

ANALYSIS OF CURRENT TRENDS IN DISTANCE EDUCATION DURING COVID-19: A SOUTH AFRICAN HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

This research explores current trends in distance education (DE) within the higher education sector. The first aspect of the study acknowledges the evolving state of distance education by adopting a definitional approach of what has been covered by previous scholars. By presenting a document analysis of the relevant studies in this field, the paper contextualizes distance education from a South African contextual perspective. Such a methodology was necessary in order to not only highlight the gaps but to also present specific up-to-date trends of distance education. This has helped to identify the key research question on what the nature of the trends are and what practical steps are necessary in enhancing quality education within the current COVID-19 situation in South Africa. The conclusion is drawn from a discussion of the major trends that have emerged to characterize the South African distance education context as a result of COVID-19 and to highlight areas for future research endeavours.

Keywords: Distance Education; Current trends; Remote learning, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

Bozkurt (2019) observes that distance education (DE) could be traced as far back as mankind's history. Despite such acknowledgement, distance education has been marked by and punctuated with phenomenal dynamism partly due to the influences of technological improvements. Such dynamism in distance education in general has been precipitated not only by technological advancements but these developments have also rendered such education more expansive as well as more complex. The expansiveness and complexity are reflected in the ways that the practice of DE has evolved to incorporate the creation of novel learning opportunities for students and the search for greater innovation by tutors and administrators alike. Additionally, the various manifestations of the terminology such as distance learning, distance teaching, open teaching, and correspondence education, among others, reflect the interchangeable nature that a range of scholars, researchers and practitioners have come to attribute to such a field. The way distance education has been conceptualized suggests not only its umbrella nature but also refers to how the reliance on technology, over the years, as a medium of communicating and disseminating specific content to learners has emerged over time (Bozkurt, 2019). Given the nature of the developments and emergence of distance education as an important vehicle of teaching and learning, we are interested in what types of trends have emerged to characterize DE in higher education, especially within the context of COVID-19 in South Africa (SA). As part of the developments and emergence of such education, Baijnath (2018) has highlighted that, as of 2015, 38.5% of students in South African higher education institutions engaged in DE. This number totalled 379,732 students in a range and combination of 126 private institutions of higher learning and 26 public universities (Baijnath, 2018). This revelation shows that SA already has a significant number of students opting for DE even prior to COVID-19 and therefore an investigation into what the nature of the emerging trends in distance education is long overdue. Based on the developments, it could therefore be ascertained that the advent of COVID-19 has led to an increased emphasis on the need for students in higher education institutions not only to adhere to the social distancing protocols and other precautionary health measures as advised by the World Health Organization and respective governments, but equally importantly, to continue to pursue their educational goals distantly and in an unhindered, COVID-19 friendly context. It is this context and the trends therein that we are interested in exploring and presenting in this paper.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Some of the limitations brought about by COVID-19 especially to Universities in SA include, for example, how to make more effective and efficient usage of technology, the search for more innovative ways of delivering teaching and learning to an increasing number of students who have been forced by the current COVID-19 situation

to study remotely, how to monitor the effective and continuous engagement of students and setting up support mechanisms that could ensure that students complete the 2020 academic year successfully. Despite the recognition that South African institutions of higher learning need to find new ways of dealing with this range of educational problems, research into the necessary strategies and mechanisms of resolving these distance learning associated problems has not been exhaustive enough. It is also problematic to find studies in distance education that have developed innovative ways that could offer students the supportive and innovative environment that institutions of higher learning in SA are currently craving for. Therefore, there is a gap in research to help develop knowledge in this area especially in the context of the abrupt spread of the disease and the concurrent urgent problem and need the disease has posed for HE institutions, tutors and students to adapt themselves to the current demands of the COVID-19 teaching and learning situation. Such research is timely and necessary because it could firstly, offer guidance on what types of steps are needed to mitigate against the educational ravages that could unfold as a result of the afore-mentioned problems, secondly, to ensure that the challenges related to SA's provision of quality higher education to all students are properly dealt with and thirdly, that SA's higher learning institution its students are not left lagging behind in the provision of quality teaching and learning as noted by Baijnath (2018). Despite noting the nature of the problems in the South African distance HE sector and some of the recommendations made by Baijnath (2018) and his followers, we neither know the extent and scope of the problems identified in distance education nor are we none the wiser in ascertaining what the key trends are in this area. Therefore, the aim of this research is to explore some of the current trends adopted by SA's universities that are anticipated to offer learners adequate support amid COVID-19 and thereby resolve the myriad of problems highlighted by previous scholars, including Baijnath (2018).

