

Whitewashed Tombs: Emergency Online Learning Through the Experiences of Students with Disabilities at a Rural South African University

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has induced an enormous effect on educational institutions globally. Rural institutions are at a greater disadvantage when compared to their urban counterparts which are better resourced with systems that enable the shift to emergency online learning. Challenges were particularly compounded for students with disabilities who appear to have been alienated from these rushed attempts at rescuing the academic project in South African institutions. As such, this paper employed a qualitative research approach to examine the challenges faced by students with disabilities at a rural university in South Africa in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed an online survey to elicit their experiences and challenges concerning learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings of the study revealed that although pregnant with promise, emergency online learning has failed to deliver inclusive education for students with disabilities. Based on the findings, it was recommended among other things that educators be trained on how to facilitate learning with technological interfaces which might be unfamiliar to them, especially those that are utilized by students with disabilities for online learning.

Keywords: COVID-19, Disability, Inclusive Education, Emergency Online Learning, Higher Education

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Introduction

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic came the realisation that there was an urgent need to make an abrupt adoption of online learning at most higher education institutions in South Africa. Because this transition was abrupt, there have been many questions that have been asked with regards to whether emergency online learning can be regarded as the panacea to the COVID-19-induced learning disruptions (Mncube, Mutongoza, & Olawale, 2021; Dube, 2020). Protagonists of this rushed online learning argued that it was the only conceivable way out of the unanticipated disruptions which caught most institutions off-guard, while antagonists fixated on how this mode of learning was irregular and that it widened inequalities that were already extant in the global education system (Dube, 2020; Muhuro & Kang'ethe, 2021).

Before the onset of the pandemic, South Africa was already in an unenviable position as one of the most unequal countries globally. The onset of the pandemic further skewed the inequalities that already existed (Dube, 2020). Access to some essential goods and services was already tilted in favour of the more affluent urbanites while the rural and township poor nursed the brunt of poverty. The prospects of emergency online learning in South Africa's poor communities diminish significantly when they are paralleled to the evidence available. Studies reveal that as of 2020, access to the internet was limited to some social groups – in fact, access to internet-enabled devices remains low in poor rural communities (Omodan, 2020; Dube, 2020). This is further exacerbated by factors such as the exorbitant costs of the internet, poor connectivity in far-flung rural areas, and frequent load shedding of electricity, all of which pose serious threats to online teaching and learning (Mncube et al., 2021).

The rushed adoption of emergency online learning also meant that there was no due regard for some unique individual needs. Traditional classrooms at universities in South Africa had already begun to make strides concerning inclusiveness yet the onset of the pandemic meant that new systems of learning had to be tested on the go (Zongozzi, 2020; Mutongoza, 2021). This resulted in the new normal of classrooms being more inaccessible for students (Daniel, 2020; Hove & Dube, 2021). Granted, some urban institutions of learning had already begun to make inroads into hybrid learning systems – thus their transition was easier and more accessible to most students. In the rural setting, most institutions there had to think of delivering learning from a distance – this had huge implications for inclusivity (Thompson & Copeland, 2020; Dube, 2020). We, therefore, set out to investigate the experiences of students with disabilities (SwDs) in a rural university in South Africa.

Problem Statement

While proponents of online learning laud it as the panacea to the learning disruptions that were occasioned by the COVID-19 pandemic, critics have incessantly questioned the efficacy of its rushed adoption in some universities in the developing world (Zongozzi, 2020). A critical facet that has been questioned has been the inability of this mode of learning, in its rushed adoption to deliver the supreme goal of equitable access (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Zongozzi, 2021; Smith, 2020). Although various legislations such as the Constitution of South Africa, the Equity and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act of 2004, and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities were enacted and ratified to advance the rights of persons with disabilities, SwDs still lament discrimination and inequality at higher education institutions prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Zongozzi, 2021). It is argued that the rushed adoption of emergency online learning as a

solution to the loss of learning time worsened the plight of SwDs in universities (Thompson & Copeland, 2020; Beckmann & Reyneke, 2021; Toseeb, Asbury, Code, Fox, & Deniz, 2020). This was because, in some instances, no due diligence was done in ensuring equitable access (Smith, 2020). After all, institutions were rushing to complete the academic year and had very limited resources which made it difficult for them to navigate the new learning environment (Mncube *et al.*, 2021). Against this background, this study sought to investigate how SwDs experienced emergency online learning at a rural university.

Literature Review

During the COVID-19 pandemic, several nations resorted to digital educational tools and virtual exchanges between students and educators, as well as among students, to provide instruction when campuses were closed (Mncube, Olawale, & Connie, 2021). As such, this school closure is argued to have a devastating impact on all students, most especially the most vulnerable ones (Dalton, Rapa, & Stein, 2020). According to Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (2020; p.2), students who were mostly affected by the closure of schools and the movement of teaching and learning to an online platform were “children and youth from low-income and single-parent families; immigrant, refugee, ethnic minority and indigenous backgrounds; with diverse gender identities and sexual orientations; and those with special education needs who all suffer by being deprived of physical learning opportunities, social and emotional support available in schools and extra services such as school meals”. As such, families who are raising children with special needs face more stressors, on average than those with neurotypical children (Asbury, Fox, Deniz, Code, & Toseeb, 2020).

