First-year students’ experience with engaging with curricular online at a private higher education institution during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

The year 2020 witnessed a paradigm shift commonly referred to as the "new normal" because of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, which had a profound impact on the lives of several students across the globe. The significant transformation posed a perplexing situation for freshmen at higher education institutions. The implementation of COVID-19 limits precipitated an abrupt digital transformation for students, necessitating the surmounting of significant obstacles. This study aimed to investigate the experiences of first-year students enrolled at a private postsecondary institution in the context of online learning. The study additionally aimed to ascertain the difficulties encountered by individuals while accessing online learning amidst the current tumultuous circumstances. The study employed a qualitative methodology in response to its inherent character. A sample size of six students was chosen from a cohort of first-year students, while three lecturers who teach first-year students were picked using random selection techniques. The data was gathered through various methods, including face-to-face interviews, focus group talks, and questionnaires. Subsequently, the data was subjected to analysis utilizing the Nvivo program. The findings derived from the research indicate that it is imperative to comprehend the experiences, computer literacy skills, and perspectives of first-year students in order to offer suitable assistance to forthcoming first-year students engaging in online learning and ultimately enhance lecturers’ online instructional methodologies. The findings additionally indicate that students encountered difficulties not only in adapting to online learning but also in dealing with various social and emotional elements that had an impact on their learning experience, hence exacerbating the issues they faced.

INTRODUCTION

The world experienced a public health crisis in 2020. This was a difficult time for all educational sectors and learning was pushed to go online – from schools to businesses to tertiary institutions, globally, everyone was forced to make the move towards a digital-mediated environment (Chan et al., 2021). The relevance of the unexpected move from regular traditional, face-to-face learning to online learning further intrigued the author to explore experiences of first-year students and determine the challenges that they faced. With that in mind, higher educational institutions in South Africa sought ways to provide valuable insights to the reshaping of policies overnight and accelerated the need for rapid development of online learning domains. Institutions had no option but to identify and implement as quickly as possible various strategies to still sustain quality academic learning but in a different form (Toqueiro, 2020).

This subsequently meant that all higher education sectors, including private higher education institutions, had to manage their own academic activities in line with the health protocols. Communication with staff and students had to be actively maintained as no graduations, examinations, events and face-to-face contact classes were allowed to resume. All classes would be conducted strictly online and if residences were built on campus grounds students could retain access to the campus and residence-based Wi-Fi. First year tertiary students struggled as they arrived on campus for the very first time, attended face-to-face lectures for just about two weeks and then were asked to stay home and interact with a computer screen. These students faced considerable physical, emotional...
and physical challenges due to this overnight move to online learning. Many students had issues concerning inadequate digital literacy skills, power connectivity and inadequate access to technological devices—they were now being told to access systems and learn and navigate for themselves online. Further research of this study focuses on the challenges experienced by first-year tertiary students with virtual learning during COVID-19. Although students faced a digital revolution overnight, there is limited understanding of how they experienced this situation especially after the closure of tertiary institutions for any on-campus classes and activities. Consequently, it was necessary to explore students’ experiences of the quality of virtual learning. The result of this study has the potential to shed light on future improvements and support strategies that could be implemented to be prepared if another event such as COVID-19 occurs again.

### Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in South African educational institutions, like many others globally, closing suddenly and adopting online teaching and learning as the main method of education. The instantaneous development and growth in technology has played an essential role in making online learning mostly hassle-free (Duncan, 2020) for both lecturers and students; however, education is said to be well executed through active, student-centred learning approaches, face-to-face interaction and traditional pedagogies (Mpungose, 2020). During the time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the choice to increase the use of dynamic undergraduate academic learning approaches and digitalisation required that a tough call had to be made at both governmental and institutional levels because this would mean a loss of response systems and a decrease in student motivation and learning outcomes (Coman, 2021). However, the implementation of online teaching and learning approaches was quickly adopted and left behind traditional teaching and learning methods which had dominated the higher education sector, especially in South African initial teacher training institutions prior to the lockdown.

