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## **Learning Online amid COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring Students' Lived Experiences**

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# **Learning Online amid COVID-19 Pandemic: Exploring Students' Lived Experiences**

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## **Abstract**

This paper explores the lived experiences of online learning by 2020 first year students in institutions of higher education in South Africa, students who had not been exposed to online learning before the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Using a qualitative approach, a sample of 50 students were interviewed. Findings indicate that students' online experiences were impacted upon by various factors which resulted in both positive and negative experiences. Factors that impacted learners' online experiences include those that deal directly with technology and learning online as well as factors that are not directly linked to technology and online learning, but indirectly impacted learners' online experiences. Such factors include student online preparedness, lecturer support, student-to-student engagement, flexible learning pathways, connectivity issues, and self-management skills. Generally, students who received proper induction and support from their lecturers and institutions experienced online learning in a positive manner. Some institutions were not prepared for online learning and offered less support to students which affected students' experiences of online learning. The paper thus argues that there is need for institutions to invest in online learning technologies, for Government to address issues of digital literacy and readiness and ensure that the right infrastructure is made available. With the fourth industrial revolution having been fast-tracked by COVID-19, it is prudent to ensure that learners are technologically savvy.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, online learning, learning experiences, digital literacy, synchronous learning

# Aprender Online en medio de la Pandemia de COVID-19: Explorando las Experiencias Vividas por Estudiantes

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## Resumen

Este artículo explora las experiencias vividas de aprendizaje en línea por estudiantes de primer año de 2020 en instituciones de educación superior en Sudáfrica, estudiantes que no habían estado expuestos al aprendizaje en línea antes del brote de la pandemia de coronavirus. Utilizando un enfoque cualitativo, se entrevistó a una muestra de 50 estudiantes. Los hallazgos indican que las experiencias en línea de los estudiantes se vieron afectadas por varios factores que resultaron en experiencias positivas y negativas. Los factores que afectaron las experiencias en línea de los alumnos incluyen aquellos que se ocupan directamente de la tecnología y el aprendizaje en línea, así como factores que no están directamente relacionados con la tecnología y el aprendizaje en línea, sino que indirectamente afectan las experiencias en línea de los alumnos. Tales factores incluyen la preparación en línea de los estudiantes, el apoyo de los profesores, la participación de estudiante a estudiante, las vías de aprendizaje flexibles, los problemas de conectividad y las habilidades de autogestión. En general, los estudiantes que recibieron la inducción y el apoyo adecuados de sus profesores e instituciones experimentaron el aprendizaje en línea de manera positiva. Algunas instituciones no estaban preparadas para el aprendizaje en línea y ofrecían menos apoyo a los estudiantes, lo que afectaba las experiencias de aprendizaje en línea de los estudiantes. Por lo tanto, el documento argumenta que es necesario que las instituciones inviertan en tecnologías de aprendizaje en línea, para que el gobierno aborde los problemas de alfabetización y preparación digital y garantice que se ponga a disposición la infraestructura adecuada. Dado que la cuarta revolución industrial ha sido acelerada por COVID-19, es prudente garantizar que los estudiantes sean tecnológicamente inteligentes.

**Palabras clave:** COVID-19, aprendizaje en línea, experiencias de aprendizaje, alfabetización digital, aprendizaje sincrónico



The current outbreak of the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) was declared a global pandemic on the 19th of March 2020 by the World Health Organisation (WHO) (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020). Nations worldwide were caught unaware and unprepared. Different national governments reacted differently to the news as reflected by the various decisions made globally. On the 26th of March 2020, the South African government declared a national lockdown. All sectors were shutdown except for essential services. Various sectors received a huge knock and had to shift their modus operandi. The education landscape was not spared. With the country coming under lockdown, schools and institutions of higher education had to officially close. Closing of such institutions as a way of combating the infectious disease was not new. According to Mallory (2020), schools and universities worldwide have previously been closed due to outbreaks of infectious diseases such as the HINI flu in 2009, where learning was supported by technologies such as the internet, phone, radio, television, phone messaging, or email communication (Ash et al., 2018). The use of these technologies was met by different degrees of effectiveness.

Although measures of success were recorded in terms of combating the diseases, nations also counted losses in other sectors, education included. Suspension of classes has both immediate and long-term implications on the students. Learning institutions sometimes act as safe hubs for students, they help keep students off the streets, thereby saving them from indulging in illicit activities like drug abuse, gangsterism, prostitution, and many other kinds of abuse and social ills. In South Africa, the closure of universities and other institutions of tertiary education also revealed the huge gaps between the haves, and the have nots. While some institutions of higher learning shifted from face-to-face to full online learning and teaching, for others, the education doors were completely shut (UNESCO, 2020; Mahaye, 2020).

