional perspectives about online learning could be shared, as the participants were able to challenge, persuade and influence one another (Jensen and Laurie 2016). All interviews and the focus group discussion were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, for the purpose of data analysis.

I conducted thematic data analysis, according to the guidelines suggested by Saldaña (2016), thereby sorting and clustering the data into broad themes and related sub-themes. Accordingly, I identified themes in the recorded data and then attempted to confirm, verify and expand on these, repeating this procedure to determine any possible additional themes based on the formulated research questions (Saldaña 2016). In terms of research ethics, I adhered to the principles of informed consent, confidentiality and allowed participants to withdraw if they felt that way. Pseudonyms were used in the form of letters of the alphabet when disseminating the results, in protection of the participants' identities.

FINDINGS

I identified three themes, related to students' and lecturers' positive and negative experiences associated with the move to online teaching and learning, the challenges they experienced during the use of online platforms, and mitigating strategies that can overcome such challenges.

Theme 1: Positive and negative feelings about moving to an online platform for teaching and learning

The findings of my research indicate that both students and lecturers had positive and negative experiences towards the digitally transformed open distance learning environment they had to rely on as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. On the positive side, the participants regarded the

move to an online mode of teaching and learning as developmental in nature, allowing them to acquire and sharpen their skills. In this regard, one of the students made the following remark:

> "Using online platform was helpful. It also created an opportunity to learn more skills on how to use the computers. Spending more time on the computer and receiving trainings has sharpened my computer skills. The same sentiments were shared by a lecturer, who stated that, I spent more time on my computer than before and that sharpened my computer skills."

Some other participants did however not share this view, especially those who had experience in ODL and using online platforms prior to the Covid-19 pandemic and the move to the online platform for teaching and learning. One of the student-participants explained this as follows:

> "As an international student I have been a student at an ODL university for some years so there was no such a big change, I am quite advanced in technology. One of the lecturers added the following: I have been working in an ODL institution for more than 10 years I am used to working online – I did not experience much of a change."

A second positive experience indicated by the participants when sharing their views about the move to online teaching and learning relates to the financial benefit they experienced. More specifically, the participants found the online mode of teaching and learning to be more cost effective than traditional tuition, where they would be expected to travel to the higher education institution to receive tuition, rather than staying and studying from home. To this end, student-participant C said:

> "I like using online modes because unlike in the past where we were asked to travel and assemble in one center to attend videoconferencing, online platforms such as TEAMS meetings are attended during spare time, there is less travel because we are working from home."

Based on individual preferences for independent work, some of the students welcomed an online teaching approach while others did not share this experience. The positive experience of student-participant D is evident in the following excerpt:

> "Naturally I prefer working independently, even though from time to time engage with other students on the study matters. I like spending time on the computer and have realized that there are resources one can use even when the institution libraries are closed."

This contribution also highlights the positive experience of additional resources that could be obtained on electronic platforms even though this advantage can and should also form part of the traditional mode of teaching.

Despite these positive experiences, the participants also shared some negative views about the sudden change to a fully online mode of teaching, that was spearheaded by the Covid-19 pandemic. Many of the participants shared negative experiences due to not being prepared for the sudden change or the shift to reliance on technology which they did not envision when enrolling for the study programme. For example, student-participant E stated that, "The new normal came with pressure and some limitations. technology instill a sense of uneasiness especially when it is sudden. I was not comfortable to work online I needed that face-to-face interaction." In terms of specific examples, the students who had been following a traditional mode of teaching and learning were seemingly used to acts such as submitting hard copies of assignments and writing exams together with other students in allocated venues. The sudden move away from these apparently caused some levels of discomfort, as reported by student-participant F, who said: "I did not study online prior to Covid-19. I used to send hard copies assignments and wrote exams in the venues. This sudden change caused me some stress."

In addition to the unfamiliar ground being a cause of stress, many of the participants related their experiences of stress, frustration, isolation and even burn-out to limited collaboration between students and their lecturers. In this regard, student-participant J stated the following: "Prior to Covid-19 we used to gather with students and discuss assignment questions together in a library or in some hubs of the university. We are unable to meet now, and I feel so lonely, struggling alone." In support, student-participant G commented that, "I feel like the relationship between university and student is somewhat isolated in an ODL context. Going fully online made things worse. computers do not have emotions to respond appropriately when you are wrong or right." Student-participant H elaborated on students' need to engage with lecturers by saying: "There is no lecturer student engagement. Problems experienced were not resolved and I was always under stress." As such, it seems evident that limited contact and engagement with lecturers resulted in students' questions not being addressed, leaving them uncertain and anxious.

