The effectiveness of online academic application and registration procedures during Covid-19 pandemic at higher education institutions (HEIs)

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ABSTRACT

Since the COVID-19 epidemic has forced several global activities, including higher educational institutions, to close, it poses a threat to civilization. Despite the difficulties associated with this abrupt shift, higher educational institutions have been compelled to move to e-learning using the existing educational platforms to lessen the spread of the virus. The number of applications in higher educational institutions continues to rise, regardless of the introduction of different policies, which aims at curtailing the spread of the virus. Thus, the objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of the academic application and registration process during COVID-19. The study adopted non-empirical research, in which existing literature on the experience of tertiary students on application and registration process post-COVID-19. This paper is solely based on a review and analysis of published research and data. The findings of this study indicate that lack of knowledge/skills and resources are challenges to students’ experiences in the application and registration process at higher educational institutions. However, it seems that the lack of internet connectivity makes these problems worse. The paper notes factors such as laptops, internet connectivity, and lack of information as contributing to the high late academic application and registration at universities. The paper recommends the adoption of mobilization of learners at secondary schools to assist them with application and registration.

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INTRODUCTION

Worldwide, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has influenced people's livelihoods, physically, mentally, and economically (Wang, Tee, Roy, Fardin, Srichokhatchawan, & Habib, 2021). According Toquero (2020), the education sector was largely affected with numerous higher education institutions throughout the world being unprepared for such an occurrence. COVID-19 epidemic has plagued higher education institutions (HEIs) all over the world, and as a result, campus closures. Ali (2020) concurs that the deficiencies in resources to deal with the pandemic led to majority of institutions announcing closure times in order to set up COVID response plans. Henceforth, many colleges, universities, and institutions of higher learning rolled out social repression, disregarding in-person training (Toquero, 2020).

According to du Plessis, Van Vuuren, Simons, Frants, Roman, and Andipatin (2022), many institutions were forced to find and implement a variety of strategies that helped to sustain the academic project. The strategies included, but were not limited to, engaging in emergency remote learning and teaching, arranging for staff to work from home, finding alternative ways to support students, and reallocating budgets to address the emerging needs. Students' life were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in a variety of ways,
including being forced to leave their homes and campuses, facing financial difficulties, losing out on internship opportunities, and having to acquire new technologies in addition to their course material (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020). From that point on, HEIs had to take a variety of factors into account when deciding how to manage the pandemic as well as how to make plans for sustainability (Du Plessis et al., 2022). Over the course of this two-year pandemic, several higher education institutions embraced learning via a virtual platform and continually responded to new and creative educational administration, curriculum, and pedagogy (Rasli, Tee, Lai, Tiu, & Soon, 2022).

Research highlights certain dearth such as the weakness of online teaching infrastructure, the limited exposure of facilitators to online teaching, lack of technological devices, the information gap, non-conductive environment for learning at home, equity and academic excellence in terms of higher education (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Du Plessis et al., 2022). According to Dhawan (2020), the COVID-19 epidemic has given us the chance to open the door for the adoption of digital learning. Du Plessis et al., (2022), postulates that the difficulties associated with online learning exposed higher education institution’s disparities and portrayed that South Africa might not be ready for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The research sought to examine the effectiveness of the academic application and registration procedure during COVID-19 as well as to reflect on the shift from venue-based operations to online operations in higher educational institutions.

**Literature Review**

**Accessibility to electronic gadgets**

Students with easy access to electronic gadgets like computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones can conveniently access the online registration platform from anywhere. This enables them to apply and register for courses or programs without being restricted to a specific location, which enhances their overall experience (Iqbal, Ashiq, Rehman, Rashid & Tayyab, 2022). Electronic gadgets allow students to receive timely notifications and updates regarding registration deadlines, course availability, and any changes to their schedules. This helps them stay informed and engaged throughout the registration period (Lokmic-Tomkins, Choo, Foley, Dix, Wong, & Brand, 2022).

However, it’s important to note that a lack of access to electronic gadgets can lead to the opposite effects. Students without access struggled with the registration process, faced barriers in timely registration, and experienced frustration due to limited or no access to online resources. Thus, leads to the decrease in Varsity admission during the pandemic.

