Pedagogical Review on the Impact of COVID-19 in Higher Institutions of South Africa: A Case Study of the University of Venda

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Abstract

The global outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) significantly impacted the higher education sector, leading to both adverse and beneficial consequences. In South Africa, higher education institutions were particularly affected, as existing inequalities and disparities became more pronounced. The enforcement of COVID-19 protocols, guidelines, and restrictions exacerbated these challenges, negatively influencing traditional face-to-face teaching and learning experiences. Consequently, institutions were compelled to rapidly transition to online education, a shift that was unfamiliar and challenging for both students and lecturers. This transition highlighted the inequalities present in online education, research activities, and experiential learning, presenting substantial obstacles. The objective of this study was to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning, and research at the University of Venda. The research was informed by social justice theory and connectivism theory. A qualitative methodology was employed to examine the pedagogical practices during the pandemic at the University of Venda. The study involved purposively selecting six lecturers and ten students from the Department of Social Work within the Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences, and Education. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews and subsequently analyzed thematically. Key findings included disparities among higher education institutions, resource shortages, and a lack of familiarity with information and communication technology (ICT).

Keywords: online teaching, work-integrated learning, institutional differentiation, inequalities

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1. Introduction

The global impact of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has profoundly affected the higher education sector, yielding both adverse and beneficial consequences. Since its onset in early 2020, the pandemic has permeated every facet of social, economic, and cultural life. The widespread economic shutdowns and subsequent lockdown measures have disrupted daily routines at both individual and institutional levels. According to Salmi [2020:5], the cessation of traditional campus-based education influenced approximately 20,000 institutions and 200 million students worldwide. In South Africa, De Willers reported that around 800,000 students across 25 public universities and about 100 private higher education institutions experienced similar disruptions. The enforcement of government protocols and guidelines aimed at mitigating the spread of COVID-19, such as lockdowns and social distancing, exacerbated the existing inequalities and challenges in institutions of higher learning.

The research conducted by Leibowitz and Bozalek [2014], Posel and Rogan [2019], and Letseka, Letseka, and Pitsoe [2018] indicates that South Africa is recognized as the most unequal country worldwide. Zungu [2022] emphasizes that the remnants of apartheid have profoundly influenced the factors that define disadvantage, reaching beyond socioeconomic dimensions to include systematic differentiation in social service access based on race. The evident disparities between historically advantaged institutions (HAIs), which were mainly white, and historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs), which were largely black, have increasingly impacted students from disadvantaged backgrounds [Zungu, 2022].

The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) [2012] identified the enhancement of access, participation, and completion rates in higher education for disadvantaged students as a primary objective following the establishment of democracy in 1994. This initiative aimed to address existing disparities and promote equitable opportunities [Zungu, 2022]. However, in South Africa, similar to many developing nations, significant inconsistencies persist in educational provision across various levels, including early primary education, secondary schooling, and higher education institutions [Zungu, 2022]. This assertion is corroborated by Czerniewicz et al. [2020a], who observed that the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to online learning brought to light previously neglected dimensions and mechanisms of inequality.

Government-imposed restrictions during COVID-19 had a detrimental effect on traditional face-to-face education, leading to an urgent shift towards online learning. This transition to online teaching and learning was a novel and unfamiliar experience for both students and staff members. According to Essop [2021], the sudden closure of higher education institutions by governments in response to the pandemic, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding the duration of these closures, necessitated a rapid shift to online education. Consequently, challenges such as inequalities in online learning, conducting research, and facilitating experiential learning in programs that require it became significant obstacles to overcome. The research aimed to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on higher education in South Africa, specifically focusing on the disparities created by the pandemic and how it affected the effectiveness of teaching and learning in higher education.

2. Literature review

2.1. The disparities present within institutions of higher education.

Insight [2024] defines inequality as the disproportionate allocation of resources, opportunities, and privileges within a society. This disparity can take various forms, including economic inequality (characterized by imbalanced wealth or income), social discrimination (based on factors such as race, gender, or ethnicity), and political inequity (marked by unequal access to power and representation). In contemporary society, inequality profoundly affects the quality of education, as socioeconomic and institutional barriers contribute to funding disparities, which in turn influence learning outcomes. The unequal distribution of resources, financial support, and opportunities results in significant gaps between privileged students and their less fortunate counterparts.