Academic lecturers from higher institutions reported having little to no prior experience with online lecturing (Duncan, 2020). For this study, a private higher educational institution adopted and adapted policies and developed material overnight to ensure students and lecturers were well equipped for the change education had taken because of COVID-19. There were various innovative tools that lecturers could use in order to promote learning for students online. The technological design of programmes, choice of online tools, the responsive curriculum that was developed and supportive full-time staff were all critical for the effective delivery of online learning (Chan et al., 2021).

According to Paul and Jefferson (2019), online platforms have proved to be highly effective and user friendly for students to be successful, although there are still some students who prefer face-to-face learning. Stern (2004) indicates that online courses are more intense as students are expected to take responsibility for their learning and do extra reading before attending actual class sessions online. Consequently, the workload for online learning is more than it is with face-to-face learning which is why some students prefer face-to-face learning. According to Kemp and Grieve (2014), when dealing with first-year students, their maturity level towards their academic studies is irrelevant – all that matters are their personal needs at that stage in their lives. Thus, factors such as students’ perceptions of the module, timing of the lecture and the financial impact of getting to the lecture influences the preferred choice of learning platform (Kemp & Grieve, 2014).

In contrast, many students reported a more undesirable perception of their online learning experience even though they had the same hopes for structure and content-related information. They expressed the need for more constructive feedback from lecturers and felt very lost as first-year students (Afolabi, 2021). The lack of feedback and communication from the lecturers was acknowledged by the students as abandonment (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Butnaro et al. (2021) state that online learning for first-year students was a huge adjustment to their learning processes and thus affected them more cognitively, socially and emotionally. Empirical data from Butnaro et al. (2021) highlight the following student challenges to online learning: a lack of student responsibility; difficulty in adjusting to the online environment; and cognitive assimilation and meaning making. Therefore, in the South African context online participation for students was and still is a struggle, and this can be attributed to various factors such loadshedding¹, expensive data and the lack of technological infrastructure.

### Face-to-Face Learning Versus Online Learning

Face-to-face learning, more commonly known as traditional learning, is when students and lecturers or teachers attend class sessions in person and the class is led by the lecturer or teacher where the students are actively learning (Duncan, 2020). Face-to-face learning has been around for centuries, and the instructors are more aware of students’ focus of attention and can hold students accountable for their learning. Most importantly, they can motivate students to be excited about the content that is being mediated. On the other hand, online learning is a form of learning which is characterised by the physical space between lecturers or teachers and students, and these forms of classes take place asynchronously. In addition, the lecturer and students do not have to be at the same place at the same time. According to Duncan (2020), online learning is characterised by the following aspects:

1. The increase of self-study that impacts the educational organisation.

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¹ Loadshedding – The deliberate action to switch off parts of the electrical grid to prevent failure of the power system, especially when there is an excessive load caused on generating plants.
ii. The ample use of computer software to produce and expose users to educational content so no hardcopy textbooks are necessary.

iii. The delivery of two-way communication via a virtual environment so that students can benefit from interaction with their fellow classmates.

First-Year Tertiary Students’ Experience of Online Learning

The processes, systems, management and structure of educational institutions influence how students take responsibility for their own learning (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Thus, first-year students’ experiences are best inclined towards how lecturers deliver content to them in a positive learning environment. Singh and Thurman’s (2019) study on students’ perception of online learning found that those students who were highly optimistic were those who were consistent with online discussions, online class attendance, reading and making notes from online study material provided. These very same students ensured they were keeping up to date with course announcements and did not forget to seek support by regularly scheduling online meetings with lecturers to discuss content-related questions and ensuring deadlines were met. An empirical study done by Rapanta et al. (2020) on both a national and international scale regarding online teaching and learning found that first-year students were expected to transition from passive to active students in a very limited time frame and thus, the opportunities for exploration and acquiring of new knowledge was their responsibility. Most students also went to the extent of setting their own pace of learning, in other words, positive students were identified as being more independent and proactive (Paul & Jefferson, 2019).