Following the closure of schools during the COVID-19 lockdown, parents and other caregivers have been in charge of completing the education of learners with disabilities. However, many of these parents and caregivers were ill-equipped to offer appropriate care and education for these children, and they frequently experienced overload and stress (Beckmann & Reyneke, 2021). In addition, parents and caregivers of students with disabilities encountered issues of inaccessibility to technology, as well as the lack of access to the teaching and learning resources proposed by the World Health Organisation (2020). Also, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2020) adds that students with disabilities experience a variety of barriers to education during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges include less help and inadequately trained teachers, unavailability of adequate equipment, internet access and specially designed materials and support, as well as the lack of ICT skills and knowledge by the teachers (Mncube, Olawale, & Connie, 2021; Mutongoza, 2021).

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread in many nations throughout the world, how to retain learning amid disruption has become a key concern for the global education sector (Belay, 2020). As a result, there has been a pool of literature on how institutions can be managed during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic (Daniel, 2020; Hove & Dube, 2021; Mncube, Mutongoza, & Olawale, 2021), COVID-19 induced psychosocial impact on students (Shahbaz, Ashraf, Zakar, Fischer, & Zakar, 2021; Ghosh, Dubey, Chatterjee, & Dubey, 2020; Olawale, Mutongoza, Adu, & Omodan, 2021), how psychological effects of the pandemic could be lessened on students with special needs and their families, as well as the type of supports families can give to students with special need (Asbury, Fox, Deniz, Code, & Toseeb, 2020; Toseeb, Asbury, Code, Fox, & Deniz, 2020; Yazcayir & Gurgur, 2021). However, there is limited in-depth research in the literature on how students with special

needs in rural institutions who continue their education through inclusive education or who study in different homes through digital platforms maintain distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Hence, the study sought to investigate how SwDs experienced emergency online learning at a rural university.

Research Methodology

Underpinned by an interpretivist paradigm, the study employed a qualitative research approach and a case study design. The researchers purposively selected a rural university in South Africa with the expectation that participants would report unique and interesting information regarding the experiences of SwDs. Likewise, purposive sampling techniques were used to select eleven (11) students who are registered with the university's disability unit. Thus, data was gathered using a qualitative online survey administered over a period of three weeks. Ethical issues such as confidentiality, anonymity, and privacy of participants' information were respected - this condition was disclosed and agreed upon before the start of data collection, and the consent of all participants was obtained.

Discussion and Results

This study sought to investigate the experiences of students with disabilities (SwDs) in a rural university in South Africa. As such, results and discussions are presented under the following sub-headings:

- Warped Assessment
- Inadequate Assistive technology
- Limited format for learning material

Warped Assessment

Research findings with regards to SwDs' experience of emergency online learning at a rural university revealed that students bemoaned that the assessment technique put in place were exclusionary. Students lamented that there was a lack of consideration in the timing of assessment, no regard for the unique needs for students with disabilities – which resulted in psychosocial challenges for SwDs. An example can be drawn from a participant who stated that,

This online learning thing is not meant for people like us. There's been a lot of discrimination experienced by us with disabilities... how can I with a special need be expected to write an online test on blackboard over a similar time span with my non-disabled peers. They are just setting us up for failure. (Student 4 – with mobility limitations)

A similar ordeal was narrated by a student who lamented,

I can really say that the COVID thing has worsened our plight in the community of those with disabilities. The whole thing was rushed, and we were never in the heads of those who crafted policies – our current circumstances show this. It is as if we are fighting a battle that has been lost already. God knows how we are going to complete these degrees we are studying for because, at the end of the day, our funding is tied to how well one performs in class. We are just doomed! (Student 9 – with visual limitations)

Participants also revealed that the challenges associated with assessment had a bearing on their psychosocial wellbeing. This can be gleaned from the response of a student who posited,

I come from a poor family...I am the one who is carrying the hopes of my family. I have done my best since starting this degree, but this pandemic has been overwhelming – we face almost double the challenges faced by students with no disabilities. I constantly worry over tests and assessments because my unique needs are not catered for, no one bothers to ask how we are coping. I am worried about whether I will complete my degree...whether I will lose funding...whether the lecturer will understand my unique challenges. (Student 1 – with audio limitations)

The above findings reveal that while emergency online learning was implemented to continue teaching and learning during the COVID-19-induced disruptions to schooling, the experiences of SwDs at a rural university in South Africa reveal that there was a lack of consideration for unique needs. Students revealed how their mental health was deteriorating in the wake of emergency online learning owing to the lack of consideration for the needs of minority groups. The argument by Thompson and Copeland (2020) that the plight of SwDs was worsened by the rushed adoption of emergency online learning rings true in this regard. This is especially true in rural and poor communities where students have little to no access to digital resources (Mutongoza, 2021; Smith, 2020). As such, we are of the considered view that to reduce the inequalities extant in education, a good starting point in developing learning platforms would be to include minority groups in the design and implementation stages.