RESEARCH QUESTION

The key research question for this study is therefore, 'What types of current trends for learner support have recently emerged within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?'

RESEARCH METHOD

To answer the research question above, we conducted a document analysis. Bowen (2009) defines document analysis as a qualitative form of research that involves the interpretation of documents and associating meaning to them. The process of document analysis involves coding content and organizing the materials into a range of relevant themes that help to capture the nature of the issues whilst addressing research question. The documents used in this analysis fall under three categories identified by O'Leary (2014), namely public records and personal documents such as incident reports, newspapers and journals/reflections. The third category, which is physical evidence, is not applicable to this research as our initial focus is currently to investigate what the trends are from what previous scholars have studied about the recent COVID-19 distance education teaching and learning. In line with O'Leary (2014), we adopted a range of steps in order to successfully complete the research, including the identification and collection of the relevant and appropriate public records as well as personal documents, the assessment of the veracity of such documentation, annotating the materials, the exploration of the content by asking questions relating to which authors wrote what, the nature of the materials and why and developing a scheme or a mechanism for the organization and management of distance education. To this effect, we targeted a minimum of between 10 to 15 documents on distance education as this would provide an adequate number for analysis and in line with O'Leary's (2014) recommendation. Doing so will contribute to developing knowledge on what the trends are and what types of steps are needed that can be taken to support learners within the context of COVID-19 and thereby add to O'Leary's (2014) work.

In order to ascertain what the current trends in distance education are in South Africa, we content analysed the collected data from the literature and the secondary sources gathered from a range of Universities offering such a provision. The analysis exhaustively identified four major themes based on their recurrence and apparent relationships to the types of support rendered to students. The total of four themes were exhaustively arrived at through an analysis of the case study and theoretical material and the extent to which our research question and the key objective of this study have been addressed. Our analysis centred on the major factors propelling the use of distance education and the range of practices used by different South African Higher Education providers to operationalize such a provision. Such a process enhanced data reliability and credibility in line with Guest et al. (2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW ON DISTANCE LEARNING

Despite the importance attributed to distance learning from antiquity (see Baijnath, 2018), it continues to gain popularity in the 21st century as one of the mainstream forms of education. However, the form and definition of distance learning have significantly varied based on a range of factors including pedagogies of age, technologies, and societal circumstances. According to Saykili (2018) and Au, Li, and Wong (2018), the widespread adoption

of distance learning has been triggered by existing digital technologies, which have effectively provided wider access to education and enhanced the connectivity between wider segments of the population than would have otherwise been the case. As such, many low-tech and high-tech tools can be embraced by educators to ensure that students have meaningful learning experiences albeit remotely. The adoption of digital media and online tools have been reported to be effective in driving student's engagement (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Lin & Chen, 2017). However, such a technical approach has been criticized for failing to take into account localized contexts, including the South African one (Le Grange, 2004; Igwe et al., 2019). Many scholars have recognized that interactive learning is an effective approach to capturing student's attention and creating a more engaged and collaborative learning and teaching environment (Rashid & Asghar, 2016). However, the anticipated engagement could not be realized if the African norms and values and cultural idiosyncratic manifestations are not fully taken into account (Msila & Gumbo, 2016; Mendy, 2018b).

Other scholars have added their voices to the notable technological approach, which they claim is changing the learning experience for students. They have introduced discussion boards as part of such a change. According to Swaggerty and Broemmelmeyer (2017) and de Lima et al. (2019), such discussion boards allow students to build interactive rapport between themselves as they learn to acknowledge what they can gain from their peers. The discussion boards allow learners to communicate asynchronously and to do so at times best suited to their learning needs. Moreover, the students can talk to each other, play an active role throughout the process, get super-timely feedback on their performances from tutors and peers alike. These activities have been noted in the literature to promote online class engagement (Douglas et al., 2018). However, engaging students in educational change processes is one thing whereas ensuring that they are committed to the actual change is another (Higgs, 2016; Igwe et al., 2019). Similarly, embracing social media platforms in interactive learning has been recognized to help students in connecting with peers and learning about other educational systems which help them in getting more useful information, which improves their creativity in the learning process (Chugh & Ruhi, 2018). However, the psycho-social aspects of students' learning has been neglected (Mendy & Madiope, 2020). Finally, innovative technologies such as video conferencing have been reported to be effective for interactive learning as they aid the students in retaining the information learnt and acquired better (Martin & Bolliger, 2018; Lawson & Comber, 2014). Whilst other scholars have recently recognized how video conferencing can help educators in delivering more personalized learning experiences to students on a distance education program, the cognitive and psycho-social approach to students' learning have been missed (Mendy & Madiope, 2020).