Mahlomaholo [2019] emphasizes that historical inequalities in South Africa have created substantial obstacles to achieving equitable access to higher education. Historically marginalized groups have frequently encountered limited access to quality secondary education, thereby perpetuating social disparities [Chiramba & Ndofirepi, 2023]. This situation fosters a discouraging cycle: disadvantaged individuals are not afforded the same educational opportunities as their wealthier peers, which significantly hinders their academic and professional success [Insight, 2024]. As noted by Insights [2024], individuals from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds often find themselves without access to the educational resources available to their more affluent peers

Over the years of political transformation in South Africa, the higher education sector has consistently mirrored a significant divide between the affluent and the underprivileged. This schism within the South African higher education framework is perpetuated by the disparities between Historically Advantaged Institutions (HAIs) and Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs). The unequal allocation of resources, both before and following 1994, has entrenched this division into categories of advantages and disadvantages. Despite the assurances made by former Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr. Blade Nzimande, regarding the establishment of a funding review committee in his 2014 address, the historically privileged white minority continues to experience living standards akin to those found in developed nations. In contrast, the historically marginalized majority of the African population remains entrenched in severe poverty, significantly below the poverty threshold established by the World Bank and other international organizations [Letseka, Letseka & Pitsoe, 2018].

Furthermore, the location of an educational institution is a critical element in its differentiation. A collective of scholars dedicated to the fields of teaching, learning, and higher education in South Africa [2020] noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the longstanding historical, geographical, and economic inequalities that affect both the nation and the global context in which students operate. In the South African context, Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) received resources based on the presumption that their requirements were of lesser significance, leading to inadequate library services and poorly equipped teaching facilities [Bozalek & Boughey, 2012]. This deficiency in necessary infrastructure resulted in the closure of many HDIs, as they were unable to facilitate effective teaching and learning. Overcrowded classrooms and limited technological resources were prevalent. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) [2013]in South Africa has committed to enhancing open and distance education and establishing more 'satellite' campuses where universities or colleges can offer classes at convenient times and locations for students, including those in rural areas. As a result, institutions focused on distance learning were established.

Nevertheless, despite this positive development, South Africa continues to grapple with significant inequalities related to race, class, gender, and socioeconomic status more than two decades after the end of apartheid [Letseka et al., 2018].

To mitigate the unjust social conditions and challenges experienced by historically disadvantaged individuals (HDIs), the Department of Higher Education, as referenced by Fraser [2008], allocated funding to foster participatory parity [Bozalek & Boughey, 2012]. Despite limited advancements, the COVID-19 crisis revealed the institutional inequalities regarding the resources available for online teaching and learning. Greenhow, Lewin, and Willet [2021] noted that various initiatives were developed to enhance technological access for marginalized students and educators struggling to adapt to digital pedagogies. Nonetheless, inconsistencies in implementation were observed across various institutions. Despite the provision of technology training and devices, students from disadvantaged rural backgrounds were less likely to participate in classes due to inadequate network connectivity.

2.2. Overview of Technological Use in Higher Institutions

Bozalek, Ng'ambi, and Gachago [2013] assert that within the context of South African higher education, there exists a notable deficiency in understanding the effects of emerging technologies on learning and the preparedness of institutions to adopt these technologies. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has compelled educators to engage more thoroughly with online teaching and learning modalities to maintain academic continuity [Kedraka & Rotidi, 2017]. Despite the identification and partial implementation of various strategies, the South African education system continues to grapple with significant challenges, particularly due to political instability, which remains a critical issue in education [Ramadass & Kruger, 2010]. Bozalek et al. [2013] contend that Higher Education Institutions must leverage emerging technologies more effectively, as their pedagogical potential has yet to be fully realized. From a scientific standpoint, technology is recognized for its influence on the dissemination of information, the enhancement of teaching quality, and the development of value-based knowledge assessments [Rienties, Brouwer & Lygo-Barker, 2013]. Furthermore, advancements in technology have significantly improved communication within higher education, providing individuals with greater ease in delivering services [Singh, 2015].

The deployment of technology was specifically intended to tackle several challenges encountered in higher education settings, including the management of large classes, relieving the workload of lecturers, and addressing overcrowding concerns [Singh, 2015]. The implementation of information and communications technologies (ICTs) was envisioned to offer substantial support to users. Consequently, the dissemination of course content and assessments has become more rapid, accessible, and efficient [Singh, 2015]. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, compelled the use of technology beyond its original objectives, extending into crisis management. Before the pandemic, institutions dedicated considerable time to training and equipping users with the necessary tools to maximize the effectiveness of technology.