**Economic constraints**

It is critical to highlight that the lack of access is predominantly determined by economic constraints which prevents students from purchasing the necessary electronic gadgets or paying for internet services required for online registrations and while some students may have smartphones, these devices may not be suitable for certain online registration processes that require larger screens or specific functionalities (Harsha & Bai, 2020). In instances where some students do have access to such devices, the challenge becomes the usage thereof, some students may not be well-versed in using electronic devices or navigating online platforms, leading to challenges in understanding and completing the registration process. It takes careful observation to understand that the lack of personal devices or having to share them among family members can impede students from participating in online registration processes (Hassan, 2021).

**Digital literacy**

Access to gadgets alone may not be sufficient. Students also need to be digitally literate and comfortable using technology for online registrations and other tasks. Students with good digital literacy abilities can fill out online forms correctly and efficiently. According to Sánchez-Cruzado, Santiago Campión, and Sánchez-Compañía, (2021) digital knowledge make it easily for individuals to enter the relevant personal information, contact information, and other data. Students with digital literacy can troubleshoot common challenges that may develop during the registration process, such as browser compatibility, login issues, or payment errors. They can take appropriate efforts to fix these concerns or seek assistance if necessary (Udeogalanya, 2022).

**Digital literacy gaps**

Students possess varying levels of digital literacy. Some may not be familiar with online platforms, making it difficult for them to navigate registration interfaces, upload documents, or troubleshoot technical issues. Online registration systems may have specific browser and software requirements, and this poses a challenge to students using outdated software or unsupported browsers who encounter compatibility issues, hindering their ability to complete the registration process. Digital security threats pose a challenge to students who lack awareness of cybersecurity best practices, making them vulnerable to phishing attacks and other online threats (Herkulaas & Oosthuizen, 2020).

**Electricity and Internet connection**

Despite the access to electronic gadgets, students also need a reliable internet connection to complete online registrations. In areas with limited or unstable internet access, students face difficulties. Online registration frequently necessitates students to research courses, programmes, and prerequisites (Lee & Choi, 2011). Students with a stable internet connection can acquire thorough
information about their selected courses and make informed conclusions. Although online registration is convenient, it can be difficult for students who do not have access to electricity or the internet. Ensuring that all students have access to the registration process promotes equity and diversity (Ndzinisa & Dlamini, 2022). Having power and an internet connection during student registration is critical to ensuring that the process is smooth, convenient, and accessible for all students, allowing them to begin their educational adventures with ease. It is equally as important that students have access to digital devices during this time.

**Cost of technology (a challenge under electricity and internet connection)**

Affordability can be a significant barrier for some students, particularly those who need to purchase or upgrade their internet plans to participate in online registration processes. Many universities had to rapidly transition from traditional registration methods to online platforms. This abrupt shift can result in a learning curve for both students and university staff, leading to inefficiencies and technical glitches (Mhandu, Mahiya & Muzvidziwa, 2021). It is critical to highlight that in a virtual environment, direct communication with university staff and officials may be limited. This lack of face-to-face interaction can result in delays in addressing queries and concerns, potentially causing frustration among students.

Access to internet connection is heavily dependent on geographic location, therefore it is important to bring to the fore the undeniable fact that students in remote or underserved areas face challenges due to inadequate internet infrastructure. Slow or unreliable internet connections can lead to difficulties in accessing and completing online registration forms, Thaba-Nkadimene (17:2020).

**Methodology**

Research methodology refers to the plan, organization, plan of action, and techniques utilized to gather and analyse data for a study (Van Niekerk, 2009). The paper adopted non-empirical research, which is a conceptual work entirely supported by a review and analysis of the literature's research and data. Non-empirical research is a form of inquiry that entails scrutinizing and assessing existing data about a specific topic (Aspers & Corte, 2019). The subject matter encompasses intangible ideas or cognitive processes. According to Jaakkola's (2020) assertion, the research study's tasks were meticulously delineated based on insights derived from pertinent ongoing research and the perspectives of other scholars on the topic. Regional (2015) posits that a non-empirical study is a researcher's amalgamation of existing literature that aims to elucidate a particular phenomenon.