Online learning is effective in digitally advanced countries (Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020). Resource availability thus play a crucial role in education continuity and effectiveness. Institutions with resources shifted their learning spaces to virtual platforms. However, the smooth running of online learning does not solely depend on the resources that institutions have. Issues of connectivity and availability of electricity, for instance are beyond these

institutions. Bearing in mind that lockdown measures which affected educational landscapes were implemented in March, this could have had a knock-on effect on first year students who were still trying to find their way around the unfamiliar landscape of higher education. The probability is also high that among these first-year students, there were some who had not been exposed to online education in high school. At the same time, most institutions of higher education in South Africa were not running fully online before lockdown, which means that majority of this particular population of first year students' exposure to online learning was most probably minimum. It is due to such reasons that the current study is focused on this group of students. The aim of this study is to explore the lived experiences of online learning by 2020 first year students in institutions of higher education, students who had not been exposed to online learning in high school, students who had been in institutions of higher education for less than two months before they were forced by circumstances to switch to complete online learning. The objectives of this research are thus to:

- Explore the participants' lived experiences of online learning during COVID-19 pandemic lockdown
- To suggest recommendations for smooth transition to online teaching and learning in case of future closures.

### **Literature Review**

Many authors have engaged the issue of online learning even before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is because there have been natural disasters before that have led to the closure of educational institutions. These includes Benson (2011), Bischel (2013), Chikasha et al. (2014), Lee et al. (2016). Apart from research on online learning, the issue of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) has also been gaining momentum, thereby forcing education institutions to start thinking about changing their modus operandi to accommodate 4IR. Education institutions that had already started on blended learning did not experience many problems in shifting over to fully online teaching and learning when countries went into shut down because of COVID-19. Things were as usual for institutions that had already started

fully online teaching and learning. However, there was a subgroup of education institutions that was still using the traditional ways of physical face-to-face teaching and learning. This subgroup mostly constitutes primary and secondary/high school, and a number of institutions of higher education as well, particularly in developing countries.

Literature, covering different parts of the world is replete with studies that revolve around the issues of COVID-19 and online teaching and learning. This is despite of COVID-19 being a recent phenomenon, with slightly more than a year in existence. However, research in this area within the South African context is limited. The impact which it has had on education in this short time warrants diverse research. Dhawan (2020) writing within the context of India argues that COVID-19 has rendered online learning a necessity and not an option, online learning can be termed the panacea for the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite online learning providing a solution that ensured continued learning and salvaged the academic year, it came with its own challenges. Dhawan (2020) went on to do an analysis of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and challenges (SWOC) of online learning modes during this time of COVID-19 crisis.

Chen et al. (2020) analyse user experience of the following seven online platforms before and after the outbreak of COVID-19: DingTalk, Tencent meeting, WeChat Work, Zoom Cloud, TIM, Chaoxing and MOOC. The aim of Chen et al. (2020) study was to explore the possibility of improving the functions of the seven platforms in relation to access speed, reliability, timely transmission technology of video information, course management, communication and interaction, as well as learning and technical support. These aspects have direct and indirect bearing on a number of things that include effectiveness of the teaching-learning process, learner motivation, satisfaction and achievement. Although this paper looks at user experience of online learning, the focus is on learners who have been using online platforms prior to COVID-19. The paper also restricts the experiences of learners to the above listed, whereas the current study goes beyond the list and endeavours to portray learner experiences without restrictions.

Bacher-Hicks, Goodman and Mulhern (2021) explore how US households sought online learning resources as schools closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of their study show that, among other

things, the search for online learning resources had doubled compared to the pre-COVID-19 levels, that there were noticeable differences in terms of frequency between high income and low-income households, and that only few rural schools saw substantial increases in search intensity. This divide has not only been witnessed in the US, but in other parts of the world as well (Dube, 2020, Mahaye, 2020).

A number of studies also explore issues of challenges and opportunities proffered by online learning (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Mukuna & Aloka, 2020; Baticulon et al., 2021). The challenges ranged from inavailability of appropriate technologies, issues of connectivity, economic resources, conducive learning environments. These issues affect students differently depending on a number of things. In most developing countries, issues of internet connectivity and the availability of economic resources to meet the needs of online learning are identified. In developed countries like the US, such challenges are also being experienced by people from rural schools and those of low- income groups (Bacher-Hicks et.al 2021). These challenges in one way or the other do impact on students' lived experiences of online learning. Scholars also looked at opportunities that came up as a result of the COVID-induced shift to online teaching and learning. From an academic lens, Adedoyin and Soykan (2021) argue that the crisis created by the pandemic opened opportunities for academics and instructional technologists to be innovative and come up with novel innovations that meet the latest challenges of online learning.