Inadequate Assistive Technologies

The findings of the study also revealed that SwDs at the rural university were left to grapple with the challenge of inadequate assistive technologies. While the university was lauded for providing devices to the generality of students, the lack of consideration of the unique requirements of devices applicable to SwDs was an eyesore. The university was blamed for its inability to source hardware and software tailored to ease the burden on SwDs. A case in point can be drawn from a student who remonstrated,

It is not easy being a differently-abled student at this university. We are being made to look like fools – asking you to perform in an environment that pits you up for difficulties. There is a Disability Unit here, but I am now convinced that it is just a farce – to portray the university as inclusive and the like. Non-disabled students were provided with laptops, but we were never considered in those schemes. Yes, they painted the scheme as a scheme for students to access laptops from the university, but in reality, how can one be provided with a laptop that doesn't account for their unique needs? Of what use is that laptop? So, in the end, it is just the university providing for non-disabled students, not all students. (Student 7 – with visual limitations)

Students further corroborated these sentiments by revealing that the university was also solely relying on software tailored for non-disabled students. This was aptly denoted by a student who articulated,

We are running an unfair race here. Equal access to education was thrown out of the window when this new abnormal came. It is abnormal that you want someone to participate on an unequal ground...when you check the platforms that have been adopted, there is almost nothing for some of us – even when options are available, we have lecturers who don't care to utilize them, or perhaps they have just not been taught about such platforms. This is very unfortunate, we are in the 21st century and we still have problems like this. (Student 11 – with speech limitations)

Similarly, a student with a learning disability concurred,

There is very little that I can do on the current platform. I have been falling behind in my assignments and tests because everything is just going too fast. I feel like there is no consideration for my learning needs... although we submitted to our Head of School for special assistance, but we have received none so far. (Student 3 – with learning difficulties)

The findings above reveal that emergency online learning experience of SwDs has been compounded by inadequate assistive technologies. While the university tries to accommodate SwDs, the lived experiences revealed that efforts have been inadequate. To this end, one can consider the view of Ngubane-Mokiwa and Zongozzi (2021) who argue that access without appropriate support is a false opportunity. While Thompson and Copeland (2020) posit that some learning platforms provide additional features to improve accessibility, the experiences of SwDs at this rural university revealed that there was no due consideration given to training such students. Perhaps Zongozzi (2020) was right in arguing that when assessing the problem of inaccessible learning material for SwDs, lecturers attitude needs to be taken into account.

Limited Format for Learning Material

SwDs also decried the format in which learning material is presented which was found to be very problematic. For instance, a participant zoned in,

I have not been able to study the majority of notes that has been sent for my modules because of my learning needs. The materials that I have been able to access has to be translated into Braille at my own cost, the university has not helped in this regard. So, when you talk about inclusive education, it is for the non-disabled students and not us (Student 10 – with visual limitations)

Participants corroborated the above findings by stating that the university had not done enough to ensure inclusivity especially for students that require an interpreter. A student with speech and hearing limitations mentioned that,

As a student living with speech and hearing disabilities, I rely on sign language for communication. The introduction of the sudden online learning left us isolated without any assistance in terms of an interpreter. At some point, I wanted to quit my degree, but I was lucky to have family members who helped me with the translation of some of the learning content. It is a miracle that I am still enrolled. (Student 2 – with speech and hearing limitations)

In addition, a student who believed that there is a chronic lack of capacity to support SwDs posited that,

As a student leader in the community of students with disabilities, we have been trying to lobby the university to consider students uniqueness. There is a challenge when it comes to online learning, we learn through online lectures and materials are made available in PDFs and PowerPoints. This format is challenging as it is not suitable for students like myself who use screen readers or voice options. (Student 8 – with visual limitation).

Research findings revealed that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the teaching and learning at the rural university mainly catered for students with no disabilities. As such, there were no specific measures that relate to SwDs in terms of learning materials that can assist students with different forms of learning disabilities. This finding corroborates that of Zongozzi

(2020) who concludes that during the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, students with different disabilities were unable to access learning materials in accessible formats, thus excluding them from online teaching and learning. Furthermore, studies revealed that SwDs often report worries about the transition to online learning with regards to receiving poorer grades, inability to meet academic requirements, and course admission (Beckmann & Reyneke, 2021; Clark, Callam, Paul, Stoltzfus, & Turner, 2020). A similar study by Ngubane-Mokiwa and Zongozzi (2021) revealed that SwDs criticised online learning because in most cases, lecturers did not give due consideration to students diversity.

Conclusion

This paper endeavoured to investigate the experiences of SwDs in a rural South African University in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our findings revealed that although pregnant with promise, emergency online learning has failed to deliver inclusive education. This is a result of warped assessment models which fails to cater for the unique needs of SwDs, inadequate assistive technologies and limited format for learning materials. While our study is limited in terms of size coverage, we recommend that to ensure educational inclusion, educators and SwDs must be at the core of plans for prototypes of inclusive education – this will ensure equitable access to technological resources. We further concede that the future of education will be a digital one as has been demonstrated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, we recommend that educators be trained on how to facilitate learning with technological interfaces which might be unfamiliar to them, especially those that are utilized by SwDs for online learning.

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