More specifically, all ten students indicated the lack of sufficient engagement with their lecturers as a disadvantage of online teaching and learning. They referred to negative experiences when not receiving responses to their queries, getting feedback very late, and the perception that some lecturers did not hold the necessary expertise to address the issues they struggled with. Student-participant E explained this cause of frustrations as follows: "Since we moved to an online platform, feedback from lecturers and administration staff is delayed. Feedback on registrations issues were delayed by eight Months." Student-participant F added that, "some lecturers were not competent; they were unable to solve problem related to their modules. The university must recruit staff with expertise."

Despite the participants mentioning the benefit of reduced travel costs others were of the view that the costs they had to incur in order to adopt an online mode of teaching and learning was expensive. One of the students provided clarity on this in the following way: "Moving to online teaching was costly because I was forced to make sure that I have internet connection, good laptop and smart phone. Unlike before I see this move to be demanding." The question can thus be asked to what extent the benefit of not having to travel to in-person meetings outweigh the financial expenses related to participating in online activities.

Theme 2: Challenges experienced when using online platforms

Closely related to the negative experiences identified as part of the first theme, the participants identified several challenges associated with the online teaching and learning. From the students' perspectives the plethora of training opportunities they had to attend in terms of the use of online tools were offered too late and interfered with their other responsibilities. One of the student-participants explained his frustrations in the following manner:

> "When this move started there were a lot of trainings offered by the institutions. The trainings were supposed to be done long time ago because it gave us pressure. Sometimes I wanted to attend online training workshops, but they always clashed with my work schedule."

Student-participant F had a similar experience, as evident in the following contribution:

> "I have missed a lot of information shared during trainings because of the type of work I am doing, yes there are recordings sent but I sometimes need more clarity. When we try to seek for help by trying to contact officials is frustrating since phones are just ringing. They are not responding to queries or calls."

These frustrations link to the negative experiences of not receiving timely feedback and answers to their questions, as discussed in the previous section on Theme 1.

Closely related, some of the participants who attended the training opportunities indicated that they also missed out on some important information due to disruptions emanating from students connecting and participating from homes. To explain this, student-participant H provided the following example: "Some of the challenges were disruptions we experience during workshops or lessons. We miss some of the information because some of the inexperienced students unmute their mic and there is noise from family members." This challenge once again relates to inexperience and technology-associated difficulties.

Also of a technological nature, some students reportedly experienced problems when wanting to upload assignments and examination scripts. One of the student-participants

remarked in this regard:

> "Because I was not fully competent in the use of technology, I struggled to use the invigilator app and uploading the examination paper. Luckily some ICT person helped me, but one of the students did not receive help and was forced to write a supplementary examination."

As such, challenges faced in terms of the use of technology had a knock-on effect and resulted in frustrations and negative experiences of the fully online mode of teaching and learning.

Lecturers who participated in my research also voiced some challenges related to technology, more specifically due to a forced change between digital platforms. They namely experienced the change from Sakai to the Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle) as a challenge. They furthermore indicated that the limited help they received from ICT staff and power outages due to national load shedding caused difficulty and resulted in their experiences of stress. One of the lecturer-participants explained these experiences as follows: "The institution's change from SAKAI learning management system to Moodle has brought new technological challenges. Moodle is a bit complicated and needed time." The second lecturer-participant shared the following view: "My main challenge was caused by technical problems on the computer which were supposed to be addressed by ICT staff. Some of the staff were lacking knowledge and skills to assist with such challenges."

In addition to technology-related challenges, the lecturers who participated in my study reported that the relationship between them and their students became estranged due to challenges experienced by the students which were out of their control. Lecturer A explained this as follows: "Delays in responding to ICT matters impacted negatively on interpersonal relationships, e.g., some of the students needed to upload their examination answer sheets and encountered challenges which could not be fixed immediately, such students complained to lecturers". As such, the lecturers seemingly felt frustrated due to them not being able to assist students with all the challenges they experienced.

Load shedding apparently added to the tension experienced by both students and lecturers. One of the lecturer participants made the following contribution in this regard: "The loadshedding caused other students not to attend the virtual workshops and students complained that we did not hold such workshops during the right time and dates". Therefore, the lecturers were frustrated due to the fact that they could not schedule online meetings and assume that all students would attend.