2.3. E-learning challenges in higher education.

Scott [2013] asserts that a complex interplay of social, demographic, economic, technological, environmental, and political forces is exerting significant pressure on higher education. In the context of South African higher education, Bozalek, Ng'ambi, and Gachago [2013] emphasize that there is a limited understanding of the effects of emerging technologies on learning and the preparedness of institutions to adopt these technologies. The

COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on South Africa's educational landscape, compelling the government to make concerted efforts to ensure the completion of the academic year [Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2020a]. In response to this crisis, alternative teaching and learning methods were prioritized, with a focus on student needs. The pandemic has expedited the integration of e-learning across various educational sectors, including higher education institutions and schools globally [Chomunorwa & Mugobo, 2023]. As a result, remote teaching and learning emerged as the most viable solution, with e-learning serving as a crucial alternative. The transition to online education was a necessary response to the crisis, which also provided advantages in managing the pandemic [Tong, Wang, McBride, Kelly, & Cui, 2020]. However, this shift also highlighted existing inequalities and disparities. Numerous challenges associated with the implementation of e-learning in higher education institutions, particularly among historically disadvantaged institutions (HDIs), have been identified and will be explored in the following section.

Technologically unprepared students and lectures

According to Bozalek et al. [2013], one of the primary obstacles to the effective use of technology in education is the presence of lecturers who are not technologically proficient, commonly referred to as BBTs (born before technology). This situation restricts the full potential of technological applications in the classroom. Hardgrave and Johnson [2003] further note that various technology-related issues are among the key factors contributing to resistance from end-users, influenced by their perceptions. The investigation conducted by Chomunorwa and Mugobu [2023] underscores the importance of careful planning and consideration in the rollout of e-learning initiatives. Their research identifies critical challenges to e-learning adoption in South African public schools within disadvantaged communities, including inadequate access to devices, prohibitive internet costs, a perceived lack of interest from teachers, and concerns about the effectiveness of e-learning. Tackling these challenges is essential for ensuring the successful implementation of e-learning, supported by the necessary infrastructure.

E-learning serves to provide equitable access to digital and innovative learning resources [Jantjies, 2020]. However, the deep-rooted digital disparities resulting from apartheid's historical injustices significantly obstruct its implementation [Chomunorwa & Mugobu, 2023]. Jantjies [2020] indicates that e-learning has had a considerable impact on students from disadvantaged backgrounds, who often find themselves ill-prepared for this educational approach. The higher education sector in South Africa is also challenged by a shortage of skilled personnel, complicating the e-learning environment. Consequently, students face a range of difficulties, including personal, institutional, and demographic challenges, as well as a lack of technical support, which remain critical issues [Agbenyegah & Dlamini, 2019].

Therefore, it is crucial to manage these challenges with care to ensure the viability of e-learning in higher education institutions. This involves the proper training of lecturers, the upgrading of existing infrastructure, and the continual updating of equipment [Agbenyegah & Dlamini, 2019]. Various studies have investigated the challenges of e-learning in both developed and developing countries [Omidinia, Masrom & Selamat, 2011]. However, the pedagogical practices that need to be implemented require additional training in remote teaching and learning for both students and lecturers. Online learning necessitates a strong academic background and self-directed learning skills, which means that students who are already at-risk face even more significant challenges [Dynarski, 2017].

Unavailability of resources for e-learning

The disparities present within higher education institutions significantly affect students hailing from underprivileged backgrounds. According to Jaffer, N'gambi, and Czerniewicz [2007], previous educational experiences and evolving learning methodologies play a crucial role in enhancing academic performance. Challenges such as inadequate internet access, expensive ICT devices, and insufficient prior computer training from secondary education hinder the effective adoption of e-learning. Many higher education institutions were ill-prepared for the abrupt transition to a fully online learning environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Bhalalusesa, Lukwaro, and Clemence [2013] highlight the difficulties in obtaining essential infrastructure, including computers and internet connectivity, in numerous developing nations. In addition to financial constraints, the growing shortage of qualified personnel to manage the installation of limited technological resources poses a significant barrier to the successful implementation of e-learning. This observation aligns with the findings of Jaansen, van Vuuren, and Coetzee [2004], who assert that the high costs associated with resources and the inadequacy of telecommunication infrastructure exacerbate these challenges. This situation is particularly evident in South Africa, where a substantial number of students lack the financial means to purchase computers necessary for internet access [Czerniewicz, Ravjee, & Mlitwa, 2006]. To effectively address inequality, it is crucial to invest in infrastructure, attract quality educators, offer financial support, and encourage diversity and inclusion [Insight, 2024]. A fair education system provides every student with the tools needed to succeed, ultimately helping to dismantle the cycle of poverty [Insight, 2024].