On an international scale, according to Almahasses (2021) and Jordan (2021), most lecturers were trained for the online teaching space with a minority having little to no experience. Consequently, the minority of lecturers would be faced with the compounded challenge of not only teaching but also developing their pedagogy for online teaching. Hence, Almahasses (2021) advocates a blended approach that adopts synchronous and asynchronous online teaching approaches. Empirical evidence by Elzainy, Sadik, and Abdulmonem (2020), suggests that lecturers feared this shift of moving to the unknown virtual domain; psychology assurance has been suggested for implementers of the curricula along the virtual domain as a means of encouragement to assist them with dealing with the consequences of the unknown,

The Impact of Online Learning For First-Year Students In South Africa

The impact of online learning on first-year students in South Africa has been both transformative and challenging. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions swiftly transitioned to virtual platforms, altering the traditional learning landscape. Private higher educational institutions and some universities did not reopen their doors until 8 June 2020 which meant they had to carry the 2020 academic year over into 2021.

The COVID-19 pandemic fast-tracked the implementation of online learning by several years (Duncan, 2020). For first-year students, this shift brought about a new set of experiences. On one hand, online learning offered flexibility and accessibility, allowing students to engage with educational materials at their own pace. However, it also posed significant challenges, particularly for those without reliable internet access or suitable devices. The digital divide further exacerbated disparities in educational opportunities among students from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The absence of in-person interactions also hindered the establishment of a sense of community and peer support, which are critical aspects for first year university students.

Craig (2021), states that collaboration is a key factor in accomplishing much during a time of crisis. This was truly evident from the way that staff, students and parents managed it. Social standards have changed drastically as students have grown very comfortable to online modes of interaction and learning (Coman, 2021). Factors such as information on the pace of work, time management, study routines and staying in regular telephone, WhatsApp or video conferencing contact with both family and friends brought about a good work balance for both students and staff’s well-being which was imperative to sustaining their mental health and focus during the lockdown period in 2020.

Theoretical and Conceptual Background

This study was guided by two systems of Bronfenbrenner’s Bio-ecological Systems Theory Model (Bronfenbrenner, 1965). It specifically looks at an individual’s development and the influences within the context of systems of relationships that form their environment. According to Butnaro et al. (2021), online learning influences students on a cognitive, emotional and social level, therefore, the selected framework was applied in this study because it was relevant when evaluating students’ experiences.
Figure 1: Bronfenbrenner’s (1965) Bio-ecological Systems Theory Model

The theory focuses on an individual’s development and the influence of the complex systems that interact to form their environment. These influences take place in the various systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exo-system, the macrosystem and the chronosystem – each looks at the various changes or conflicts in one system that cause a ripple effect throughout other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1965). It is essential to not only look at the immediate environment of an individual but also the interaction of the larger environments.

The microsystem is the closest to the individual and involves direct contact with those within their immediate environment: their family, friends, lecturers and tertiary institution. In this system, these relationships have a major impact in two directions, both away from the individual and towards the individual (Paquette, 2011). An example of this is seen when an individual’s parents/family affects their beliefs and behaviour but the individual also affects the behaviour and beliefs of the parents/family. The theory goes further to explore other systems that surround an individual, even those that indirectly influence the individual’s achievement either positively or negatively (Bronfenbrenner, 1965). The mesosystem is explained as the system that is the link between the structures of the microsystem, for example, the parents’ relationship with the friends of the individual. The exosystem is then defined as the system that indirectly affects the individual, such as the parents’ work schedules not being consistent, as this could affect their emotions, i.e. feeling happy or sad.