RESULTS

In this section, we present the results of our study highlighting the types of trends that have recently emerged in distance education within the South African COVID-19 situation but also recommending four steps that could help alleviate the problems whilst contributing to O'Leary's (2014) work. The steps include 1) strengthening remote learning; 2) establishing discussion boards; 3) developing video conferencing and 4) using social media innovatively (see below for details).

1) STRENGTHENING REMOTE LEARNING

One of the major steps taken by higher education institutions in SA to give support to students is the strengthening of remote learning. Dipa (2020) reports that South African universities experienced a curriculum crunch due to COVID-19. In doing so, Dipa (2020) made reference to the directives that were given by Professor Bawa Ahmed, the Universities SA's (Ufas) chief executive, who stated that most of the universities are committed to ensuring students complete the 2020 academic calendar, and they have demonstrated this commitment by migrating learning online. The discussion started by Dipa (2020) highlights authentic insights into the current steps being taken to ensure students in South African universities continue learning. Even so, as a newspaper article, it is slightly biased in its presentation of the situation because it focuses more on the limitations experienced by the universities than the possible solutions and innovative practices. This perspective can be supported further through reference to the University of Johannesburg's (UJ) (2020) website which outlines the guidelines for online learning aimed at helping students enrolled at the institution. UJ has developed a website that offers guidelines that are meant to assist students who are new to the online environment. They do so by directing them to faculty information through which they can access specific programmes that are available online. Students also have access to online resources and are offered support by staff members (UJ, 2020). The remote learning trend is aligned to public safety guidelines aimed at limiting the transmission of COVID-19 but at the same time lead to the completion of academic courses during 2020. In most instances, remote learning is supported through institutional websites that are readily accessible to students across the country through their phones and computers. Support for remote learning is also evidenced by a proliferation of activities in this area especially from key institutions such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) (2020), Stellenbosch University (SUN) (2020), the University of Pretoria (UP) (2020) and the University of Free State (UFS) (2020). Each of these HE institutions provide student the option to study and be

supported online. The UCT, SUN and UP syllabi are presented under faculty information and students have opportunities to pursue short courses or access information about the respective courses they are pursuing.

The UCT (2020), SUN (2020), UP (2020) and UFS (2020) websites are highly formal and provide balanced and objective content for student' perusal and usage. Even so, the formal tones and styles that the institutions adopt are also influenced by the fact that they appeal to professional audiences including instructors who use them to facilitate online learning. Other individuals who may be interested in learning about them could also avail themselves of the ready access to such useful materials. The UFS (2020) emphasises the fact that some of its courses are 100% online but also highlight a range of mechanisms providing students with the full support they need to be successful. In fact, the UFS (2020) is currently advertising online programmes that will start in September 2020. These advertisements by UFS (2020) mainly focus on the benefits of online learning, but they have not delved much into how such support could be operationalized within the context of COVID-19. However, remote learning is characterized by additional sub-trends, which also provide bases for additional learning support as explored below.

2) ESTABLISHING DISCUSSION BOARDS

Some of the universities have recently established discussion boards that allow students to discuss topics the same way they would in the traditional classroom setting. The use of discussion boards is exemplified by the University of South Africa (UNISA) (2020). UNISA (2020) claims students at the institution have access to myUnisa, which is a student platform that is focused on advancing students' learning. The students get opportunities to express their opinions through myUnisa even in instances when those opinions differ from those of the institution (UNISA, 2020). The institution proposes that the UNISA site should strictly be used to engage in study discussions and not to be used for any form of advertising or private forms of communication (UNISA, 2020). The case of UNISA demonstrates that amid COVID-19 concerns, higher learning institutions in South Africa are promoting students' interactions through discussions boards. External parties are not allowed to participate in the discussions held by students (UNISA, 2020). This exemplifies the formal tone adopted by UNISA (2020) and the mitigation of the adverse influences that external sources may have on the students' formal learning environment in a way to similar to students attending traditional, face-to-face lectures.