3. Theoretical framework

The research was guided by two theoretical frameworks: social justice and connectivism. Ramdass and Kruger [2010] highlight that the South African government has initiated a program to restructure the educational landscape based on principles of equity, human rights, democracy, and sustainable development. This program includes the establishment of a unified national education system, the enhancement of democratic governance in schools, the introduction of new standards and qualifications authorities, the redistribution of financial and human resources, reforms in higher education, and a focus on outcomes-based education [Ramdass & Kruger, 2010]. Nonetheless, the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic have underscored that the South African education sector is still considerably away from achieving its goal of differentiation within higher education institutions.

The social justice theory was used as it aimed at addressing injustice in higher education institutions and promoting principles of access to resources, equity, participation, diversity, and human rights [Van den Bos 2003]. Sue [2001] further explained that social justice theory aims to create more egalitarian societies and reduce the exploitation of marginalized groups. The disparities within higher education institutions highlight certain inequities and social injustices. Consequently, this concept aims to bridge the divide by ensuring equitable access to resources. Conversely, the connectivism theory advocates for online education initiatives, positing that learning can be effectively facilitated through a network, the web, or the internet, particularly in times such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Downes and Siemens are credited as the originators of the connectivism theory. Since 1980, technology has significantly transformed daily life, communication, and education [Siemens, 2004]. According to Siemens [2004], connectivism is a learning theory heavily influenced by technology and is well-aligned with the 4th

industrial revolution (4IR). As Siemens [2004] aptly asserts, students can (a) access continually updated content, (b) discern credible resources, and (c) differentiate between conflicting facts and figures through a network, the web, or the internet. This is corroborated by Shahzad, Hassan, Aremu, Hussain, and Lodhi [2021], who note that e-learning falls under the broader umbrella of technology-based learning, encompassing websites, learning portals, video conferencing, YouTube, mobile apps, and numerous free websites for blended learning. Therefore, the utilization of these two theories aimed to advocate for social justice within higher education institutions and advance the 4IR through the connectivism theory.

4. Research approach and strategy

This research employed a qualitative methodology to investigate the disparities exacerbated by COVID-19 and the educational offerings at the University of Venda. Insights into the effects of COVID-19 on higher education institutions were gathered from the lived experiences of the individuals directly engaged with the situation. The study utilized interpretive inquiry and inductive analysis to uncover the meanings that participants ascribe to the phenomenon. Creswell [2014] emphasizes that qualitative research serves as a tool for exploring and comprehending the significance that individuals or groups attach to social or human issues. Consequently, the qualitative approach proved instrumental in examining and articulating the effects of COVID-19 on teaching and learning from the viewpoints of both lecturers and students.

Advocates of qualitative and contextual methodologies provide access to critical insights, offering a deeper and richer understanding of individuals' lives and behaviors through their personal experiences [Monette, Sillivan, DeJong, & Hilton, 2014]. An exploratory research design, employing face-to-face inquiry, was deemed the most suitable method for gaining a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of lecturers and students. The sample size for the study was determined based on the principle of saturation, which indicates that data collection should conclude when no new themes are emerging [Pellerin, 2012].

The purposive sampling method was deemed the most suitable approach for selecting ten students and six lecturers for participation in the study. The researchers aimed to gather representative and diverse data. Lecturers were chosen from the Department of Social Work at the University of Venda, specifically those who had been engaged in online teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, ten students from the same department, specifically those in their fourth year, were recruited due to their exposure to COVID-19, their experience with online learning, and their inability to participate in Work Integrated Learning (WIL) opportunities. This selection was based on the premise that these individuals could provide valuable insights into the challenges faced during the transition to rapid online teaching, as they were directly impacted by the pandemic.