Theme 3: Strategies used to overcome challenges

The participating students and lecturers mentioned a few coping strategies that they relied on

in coping with the challenges they faced. One of the student-participants, when discussing some negative experiences of online tuition, explained that, "... to deal with this monster I decided to attend online workshops and gave myself time to practice the online skills". In response to the frustration due to lecturers not responding to enquiries, another student focused on the following solution: "When I asked for help from my lecturer, and I did not get it – I sent emails to other lecturers – sometimes they helped me sometimes not".

Lecturers similarly implemented alternative approaches as strategies to mitigate some of the challenges they experienced. One of the lecturers referred to some adjustments with student submissions of assignments, saying that, "most of the students were not meeting the submission deadlines of assignments. I used to decide to extend submission date so that students must have a year mark." In this manner, students were reportedly supported to overcome the challenges they experienced and encouraged to succeed in their studies.

The other lecture explained additional efforts to support students, as evident in the following contribution: "I have realised that most of the students do not use their online platform regularly because they do not respond to emails or announcement messages. I visited the student system, retrieved their cell numbers and call them, they answered."

DISCUSSION

Despite the participants displaying some negative experiences as a result of the move to online teaching and learning, the majority of the student-participants were positive about the change that occurred as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Even though the participants experienced challenges related to technology and other related issues as discussed in the previous section, they in general valued the digitally transformed teaching and learning milieu namely. The overall positive experience may have been caused by the fact that some of these students had been exposed to ODL prior to 2020, providing them with the necessary basic skills to engage in online learning and at the same time preparing them to compete in a global world (Ng 2016), acquiring the skills needed to deal with changes in the work environment (Panagiotakopoulos 2012).

Even though the majority of the participants had an overall positive experience due to aspects such as them embracing the digital world, benefiting through reduced financial expenses, and their activities not being time bound, the findings of my study also foreground the importance of individual preferences for the mode of teaching and learning, as also indicated by Flores et al. (2016). More specifically, some of the participants preferred an online mode of teaching and learning due to them enjoying independent work in their own space, with these participants feeling confident about their levels of technological literacy. On the other hand,

participants who lacked the necessary technological skills slanted towards traditional face-to-face learning experiences, where they could engage with confidence. These findings emphasise the possibility of yet also the prerequisite for a successful digitally transformed teaching and learning environment on condition that the relevant stakeholders be empowered with the necessary online knowledge and skills, as outlined by Bates (2019). By better preparing both students and lecturers for change in terms of the mode of delivery, negative experiences associated with a move to online teaching and learning may potentially be limited.

In terms of financial implications, the participants benefited from not having to travel to attend in-person meetings however also faced the challenges of securing internet connection and access to a laptop and/or smart phone when moving to an online mode of delivery. This finding relates to the work of Boeren et al. (2020), who explain that African communities are more often than not challenged by poverty and high costs for data to access the Internet. Barbour (2011) similarly indicate that, due to financial implications, governments of African countries may be reluctant to move to fully online modes of teaching and learning, resulting in the question whether or not African institutions of higher learning are ready to move towards the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) way of tuition and ultimately living, due to the constraints associated with technological skills as well as supportive resources in the form of sufficient funds.

Based on the negative experiences as discussed in the previous paragraphs, one can deduce that a digitally transformed higher education environment may pose certain challenges for both students and lecturers. In addition to the challenges related to expenses and technological skills, some of the students who participated in my research felt isolated after the move to online teaching and learning, with them being used to collaboration and face-to-face meetings at the higher education institution prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. This finding does however not align with the work of Harasim (2012) on collaborative theory, who proposes discussions between students and lecturers and between students themselves as a key component of effective online learning. Findings indicated that there was little or no collaboration between students themselves and between students and lecturers caused by a sudden move to online teaching and learning, something that Harasim's (2012) theory encourages.

Closely related, the findings of my research indicate that the move to online teaching and learning posed the challenge of lecturers and administrative staff members sometimes not responding to students' emails and enquiries. This resulted in students not experiencing the necessary interpersonal support and team building opportunities which, according to Andrade (2015) is important when teaching students online. As a secondary outcome, which greatly impacted on students' progress, late or no feedback from lecturers resulted in some students in

my study experiencing difficulty to upload their work on time, with them having to rewrite an exam or redo an assignment. This finding once again points to the importance of training and the acquisition of the necessary technological skills when moving to an online mode of teaching and learning. The finding supports the work of Ersin et al. (2020) who stipulate thorough training by experts is a prerequisite when wanting to create a conducive online teaching and learning environment, as also proposed by Bao (2020).