3) DEVELOPING VIDEO CONFERENCING

Some of the institutions in SA also support video conferencing to facilitate learning in the current COVID-19 context. A report that was published by the Association for the Development of Education in Africa (ADEA, 2020) showed that educational institutions at various levels, including the HEs in SA, use video conferences to support teaching and learning. It is reported that HE institutions are using "interactive audio and videoconferencing platforms and applications such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Eneza, edX, Moodle, Google Classroom, WhatsApp and Skype" (ADEA, 2020, p. 7). UCT recently acquired its Zoom license allowing it to conduct large or small classes (UCT, 2020). Additionally, UCT (2020) outlines its recent investment in Skype for Business, which supports voice and video calls, instant messaging and conference calls (UCT, 2020). Video conferencing allows students to interact in real-time the same way they would have done had they been in the traditional, face-to-face classroom setting. Thus, it partially mitigates against some of the challenges highlighted earlier and which are intricately linked to remote learning. The University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) (2020) also states that universities are resorting to the use of video conferencing for learning as part of their response to the COVID-19 situation. However, it is worthy to note that UKZN (2020) exhibits some promotional bias by positioning itself as an institution that is implementing remote learning through extended learning. UKZN has resorted to using webinars to support learning. Students have access to an online learning platform that that allows them to participate in discussion forums with colleagues and tutors alike.

4) USING SOCIAL MEDIA INNOVATIVELY

Swanepoel and Bruwer (2020) explored the possibility of using social media to teach students in a South African university. These authors conducted an exploratory study that focused primarily on the use of Instagram as a teaching and learning tool. The researchers sought to establish students' perspectives about the use of Instagram to teach and to facilitate the execution of administrative duties. The study participants included students on an Accounting course. The findings showed that students generally had positive perceptions about the use of Instagram for instruction purposes. The students appreciated the usefulness of social media for instruction (Swanepoel & Bruwer, 2020). Despite such an attempt, it ought to be highlighted that this study is limited only to the use of Instagram as a distance education teaching and learning support tool but it has not gained extensive popularity in the academic realm. UNISA (2020) has gone a step further by supplementing traditional forms of instruction using a range of social media platforms such as Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and Facebook to support teaching and learning. UNISA (2020) offers support to students by positioning social media as a tool through which general information can be disseminated and shared. Therefore, UNISA's use of social media is not

characterized by formal instruction and this is similar to what other institutions appear to be doing. UNISA's social media page is characterized by an interactive tone and a less formal style compared to its website.

UKZN (2020) is also using social media, but one may readily notice that its use of Facebook is mainly meant to draw attention to the forms of extended learning that students may access beyond the traditional face-to-face interaction. Therefore, it could be ascertained that recent developments in social media use do not involve the implementation of lessons in a direct manner compared to what would have been permissible within the face-to-face setting. Instead, it supports the use of remote learning such as video conferencing and the use of discussion boards. A similar trend is deductible from the University of Witwatersrand's (Wits, 2020) use of social media. Wits (2020) use social media to keep students informed and, at the same time, point students toward actions that they can take to successfully complete their learning in the current context. The UFS (2020) is also using social media for similar purposes. For example, it has held a virtual postgraduate session for students on 01 July 2020 using Blackboard Collaborate.

The social media pages of the institutions are highly interactive and less formal than the collective institutions' websites used for remote learning. They reduce some of the impersonal aspects of remote learning by improving interactions among students and between students and administrators. Perhaps the relaxed tone adopted by institutions on social media, which differs from the more formal tone adopted on their websites, is influenced by the authors of social media content, or the intended effect of social media use, both of which involve establishing and maintaining a sense of a community of learners. This is despite the ravaging effects of COVID-19 on institutional operations and personal lives and livelihoods.

Despite the emergence of the trends above and the adoption of a range of the steps identified, it is imperative to note that institutions of higher learning can develop and implement teaching and learning in other (if not equally) innovative ways. COVID-19 is changing the higher education landscape and perhaps it may be necessary for instructors to develop greater understandings of what the emerging trends are within the COVID-19 distance education context and the strategies they should use to ensure their students benefit maximally from their learning experiences. In addition, it could also be ascertained from the emerging studies that students will also need to develop stronger convictions to engage in self-directed learning. Part of this assertion is premised on the fact that according to the Inter Press Service (IPS, 2020), the recent interventions aimed at supporting distance learning in South African institutions are however limited because institutional differences still prevail. Part of the issue here is that some of the institutions are considered more privileged than others and such differences inevitably interfere with the extent to which distance-learning steps highlighted herein can be successfully implemented in all South African HE institutions (IPS, 2020).