The macrosystem on the other hand involves the cultural values, customs, socio-economic status and laws that can influence the individual; an example of this could be that due to a low social-economic status, the individual may not always have access to certain resources or places, whereas another individual who comes from a high-bracket income can afford state-of-the-art technological devices and learn better online (Duncan, 2020). The chronosystem is explained as the system that brings about the life changes that occur over time; an example of this would be the timing of a parent’s death. Again, this could affect the individual negatively or positively in that, if the parent died when they were young, there would not have been enough parental time spent with them and this would affect the individual when major events occur in their life (Duncan, 2020).

Research and Methodology

The research design which was chosen for this research study was qualitative in nature using interviews and focus group discussions that were recorded and a questionnaire. Qualitative research provides a deep understanding of an experience through which data is obtained by means of open-ended, conversational communication (Pathak, 2013). The techniques for steering qualitative research include observations, interviews and document analysis which allows for triangulation. Triangulation refers to correlating several types of information for a better explanation of a situation. The study was conducted at a private higher institution in South Africa, thus, the target population focused on first-year foundation phase student teachers. According to Coman (2021), studies that involve multiple methods with distinct types of data provide strong validity compared to studies that use one approach as they are more prone to errors. To strengthen the validity of the study, the data collection methods used in this study comprised structured interviews and focus group discussions with students and a questionnaire completed from lecturers. The initial communication with first-year students was done informally and the author provided them with insight into the study and requested for their voluntary participation. Students were notified of interviews to take place and two focus group discussions were planned and conducted. In addition, lecturers who lectured first-year students were randomly selected to answer a questionnaire. In this study, first-year students and lecturers were informed about the study and voluntarily accepted to participate. Data analysis is the process of creating order, structure and
meaning from the collected data and is a key component of qualitative research (Boynton, 2004). For the data analysis, the author used qualitative coding using NVivo for thematic analysis. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis is a good technique of systematically finding and organising themes using a set of data. The author first transcribed the responses of the targeted population from the interviews and the focus group discussions and checked the accuracy against the original recordings. The author then searched for any similarities and differences in the data in a meaningful manner, extracting the ages of students and their maturity level in terms of their coping as first-year tertiary students. Data was structured around each interview question which related to the experiences of first-year tertiary students and their online learning experiences during COVID-19.

Findings and Discussions

A detailed review of the data and findings from the responses given by the six participants that participated in this research prompted the following pieces of evidence in answering the research question:

What are the experiences of first-year students using online learning at a private tertiary institution during COVID-19?

The fully analysed data collected from the participants of the study showed that the first-year students did face challenges; mostly with navigating online learning but also with other contributing social and emotional factors which made learning more difficult.

In response to the research questions, many participants indicated that they had no basic computer literacy skills and thus online learning was difficult. However, many participants felt they were well supported by lecturers and their fellow classmates. All six participants specified that some communications received from the institution were not easy to understand because of the high level of academic writing; therefore, they felt left behind or that they were treated as just a number in the institution. The lack of computer skills meant the online learning space compromised students’ learning (Craig, 2021). Participant 4’s response: “To add the online new platform that we did not know how to use” suggests that students also had limited knowledge of how to access student material online. Therefore, there was a great possibility of missing important content-related matter for their modules because they were not fully knowledgeable about the software of their computer devices. It was vital that the students’ online experiences needed to be streamlined and much smoother with the aid of face-to-face training sessions for computer features and online tools. This meant that students would have a greater understanding of the functionality of different software components and enhance their ability to work effectively on their technological devices during online learning.

The structured and focus group interview findings showed that the factors of communication and collaboration played a key role in student online learning experiences. The constant touch-ins, catch-up sessions with classmates, support from lecturers and the positive energy communicated by family members made online learning easier to navigate despite the challenges that arose along the way. Students recognised the role of lecturers, the institution and their family as being key role players in encouraging them to be positive and give it their all. There are different reasons that triggered negative emotional anxiety for first-year students in this study. The one cause was the absence of social communication or contact between lecturers and students and students and students. Many participants indicated that they missed out on the hands-on experience of face-to-face sessions and having discussions online was very different to having them in person. One participant experienced a strong sense of isolation in the online classes as not all students spoke, and many did not put their cameras on. In addition, as lockdown was implemented six weeks into their academic first year, students did not even get a chance to meet as participant 4 indicated in her focus group response: “First semester of 2020 was difficult to communicate with everyone without really knowing everyone and to try and put names with faces”.

