

Chapter 9

Teaching, Learning, and Assessment During the COVID–19 Pandemic: An African Perspective

Upasana Gitanjali Singh

University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Chenicheri Sid Nair

Victorian Institute of Technology, Australia & University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

ABSTRACT

The COVID pandemic raises several questions in terms of the adaptability of the higher education sector and its readiness to act, while providing the same quality of delivery as face-to-face classes. This mixed method study investigated academic perceptions of the forced change of delivery and the effects on the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment. This study identified that many African academics, though not having formal training in digital pedagogy, rated themselves as more than average in their ability to adopt technology for the online environment. The most effective online tools adopted during this crisis was Zoom and WhatsApp with the LMS tools mostly adopted for assessment purposes. The major factors that affected African students' ability to engage online included lack of access to connectivity and devices, technological competency, and emotional and social factors. The study reinforced the need to consider all the pillars proposed by the Khan framework.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 across the globe has led to schools and institutions of higher learning shutting down for lengthy periods. The Chinese Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, for example, originally announced the closure of schools until 17 February 2020 (Panetta, 2020), only to revise the date to at least 20 April 2020 (Wei, 2020). A report published on 17 March 2020 now suggests that some

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-7607-6.ch009

schools will remain shut beyond the April deadline (Marlow, 2020). Many countries have since followed suit and Africa is no different, with many African countries having entered a national shut-down/curfew period of a minimum of 21 days that started in March 2020.

These national shutdowns, which were subsequently extended, led to educational disruptions that are unprecedented - younger students risk falling behind in crucial skills development (such as reading and mathematics) while older students are missing opportunities that prepare them for crucial assessments (Wang & Inoue, 2020).

As Chaisi (2020) stated, the impact of COVID-19 on the educational activities of South African (SA) universities was clearly illustrated in the three key government decisions, all made in the space of less than 10 days. Like many HEIs internationally, this resulted in many SA HEIs gearing up to switch to online teaching, learning and assessment methods to ensure academic continuity. The impact of this decision is felt differently in different contexts, with underprivileged individuals and institutions finding themselves on the receiving end of the digital divide. This is true for not just SA, but many other African countries. Clearly “COVID-19 is not an equalising force” (Chaisi, 2020).

Recognising that the end to the shutdowns is unlikely in sight, many countries and institutions internationally have been turning to technology to offer alternative approaches to limit the impact of this educational disruption as much as possible. Imperial College London, for example, have assessed their sixth-year medical undergraduates in two online examinations (Tapper, Batty, & Savage, 2020); the Italian government are equipping teachers with resources to offer lessons on the Internet; classes are being aired on Mongolian television stations; and one school in Hong Kong requires their students to prove that they are completing push-ups during online physical education by means of their Webcams (Wang & Inoue, 2020). In March 2020, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning of the University of Cape Town (UCT) issued a statement indicating that their institution would be making changes to ensure that teaching and learning would continue through an online presence (Lange, 2020).

Each of these examples of supposed triumph over the disruption of academic activities is however only one side of the story - the reality is that both lecturers and students do not necessarily have the resources to realise this transition. Recognising this, UCT, for example, has indicated measures prior to their planned resumption of classes online to ensure that both staff and students are better prepared to go online (Lange, 2020). On the other hand, other SA HEIs lagged behind in the planning phase, as the implementation phase required extensive consultations before the roll-out of the moving to online academic activities.

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic forced HEIs worldwide to revise their Institutional level planning; training and support plans for staff and students; modes of assessments and delivery; and sessional dates. As Songca (2020), explains, “implementation timelines and user interface/experience are key considerations” that should be incorporated into any online teaching, learning, and assessment strategy which required extensive and efficient consultation between all relevant stakeholders - academics, students and support staff.

The incorporation of online learning into the curriculum typically requires that the teaching material is “prepared by a professional instructional designer, that the lecturer is pedagogically trained for delivering the programme, and the students are equally exposed to the pedagogy of online learning” (Mohamedbhai, 2020). In many cases, with the sudden shift to online learning, without any of these

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