Even though the findings of my study indicate that the institution did provide training when moving to the online mode of teaching and learning, both students and lecturers did seemingly not benefit fully from the training opportunities. Individuals complained that the training they received came suddenly and should have been offered ahead of time rather than only after introducing the move to the online mode of delivery. Training opportunities could also not be utilised to potential due to timeslots interfering with students' work-related responsibilities or some students not being technologically skilled, resulting in background noises and disturbances during online discussions or training sessions. This finding aligns with the work of Aguilera-Hermida (2020) who states that one of the disadvantages when working from home relates to distractions and background noise.

As in the case of the students, the lecturers who participated in my research experienced challenges related to technological skills, students not meeting submission deadlines and the related frustrations of lecturers having to apply for extension of submission dates which is a lengthy process, and difficulty to use the new online platform (Moodle). In addition, lecturers also experienced delays in obtaining ICT support when experiencing difficulty with technology.

Even though the participants did seemingly not gain from the training opportunities they attended, they agreed that the key to a successful move to online teaching and learning lies in thorough training. Such training opportunities will however have more value when offered in advance of change and in a structured way. For lecturers, another strategy entailed integration of different channels of communication, such as emails and telephone contact, with this suggestion supporting the work of Flores et al. (2016), indicating the importance of a variety of didactic devices to engender participation and collaboration between students and lecturers and students amongst themselves.

CONCLUSION

The research aimed to address a relatively underexplored focus area, being the experiences of students and lecturers of a digitally transformed ODL model of teaching at a higher education institution in South Africa. The participants indicated both positive and negative experiences of adopting a fully online teaching and learning mode as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The challenges they experienced ranged from limited knowledge and skills to engage in technology-driven online activities, limited human support and insufficient resources, to the challenge of load shedding on a national level, preventing effective online engagement with other students and their lecturers. As a result, students attempted to engage in practise and attend training opportunities to adapt to the digitally transformed study environment more actively.

In similar situations it can thus be valuable for both students and lecturers to access training opportunities and be empowered in terms of technological skills. Furthermore, I recommend that institutions of higher learning should prepare its population for any such changes in the implementation of the curriculum in advance to the change being put into effect. Finally, lecturers should be empowered on how to engage students in collaborative engagements.

REFERENCES

Aguilera-Hermida, A. Patricia. 2020. "College students' use and acceptance of emergency online learning due to COVID-19." *International Journal of Educational Research Open* 1: 100011. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100011.

Ali, Wahab. 2020. "Online and remote learning in higher education institutes: A necessity in light of COVID-19 pandemic." *Higher Education Studies* 10(3): 16–25. https://doi.org/10.5539/hes.v10n3p16.

Andrade, Maureen Snow. 2015 "Teaching online: A theory-based approach to student success." *Journal of Education and Training Studies* 3(5): 1–9. http://dx.doi.org/10.11114/jets.v3i5.904.

Bao, Wei. 2020. "COVID-19 and online teaching in higher education: A case study of Peking University." *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies* 2(2): 113–115. https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.191.

Barbour, Michael, Regina Brown, Lisa Hasler Waters, Rebecca Hoey, Jeffrey L. Hunt, Kathryn Kennedy, Chantal Ounsworth, Allison Powell, and Trina Trimm. 2011. "*Online and Blended Learning: A Survey of Policy and Practice from K-12 Schools around the World*." International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

Bates, Anthony William (Tony). 2019. "Teaching in a digital age teaching in a digital age." *Creative Commons Attributions Non-Commercial International License*. http://solr.bccampus.ca:8001/bcc/items/6e34af22-19b4-4271-9337-8ee1160d85ec/1/?attachment.

Bennett, Sue, Shirley Agostinho, and Lori Lockyer. 2015. "Technology tools to support learning design: Implications derived from an investigation of university teachers' design practices." *Computers & Education* 81: 211–220. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2014.10.016.

Boeren, Ellen, Elizabeth A. Roumell, and Kevin M. Roessger. 2020. "COVID-19 and the future of adult education: An editorial." *Adult Education Quarterly* 70(3): 201–204. https://doi.org/10.1177/0741713620925029.

Brown, Michael Geoffrey. 2016. "Blended instructional practice: A review of the empirical literature on instructors' adoption and use of online tools in face-to-face teaching." *The Internet and Higher Education* 31: 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2016.05.001.