This aligns with Denzin's [2015] definition of a population, which encompasses all individuals, events, organizational units, case records, or other sampling units relevant to the research problem. The student participants were identified through discipline-specific lecturers who acted as informants. The data collection process adhered to a series of sequential steps, including obtaining approval from the research ethics committee, securing permission to conduct the study, and acquiring informed consent forms, as well as implementing data collection techniques as outlined by Botma, Greeff, Mulaudzi, and Wright [2010]. The researchers received an ethical clearance certificate to proceed with the study. Prior arrangements were made with participants to inform

them about the study's specifics, including the consent form, confidentiality issues, voluntary participation, and measures to prevent harm.

Regarding the collection of data, both lecturers and students participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The interview guide consisted of the same set of questions for all participants, focusing on their experiences with the impact of COVID-19 in higher education. The questions asked of both groups were closely correlated, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of the issue from multiple perspectives. Data collection took place concurrently, and the collected information was analyzed thematically following the method described by Creswell [2014], which involved categorizing, coding, and supporting the identified themes. The researchers familiarized themselves with the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and then organized the information in a way that addressed the study's objectives through data reduction. Various themes were formed through coding, and thematic analysis was used to classify these themes based on the main patterns in the data, as outlined by Kyle [2014]. The identified themes were then interpreted and linked to relevant literature, providing a deeper understanding of the data. Finally, a narrative report was compiled, following the approach suggested by Maree [2012].

5. Findings and discussion of the core themes

The pandemic has undeniably caused disruptions, prompting a need to reconsider and reshape higher education [Essop,2021]. This crisis has highlighted the existing inequalities within higher education systems, which have been further magnified by the transition to online learning [Essop,2021]. Through interviews and data analysis, three main themes emerged, supported by insights from both social work lecturers (SWL) and social work students (SWS).

Theme 1. Differentiation perpetuated by COVID-19 and the response of institutions of higher learning

This section examines the impact of COVID-19 on higher education institutions, with a specific focus on the University of Venda. It is important to highlight that COVID-19 had a significant effect on higher education institutions globally. However, as noted by Mtshweni [2022], South African higher education institutions were already facing challenges before the emergence of COVID-19. The shift to online teaching and learning, as described by Czerniewicz et.al., [2020a: 949], brought attention to previously overlooked issues ("invisible to invisible"). The existing disparities between HAIs and HDIs can be traced back to the legacy of apartheid and harmed the transition to online learning during COVID-19 [Essop, 2021]. Moosa [2020] also observed that HAIs were able to transition to online teaching and complete the academic year by the end of the year, while HDIs often started online teaching later and extended the academic year to March 2021. These findings are consistent with the responses provided by the participants.

In comparison to other universities, it has come to my attention that our university lacks sufficient resources, especially considering that we cater to students from underprivileged backgrounds. When analyzing our target market, it became apparent that many of these students struggled to access the necessary resources to adapt quickly to the challenges posed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (SWL1).

Some lectures have pointed out that: *There exists an imbalance among institutions, with certain universities being better equipped to handle the transition to online learning. For example, students at UNISA or those aspiring to*

study there faced fewer obstacles due to their familiarity with online learning, whereas institutions like ours encountered difficulties. Consequently, we found ourselves lacking the resources needed to effectively address this issue promptly (SWL2).

According to Mtshweni [2022], the participant's statement underscores the transformation gaps and systematic weaknesses in South African higher education institutions brought to light by the unprecedented closure. For instance, during the nationwide lockdown, some institutions faced challenges transitioning from traditional contact learning to online learning. As one of the lecturers pointed out *"This differentiation was observed when COVID-19 struck, and online teaching was to be introduced immediately to curb the pandemic, but our university mitigated that very late due to lack of resources (SWL 1)*.

The responses indicated that despite the minister of higher education and training, Dr. Blade Nzimande, identifying eight universities, including the University of Venda, as HDIs to address past injustices, the disparities have not been fully addressed, as evidenced by the impact of COVID-19. The transition to online teaching and learning has exacerbated existing inequalities and injustices in terms of access to digital equipment, facilities, and infrastructure necessary for online learning [Essop, 2021]. These inequalities, as highlighted by Van den Bos [2003], contradict the goals of the social justice theory, which aims to address injustice in higher learning institutions by focusing on principles of resource access, equity, participation, diversity, and human rights.

However, Novicki [2020] argues that social justice requires an awareness of inequalities and active intervention to mitigate their consequences. Therefore, Essop [2021] cautions that while COVID-19 has been disruptive, it has also provided the education sector with an opportunity to rethink and reimagine higher education and address pervasive inequalities. This study has revealed the disparities that exist among higher learning institutions, particularly in terms of resource equality and social justice for all institutions.