DISCUSSIONS

This research is highly meaningful in the current context in which DE is positioned as a "tool" through which learning institutions can resolve the challenges brought about by COVID-19. The study presents practical ways through which learning institutions in SA are ensuring that students are not disadvantaged even in the wake of the pandemic. This study is also highly useful in the current South African context in which institutions of higher learning are still grappling with issues of quality, as stated by Baijnath (2018). The research highlights opportunities and four steps that could be taken to further develop distance learning in ways that will lead to the realization of positive outcomes by the learners.

The findings are linked to previous literature that identifies distance learning as a feasible option in instances when face-to-face teaching and learning has been rendered problematic as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Laaser and Toloza (2017), video content can be used to support student teaching and learning within distance learning contexts. Live videos, animations and slides have been used previously and their current use in SA reinforces understandings of the usefulness of video conferencing for teaching and learning. Additionally, whilst Kyei-Blankson, Ntuli and Blankson (2019) mention the usefulness of virtual learning platforms, the steps necessary for doing so have been articulated in the context of distance learning in South Africa. This research demonstrates that indeed, South African higher learning institutions are developing and improving virtual learning environments. Additionally, the steps through which these efforts can be operationalized in practice for students' benefit have been stipulated in this paper. Our findings resonate with previous literature that identifies the usefulness of mobile phones and other internet-connected gadgets in supporting distance learning (Zhang, Burgos & Dawson, 2019).

Our study is significant because it serves as a useful reference point for the necessary steps to ensure that students in institutions of higher learning continue with their academic journeys and attain the best possible outcomes. On the basis of our findings, students' learning in South African colleges and universities do not have to stagnate

because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The research is also significant because it reveals the importance of ensuring that faculty or academics in institutions of higher learning are well equipped to implement DE by using the steps we have deduced from previous studies in order to help students learn remotely and successfully.

Our study has several implications as follows. Firstly, higher education institutions in SA and other parts of the world need to invest more in DE given the extent of the problems posed by COVID-19. Secondly, they should look for ways to make DE work for all learners just in case the COVID-19 pandemic worsens or persists longer than anticipated. Thirdly, this research implies that higher learning institutions in SA should invest further in staff and student training to ensure that teaching and learning processes in DE remain efficient.

Despite its usefulness, the study has some limitations. Firstly, its methodology did not support the collection of any significant statistical data for comparative purposes. As a result, the types of interventions or steps used by institutions to ensure that students receive support are not quantified thereby rendering quantitative analysis across different HE institutions impossible. This means that the study does not quantitatively capture the rate at which higher learning institutions are implementing the interventions/steps discussed. Secondly, this study is also limited because transferability to other settings has not been our prime objective. Based on the findings, it is recommended that higher learning institutions should strengthen mechanisms and steps for the implementation of DE practices to ensure that their students benefit from learning experiences amid COVID-19. Additionally, the government of SA should offer greater support to institutions to ensure they can meet the demands of distance learning and help mitigate against further damage to quality education. A practical way of doing so could include offering financial support and additional capacity development and investment in DE.

CONCLUSION

This research paper demonstrates that COVID-19 has posed fundamental challenges, led to the emergence of trends and the adoption of significant steps to facilitate successful change in the South African HE sector. As noted in the introduction, most of the students in the country attended traditional lessons before COVID-19 started. Currently, most higher learning institutions are implementing a range of distance learning steps/interventions to ensure that the 2020 academic year runs smoothly. The document analysis conducted showed that institutions of higher learning in SA are implementing distance learning through four mechanisms, namely 1) strengthening remote learning; 2) establishing discussion boards; 3) developing video conferencing and 4) using social media innovatively. Based on the presented research findings, future research could focus on comparing the learning outcomes of students within the context of face-to-face instruction and that of DE due to COVID-19 cases. Future studies could also investigate and compare the various steps/interventions taken by a range of South African and Western institutions. Additionally, future research could examine the extent to which quantitative data could be used to ascertain the usefulness and value of the practical steps adopted by different emerging and more established economies in implementing distance education within a post-COVID-19 context.

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