Cant, Michael C., Johannes A. Wiid, and Ricardo Machado. 2013. "The characteristics of a good ODL practitioner." *Gender and Behaviour* 11(2): 5673–5687. https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC144836.

Downes, Stephen. 2007. "What connectivism is." (Web log post). July 24, 2013. http://halfanhour.blogspot.com/2007/02/what-connectivism-is.html.

Ersin, Pinar, Derin Atay, and Enisa Mede. 2020. "Boosting preservice teachers' competence and online teaching readiness through e-practicum during the COVID-19 outbreak." *International Journal of TESOL Studies* 2(2): 112–124. https://doi.org/10.46451/ijts.2020.09.09.

Fedynich, La Vonne. 2013 "Teaching beyond the classroom walls: The pros and cons of cyber learning." *Journal of Instructional Pedagogies* 3(1): 1–6. https://www.aabri.com/manuscripts/131701.pdf.

Flores, Óscar, Isabel del Arco, and Patricia Silva. 2016 "Flexible Educational Models: A response to current needs." In *Special edition for the 10th international conference on University Teaching and Innovation*, ed. S. Carrasco and I. de Corral. Girona 4, 5, 6 July.

Gazza, Elizabeth A. 2017. "The experience of teaching online in nursing education." *Journal of Nursing Education* 56(6): 343–349. https://doi.org/10.3928/01484834-20170518-05.

Harasim, Linda. 2012. *Learning theory and online technologies*. New York/London: Routledge.

Jensen, Eric and Charles Laurie. 2016. *Doing real research: A practical guide to social research*. Routledge: Sage.

Kim, Jinyoung. 2020. "Learning and teaching online during Covid-19: Experiences of student teachers in an early childhood education practicum." *International Journal of Early Childhood* 52(2): 145–158. https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-020-00272-6.

Kuh, George D., Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, and Elizabeth J. Whitt. 2011. "Fostering student success in hard times." *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 43(4): 13–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2011.585311.

Latchem, Colin. 2016. "Open and distance learning quality assurance in commonwealth universities: A report and recommendations for QA and accreditation agencies and higher education institutions." Vancouver: Commonwealth of Learning. http://oasis.col.org/handle/11599/2046. (Google Scholar).

Naylor, Dawn and Julie Nyanjom. 2021. "Educators' emotions involved in the transition to online teaching in higher education." *Higher Education Research & Development* 40(6): 1236–1250. https://www.tandfonline.com/action/showCitFormats?doi=10.1080/07294360.2020.1811645.

Neuman, W. Lawrence. 2014. *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. 7th Edition. (International edition). Boston: Peason Education. England.

Ng, Chi-hung Clarence. 2016. "Sustaining learning engagement in distance education: An achievement goal perspective." In *Reforming learning and teaching in Asia-Pacific universities*, 115–134. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-0431-5_6.

Oladejo, Maruff Akinwale and M. A. Gesinde. 2014. "Trends and future directions in open and distance learning practice in Africa." *Journal of Education and Practice* 5(18): 132–138.

Ouyang, Fan and Cassandra Scharber. 2017. "The influences of an experienced instructor's discussion design and facilitation on an online learning community development: A social network analysis study." *The Internet and Higher Education* 35: 34–47. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2017.07.002.

Panagiotakopoulos, Antonios. 2012. "Employability skills development in Greek higher education institutions (HEIs) Implications for policy makers." *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 2(2): 141–150. https://doi.org/10.1108/20423891211224621.

Perrotta, Carlo. 2017. "Beyond rational choice: How teacher engagement with technology is mediated by culture and emotions." *Education and Information Technologies* 22(3): 789–804. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-015-9457-6.

Poon, Joanna. 2014 "A cross-country comparison on the use of blended learning in property education." *Property Management* 32(2): 154–175. https://doi.org/10.1108/PM-04-2013-0026.

Saldaña, Johnny. 2016. "The coding manual for qualitative researchers." In *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, 1–440. Sage.

Tarusikirwa, Moffat C. 2016. "Modelling Teacher Development through Open and Distance Learning:

A Zimbabwean Experience." *Universal Journal of Educational Research* 4(12): 2706–2715. DOI: 10.13189/ujer.2016.041203.

Usher, Nikki. 2019. "Women and technology in the newsroom: Vision or reality from data journalism to the news startup era." In *Journalism, Gender and Power*, 18–32. Routledge.