University response to COVID-19

During the onset of the pandemic, universities across the board faced significant disruptions, prompting them to explore various strategies to adapt. The sudden nature of the shift caught many institutions off guard, leaving little to no time for a structured transition plan. Motala and Menon [2020: 87-88] highlight the response of the University of Johannesburg to the COVID-19 crisis, which involved equipping staff and students with online teaching tools, adjusting the academic calendar, modifying course modules to accommodate practical deferments, creating suitable online assessment methods, and ensuring that any alterations to academic programs were approved by the appropriate academic bodies. Similar actions were taken by other universities, such as the University of Venda, as they worked towards finding common ground among university management, staff, and students to address the challenges posed by the pandemic. In their response to COVID-19, participants at the University of Venda shared their perspectives and experiences, acknowledging the support provided to both lecturers and students. Despite the constraints of limited resources and a delayed response, participants recognized the genuine efforts made by the University to alleviate the impact of COVID-19. Feedback from lecturers and students further underscores the collaborative efforts undertaken to navigate the challenges brought about by the pandemic as follows:

The University of Venda endeavored to address the challenges posed by COVID-19 within a particularly challenging context, likely recognizing the existing gap in online teaching resources for both students and

lecturers. Despite not all students receiving the necessary resources at the time, the university made efforts to provide available resources to students, albeit with limitations (SWL 2).

Some students resorted to using their mobile phones for online learning, resulting in compromised writing quality, font, and typing. Nevertheless, the university's provision of resources, particularly data, and minimal training for students can be viewed as a response to the crisis (SWS1).

In my opinion, the university's support staff fell short in their responsibilities, as they should have prioritized the swift provision of resources to both students and staff from the outset. It appears that it took them approximately 3 to 4 months to adequately equip students and staff with the necessary resources to effectively respond to the crisis (SWL3).

The university offered assistance by providing data, albeit delayed, for the device in question (SWS1).

The options for receiving the data included purchasing it or receiving money that would be deducted from your salary, with the latter being subject to taxation, which could be seen as a drawback and a demotivating factor (SWL4).

The University of Venda extended support by offering personal protective equipment (PPE), electronic devices, and transportation for distributing the devices (SWS 5).

The distribution of gadgets and data occurred after other higher education institutions had already transitioned to online teaching (SWS 6).

The University of Venda, like many other higher education institutions, made efforts to address the challenges posed by COVID-19. Being a historically disadvantaged institution, its response was delayed compared to other historically advantaged institutions (HAIs) that had already taken proactive measures. According to van Vught [2020], Institutions that had invested in and had prior experience with online teaching and learning were more equipped to handle the impact of the pandemic. Consequently, it can be inferred that while some universities, particularly HAIs, swiftly adapted to the disruptions caused by COVID-19, other historically disadvantaged institutions struggled to keep pace.

Theme 2. The impact of COVID-19 on the delivery of effective teaching and learning

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly disrupted the normal operations of businesses, affecting institutions of higher education both positively and negatively in various ways. Challenges such as lack of preparedness in terms of resources (material, human, and financial), the shift to online teaching and learning, and limited experience with information and communication technology (ICT) have been particularly pronounced.

Lack of necessary resources: Provision of laptops and data

The responses from participants indicate that the insufficiency of resources (financial, material, and human) significantly influenced the situation. The University of Venda lacked the necessary resources to adequately address the challenges posed by the pandemic. A group of concerned academics [2020] contended that this deficiency would further exacerbate and widen pre-existing inequalities, as it failed to consider the lived

experiences of most students and staff regarding access to essential digital tools and a supportive environment for online education.

These circumstances are detrimental to effective teaching and learning, characterized by inadequate living conditions, insufficient infrastructure, unreliable electricity, limited access to data and technology, as well as food and water shortages [Essop, 2021]. Cloete [2020] noted that during the 2020 academic year, several universities faced ongoing difficulties in mobilizing resources, such as laptops and mobile data, to support numerous students reliant on financial aid. HAIs with better resources and fewer students from impoverished or working-class backgrounds were able to supply laptops and other necessary materials; for instance, the University of the Witwatersrand successfully distributed 5,000 laptops to about 15% of its students lacking access [USAf, 2020b&c].