Challenges with online learning during COVID-19 identified by participants included: the major adjustment to a tertiary environment, the use of technology, internet problems and identifying that lecturers were inexperienced in facilitating teaching and learning online. Participant recommendations from their experiences highlighted the importance of computer literacy workshops for lecturers and students to help in navigating the online space for teaching and learning to be successful. In addition, some students were self-motivated in exploring online learning with the help of spouses or siblings.

Table 4: Students’ Biographical Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18–20 years old</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–30 years old</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31–40 years old</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41–50 years old</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1 shows that the age group of first-year students covers a wide range and therefore the level of maturity and cognitive developmental level of the students was expected to differ. Based on Piaget’s (1964) learner cognition theory, tertiary students are at the formal operational stage of their lives and thus are able to understand the world around them through the lens of abstract logical thinking and strategic reasoning and planning. This applies to the participants in Table 4.1 as the maturity and focus on work for the 50-year-old student was more when compared to the 18-year old during the online learning period. Consequently, the constant drive for the 50-year-old to learn and adapt was easier, which could be attributed to her life experience and its impact on her thinking and
understanding. Craig (2021), who adds that aside from collaboration being a key factor in overcoming hurdles at the time of a crisis, the facilitation of interaction amongst students greatly aids in developing a firm sense of community and thus many goals can be achieved together.

Communication proved to be a key factor in establishing a community for success amongst participants.

We were also helpful with each other, so you message and anyone and they would be willing to help.

I did emails and had a good response, for me, college tried their best to communicate with us.

The evidence suggests that the microsystem influenced first-year students development in that the support they received from their immediate environment, being their family members, lecturers and peers motivated them to better achieve their goals. In addition, the chronosystem influenced some positive changes that students went through during COVID-19 with online learning as they learnt valuable lessons such as time management and making better use of online tools to understand the content more fully. Therefore, the chronosystem impacted students positively and helped them to become more successful academic students: “It gave me a good basis for work ethic”.

All six participants emphasised that they received overwhelming support from family, class-mates, lecturers and class representatives. Hence, three participants mentioned that the class representative arranged virtual online sessions for the class to discuss assessments and address any major queries on the content that they could not understand. This was extremely beneficial especially when using online learning during COVID-19.

Conclusion

This research delved into the experiences of students with online education during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students engaged in this study exhibited a mix of emotions regarding online teaching and learning, and they articulated the difficulties they encountered throughout this period. The manner in which students perceived and tackled these challenges was influenced by their cognitive developmental stage and immediate surroundings. Suggestions for future investigations revolve around exploring lecturers' viewpoints on online teaching and learning. This could extend to examining how instructors can enhance their skills for conducting online formative assessments. Drawing from the study’s discoveries, the authors propose that higher education institutions offer computer literacy workshops to support first-year university students in surmounting the obstacles associated with online learning. Additionally, lecturers should have the opportunity to undergo advanced training in online pedagogy to ensure their professional growth and competence in effective instruction and learning facilitation.

Acknowledgements

To Dr. Thasmai Dhurumraj, research supervisor, for her invaluable assistance, support and inspiration during the difficult times in the course of the research.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, S.K. and Dr.T.D.; methodology, S.K. and Dr.T.D.; validation, S.K.; formal analysis, S.K. and Dr.T.D.; investigation, S.K.; resources, S.K. and Dr.T.D.; writing—original draft preparation, S.K.; writing—review and editing, S.K. and Dr.T.D.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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https://doi.org/10.1177/2042753017751712


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