The researchers employed several significant measures to conceptualize and execute this study. The model depicted in Figure 1 was utilized. The study conducted a comprehensive examination of existing literature. The article commences with a description of the researchers' collaborative process in conceptualizing the study's title, with a focus on the methodology employed. The scholars opted for a subject matter that pertained to their field of specialization. The researchers selected a subject matter that is currently under investigation due to its relevance to their academic discipline (Chigbu, Atiku & Plessis, 2023). The data was collected by the researchers through a comprehensive survey of the available literature, as depicted in Figure 1. Sundani and Mamokhere (2021) have indicated that the data presented in this article was compiled through the utilization of peer-reviewed academic publications, books, government laws, and online sources.

The study's primary objective was to gather data on the effectiveness of online academic application and registration procedures during covid-19 pandemic at higher education institutions (HEIS). Additionally, the research aimed to identify the challenges faced by HEI’s in facilitating online academic application and registration during and after the pandemic. The present study collected data from various databases and sources, such as Google Scholar, Google, J-Gate, Scopus, and university libraries, in addition to the primary topics discussed in the article. Henceforth, the findings in this study are based on secondary data, which is information that has already been published or generated from source data. The information collected was gleaned from sources that focused on COVID-19's impacts. As primary resources, Jaakkola (2020) suggests using scholarly journals, research articles, and other materials written by credible social science scholars. As such, the authors of this academic paper carefully examined secondary sources in order to support their claims.
Figure 1: Steps for conducting a conceptual paper; Source: Mamokhere, Mabeba, & Kgobe, 2022.

According to Sundani and Mamokhere (2020), the process of analyzing qualitative data frequently entails a thorough examination of many transcripts, which is followed by the discovery and elaboration of themes and categories. The article examined perceived documents or secondary data using the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) technique. According to Muller (2018), discourse development analysis (CDA) is a qualitative analytical method that is used to examine, interpret, and clarify the ways in which discourses create, maintain, and justify social injustices. Unlike the quantitative research paradigm, which places a higher priority on numerical data, qualitative research primarily uses the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach. To review and compile the body of knowledge on academic online applications and registration as well as other new developments, a methodical approach was taken. Stated differently, the researcher gathered secondary material from a variety of sources, including books, scholarly articles, legislative documents, and websites.

Discussions and Findings

Based on the literature above, the following themes emerged:

Limited access to resources and technology

Limited access to resources and technology, as well as the fact that many students come from rural areas with low socioeconomic origins, are obstacles throughout the shift to online learning (Cullinan, Flannery, Harold, Lyons & Palcic, 2021). Due to family circumstances, students have restricted access to resources and technology, which presents challenges for online learning. Students may find it difficult to register online, engage fully in virtual classes, and finish assignments if they don't have access to the essential software or equipment. Because the system keeps kicking them out when they try to register, some students end up registering two months after registrations have occurred. Some students have trouble submitting their exams during exam time due to network problems (El Firdoussi, Lachgar, Kabaili, Rochdi, Goujdami & El Firdoussi, 2020). This may result in unequal learning chances and impede the academic progress of individuals who are already at a disadvantage. Additionally, the lack of in-person support from lecturers and classmates can make it difficult for students to seek help or collaborate effectively, further exacerbating the challenges they face in online learning (Cullinan et al., 2021).

Remote learning and technology

The COVID-19 pandemic’s rapid development of digital technologies has had a significant impact on management education (Palumbo, 2022). Although the education sector has seen other crises in the past, the COVID-19 pandemic’s scope was unparalleled (Baber, 2021). Universities were able to carry on with their classes despite lockdowns and social isolation regulations thanks to digital technology during the COVID-19 pandemic (Barnes, 2020). Virtual learning encourages technology-enabled prospects for higher education institutions, however due to certain of these institutions’ lack of readiness, no suitable solutions for educational technology have been developed that have increased online involvement (Ratten, 2020). The teaching process has been transformed by the digitalization of several traditionally manual duties (Tiwari, Seraphin, & Chowdhary, 2021). As a result of their systems
frequently crashing during online registration and applications, underdeveloped universities have experienced significant disruptions as a result of the shift to remote learning.