Conversely, HDIs, where a significant number of students depend on state financial assistance through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and face limited institutional resources, did not distribute laptops until August or September due to procurement issues with NSFAS [Linden, 2020]. To substantiate these observations, participants referenced the following:

Our data came at a very late time we had to struggle first to make sure that learning does happen (SWS 3)
University of Venda is a rural-based university that has few resources for its main activities, most students come from rural areas with limited resources and little knowledge of technological usage (SWL2)

Hedding et al. [2020] emphasized the challenges faced by universities in facilitating remote learning for students and providing necessary resources for staff members to fulfill their duties remotely. These difficulties hindered the seamless continuation of teaching and learning activities, leading to disruptions in the academic calendar. The disparities and shortcomings within the higher education system, particularly when certain universities or student populations are disadvantaged, need to be brought to light, as highlighted by Mtshweni [2020]. While some institutions smoothly transitioned to online platforms due to robust infrastructure support, long-term investments in information technology, and digital transformation, others encountered significant obstacles, as noted by Crawford et al. [2020].

Macupe [2020] further argues that well-resourced universities have been able to sustain online learning during the nationwide lockdown, whereas Historically Black Institutions (HBIs) have struggled due to the lack of mobile data and laptops for staff and students. One of the lecturers stated: "*Unlike other Universities, the University of Venda wasn't quite ready to engage in online teaching and learning which led to the delayed allocation of data to students and staff" (SWL1).*

One of the difficulties encountered pertains to the absence of internet access, a suitable home environment, and consistent electricity provision (DHET, 2020; USAf, 2020c). In certain regions of South Africa, there is still a lack of electricity and connectivity. These issues were exacerbated by load shedding. The inadequate network signal (both mobile and internet connectivity) hindered accessibility (Daily Vox, 2020); the unreliable power supply (frequent load shedding and power cuts); and the challenges in distributing laptops and printed materials to remote villages without proper addressing systems or local collection points in shops and schools in nearby towns necessitate transportation, which can be expensive. All of these obstacles had an impact on the delivery of education. The respondents reacted to these challenges in the following manner:

The network issue also had an impact on my students, as I often found myself only able to connect with a fraction of the 60-something students, with some coming in and out of the connection. (SWL2)

Considering our rural location in comparison to other universities in urban areas, it is clear that we were at a disadvantage, particularly in terms of network connectivity. I couldn't help but wonder how this would have affected lecturers based in rural areas. (SWL1)

The network issues were simply a hindrance in terms of meeting our expected responsibilities. (SWS 4)

The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on various aspects, particularly on the teaching and learning processes. The absence of electricity, electronic devices, and internet connectivity made it impossible for learning to occur. This highlights the importance of equal resource allocation to institutions of higher learning, as it would have mitigated the challenges experienced to a large extent.

Theme 3. The Effects of Online Teaching and learning under COVID-19 in institutions of Higher Learning

The integration of online teaching and learning in higher education institutions has been met with some hesitancy, despite efforts to provide training to both students and lecturers. While many institutions have recognized the importance of online education in their strategic plans, few have fully embraced its implementation [Mtshweni, 2022]. However, the outbreak of COVID-19 necessitated a sudden shift towards online teaching and learning, prompting institutions worldwide to rapidly adapt their operational models [Mtshweni, 2022]. This transition led to a significant change from traditional teaching methods to online platforms, and then back again in some cases.

Particularly in HDIs, the challenges in transitioning from in-person to online learning highlight persistent administrative and financial limitations [Mutshweni, 2024]. The University of Venda's switch from Blackboard to Moodle for online teaching and learning several years ago aimed to facilitate blended learning, but the unanticipated impact of COVID-19 revealed gaps in their preparedness. Interviews with students revealed mixed feelings, with some feeling overwhelmed by the sudden change while others were more comfortable with a gradual approach. Interestingly, students generally expressed a preference for traditional teaching methods over online instruction.

Honestly, our university was not ready for online teaching; I was not completely ready (SWSL 1).

Students and lecturers were caught off guard because you tell students to do their work and they don't do that, and you have to follow them to do their work. you organize a class they do not show up. You organize or maybe the kind of class you want to conduct requires them to form groups to discuss but they could not have such opportunities per se. Even lecturers have breakaway groups but the how part in ensuring that the students are in those groups is still a challenge (SWL2)

I think we were caught urgently by the arrival of COVID-19 bearing in mind that you know our institutions were not even ready in terms of offering teaching online (SWL2).

As much as we were trained in using online platforms, we were not fully ready to implement them. for example, the training I got did not prepare me to fully immerse myself in doing activities that I would in a traditional class, and that made me end up not doing them online, so everything was also complicated, assessing them, online was a huge challenge (SWL3).

The training that we got was sort of quick training that we had to go through, and that training was not to prepare us to go out and do the work. (SWL 4)

Experience, and tools provided affect teaching and learning for students and lectures remember we were using Blackboard and while we were still learning, we were moved to Moodle we were doing trial and error the transition was not smooth and proper (SWL2,)

I feel the lecturers were lost also, did not know what to do (SWS 7)"

Ssebwami (2020) pointed out that despite the widespread implementation of learning management systems in various educational institutions, most users failed to utilize them effectively. This observation is supported by Woldegorgis (2022), who also noted that the E-Learning infrastructure was ill-prepared for such a rapid transition. The transition not only involved technological aspects but also had significant implications on human factors, both physically and psychologically. Chrysanthos (2020) highlighted the negative impact of the lack of human engagement and interaction, as well as the confusion surrounding the sudden shift to digital learning. Additionally, inadequate training on online platforms contributed to decreased motivation and increased levels of anxiety, stress, and depression among students.

One student expressed feeling isolated and without support, stating, *"I felt alone with no one to assist me (SWS 8)"*. Another student mentioned that *"sometimes I get stuck and have no one to talk to"* having trouble and lacking someone to talk to. These sentiments are consistent with the findings of a survey conducted with students, which highlighted challenges such as adjusting to online learning, managing time, the inability to interact with lecturers and peers, anxiety about isolation, and the absence of supportive classmates [DHET, 2020]. Conversely, the transition from online to traditional teaching and learning post-COVID-19 was not seamless, posing challenges for students upon their return to traditional classes. The participants' feedback on the transition is documented as follows:

The students were still in the online mode and suddenly were back to traditional teaching. Mentally and physically, they were not ready for that transition (SWL1).

I think COVID-19 impacted the students in the sense that they were still in online teaching mode and mentally were still home, students are taking time to get out of that mindset of being at home SWL2.
It has affected their attendance in classes, students are not fully back, in teaching and learning students are very passive, not necessarily that they were not passive but now they are worse (SWL 3).
We forgot that we need to take it back slowly. The very same practice was done when they were switched to online. Even the lectures also take time to adjust to the transition, but for us, it was better because we had demands and expectations to meet unlike students (SWL4)

Tawana Kupe, the vice-chancellor of the University of Pretoria, has emphasized that a complete return to traditional in-person learning may not be feasible. According to Hedding et al. [2020], academic staff at certain higher education institutions had limited experience and training in online teaching methods, which hindered the transition to remote learning. Both students and lecturers reported that their lack of familiarity with ICT services resulted in high failure rates and teaching challenges. Their struggles with the unfamiliar system led to a trial-and-error approach, as evidenced by the responses of some participants here under:

The unfamiliarity with ICT disadvantaged students as they sometimes will join the class late due to the inability to log in as they do not know how to access the link (SWL1).

As a lecturer you find yourself having 90 students but only 20 or 30 logged in and others are struggling to log in because they are not familiar with the ICT (SWL2)

The students are unable to participate in breakaway rooms, discussion forums and even typing or writing assessments online because they are not well conversant in ICT(S) (SWL3)

Due to unfamiliarity with online teaching and learning, I had to repeat a module (SWS4)

The students' uncertainty regarding whether they have submitted their work in the correct location or on time can lead to increased levels of anxiety, stress, and even depression. This is particularly true when facing technical difficulties, especially when a deadline for a specific assignment or quiz is approaching [DHET, 2020].

6. Conclusion

It is apparent from this research that the COVID-19 outbreak significantly impacted the teaching and learning processes in higher education institutions, particularly in the context of HDIs. The disparities between HDIs and HAIs were exacerbated by the pandemic. The main issues revolve around the availability of resources, including materials, human resources, and financial support. The lack of access to online infrastructure, such as ICT tools, as well as educational resources, coupled with pedagogical approaches that do not cater to the diverse needs of students from various backgrounds, has been well-documented. COVID-19 has brought to light the existing disparities between HDIs and HAIs. The pandemic has exposed the lack of readiness among universities, lecturers, and students in dealing with such crises. Students encountered difficulties in applying theoretical knowledge to practical settings, as they were unable to engage in face-to-face interactions. This hindered their ability to participate in work-integrated learning and gain real-world experience in fields like social work.

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