Student Well-being and Mental Health:

Universities all over the world abruptly shut down their campuses after the COVID-19 outbreak and switched to online learning without any planning, leaving their students to deal with unprecedented challenges and a variety of stressors related to the lockdown and remote learning (Pat-Horenczyk, Schiff, Arênilu, Zasiekina, Kagialis, Ferreira, Nesterko, Glaesmer, Fernández-Alcántara & Benbenishty, 2022). Feelings of loneliness and isolation were brought on by the lack of face-to-face interactions and social contact with peers and teachers. Schiff, Zasiekina, Pat-Horenczyk, and Benbenishty (2021) supported that the COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an alarming increase in worldwide stress, anxiety, and emotions of threat. Due to the lack of social support and the added stress of adjusting to a new learning environment, it has drastically impacted many aspects of everyday life and the mental health and well-being of students (Gao, Zheng, Chen, Mao, Chen, Wang, Fu & Dai, 2020).

The abrupt changeover of registrations to online registrations, the requirement to move homes or return to living with their families, the loss of social connections, the emergence of new concerns about the health of their parents and extended family, as well as the pressing need to adjust to distance learning, all created the possibility of a unique combination of accumulated stress and functional difficulties (Schiff et al., 2021). Additionally, several students were anxious as they struggled to register because the system is constantly down as a result of the high volume of students attempting to do register. Students also experience greater emotions of loneliness and disengagement as a result of the abrupt switch to online learning, which will make it harder for them to maintain motivation and concentration while studying (Holmes, O'Connor, Perry, Tracey, Wessely, Arseneault, Ballard, Christensen, Silver, Everall, & Ford, 2020).

Conclusion

The article explored the effectiveness of online academic application and registration procedure during covid-19 pandemic, factoring the role played by Higher Educational Institutions to support and encourage continued academic progression. It can be deduced from the study that the Covid-19 pandemic has deranged not only application and registration procedures in Higher Institutions, but also teaching & learning, assessments and extramural activities. The trend of higher education institution’s operations and procedures during Covid-19 is attributed by the transition from venue-based to remote applications, registration, learning and assessments, disregarding student’s extramural activities on campus.

The persistence of the pandemic has led to HEI attempt to adhere to the 4th industrial revolution where they were forced to put in place technological mechanisms to support teaching, learning and the assessments, dwindling their finances. HEI’s are continuously operating remotely post the pandemic. As a consequence of a lack of technical equipment, inadequate internet access, and a lack of knowledge about the operationalization of applications, registrations, classes, and assessments, a large pool of students experience exclusion. When used wisely, the tactics mentioned in the recommendation section may lead to an advancement of online applications, registration, and teaching & learning at high institutions. The paper recommends the following:

i. HEI’s should adopt mobilization of learners at secondary school to assist them with application and registration. They could establish student-led committees or task forces dedicated to application and registration assistance. Furthermore, provide training and resources to equip students with the necessary knowledge and skills for assisting the learners. The HEI’s could also collaborate with school administrators, teachers, and guidance counselors to integrate registration assistance into the curriculum or extracurricular activities. They could establish partnerships with schools and educational institutions to provide mentorship programs and internship opportunities for secondary school learners. This can help students gain practical experience and further develop their skills and knowledge in their chosen fields. Additionally, organizing workshops or seminars led by experts in college admissions to further enhance students' understanding of the application and registration procedures.

ii. Government should introduce digital courses to educate and capacitate communities on the use of digital platforms

iii. HEI’s should simplify the application and registration process as much as possible to ensure that it is user-friendly and easy to navigate.

iv. HEI’s should ensure that all necessary information related to applications and registrations are available on the institution’s website.

v. Implement virtual assistance platforms like live chat or chat box to provide instant supports to applications.

vi. Create a summarized video tutorials that explain the online application and registration process step-by-step.

vii. Establish effective communication channels with applicants to respond promptly to queries and provide clear instructions for completing the application process.
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References


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