Issues of student and lecturer perceptions of online learning and teaching in the midst of COVID-19 have also been studied. According to Agarwal and Kaushik (2020), majority of the participants in their study perceived that online sessions were tailored to their level of learning and that the sessions were found to be interesting and enjoyable. The learners in this study also indicated that these online sessions broke monotonous routines and the material was easy to access. Apart from issues that impact directly on their learning, students also indicated that online learning helped them not to think of COVID and sleep peacefully. So, apart from ensuring continued learning, online learning also had a positive effect on students' mental health.



### **Research Methodology**

This study adopts the qualitative approach. Qualitative research as a design aims at understanding humans and human behaviour through a variety of methods, which are interactive, for example; the primary techniques of interviewing, observing, gathering documents and examining material culture. Qualitative research was also chosen because of its emphasis on the involvement of the phenomenon being investigated, hence its participatory nature. Willis (2007) postulates that qualitative research involves participants in the design, execution, analysis and write-up of the study. This means that research participants are not just objects to be studied but are active participants in the study. This is especially relevant in the current study because the researcher aims at discovering the subjective experiences of social actors in question. The aim of the current research is to uncover 2020 post high school first year students' lived experiences of online learning during the COVID-19 imposed lockdown. The participatory nature of qualitative research allows the researcher to access first-hand information, which is assumed to be more reliable than second hand information.

#### **Population and Sampling.**

The population for the current study constitutes students who were in their first year of study in post-high school/post matric study in year 2020, which means students who are currently in their second year of study this 2021. Only students 18 years and above were allowed to take part in the study. The population includes students enrolled for both degree and national diploma programmes, at both private and government institutions within the greater Johannesburg area which switched to full online teaching and learning during the first half of 2020 because of the COVID-19 lockdown. From this category of students, a sample of 50 participants was recruited. The sample consisted of students who did not have exposure to online learning during their high school years, and only encountered online learning in 2020. The participants were recruited through purposive sampling. Babbie (2005) defines this as a type of non-probability sampling in which one selects the units to be observed on the basis of one's own judgement about which ones will be most useful or representative. The researcher used snowball sampling in particular.

This is a nonprobability sampling method often employed in social research whereby each person interviewed may be asked to suggest additional people to be interviewed, appropriate when members of a special group are difficult to locate (Neuman, 2000). In the current study, this sampling method was particularly useful in the selection of this specific group of participants. The researcher started off with people that suited this category from her social networking groups and then got further referrals from these.

### **Data Collection.**

Data for this research was collected through individual structured and semi-structured interviews. The structured interview method was adopted for the sake of ensuring data reliability since all the participants were asked the same questions. Unstructured interview questions were used in instances whereby the need arose to follow-up emerging themes from responses given by participants. Unstructured interview questions thus became handy because of their flexibility which allowed the researcher to gain insight into the participants' feelings, attitudes and concerns as they relived their online experiences.

Data for this study was collected when the country was under lockdown level one. Some interviews were therefore done face-to-face, some over the phone and some over the WhatsApp social platform. The adoption of a particular interview platform was guided by the participants' preference. Where face-to-face interviews were done, COVID-19 protocols were followed, that is social distancing, masking, sanitising and temperature checking.

### **Data Analysis.**

The data gathered was analyzed using thematic analysis of familiarisation and immersion, from which the themes of coding, elaboration, interpreting and checking were derived (Babbie & Mouton, 2006).

## **Findings and Discussion**

Fifty participants took part in the current study, of which 64% (N=34) were females and 36% (N=16) were males. All the participants fell within the 18-

20 age range. 83% of the participants are studying towards an undergraduate degree whereas 17% are studying towards a diploma programme. In terms of areas of study, the following fields were noted: Marketing and Business Management, Finance, Civil Engineering, Languages and Town Planning. Although the research site was Johannesburg, South Africa, the research population was not targeted at students of South African origin only, the study focus was on students of any nationality who is currently in his or her second year of post high school study in Johannesburg who had no experience of online learning prior to COVID-19. It should however be noted that 87% of the participants were of South African origin.

The data gathered indicates that some institutions of higher education in South Africa shifted to online platforms for both teaching and learning, as well as assessments, whilst others only shifted to online platforms for teaching and learning but final module examinations were written the traditional way, with students on campus. Looking at the aspect of students lived experiences, a number of themes emerged from the data gathered and these include the following; student online preparedness, lecturer support, student-to-student engagement, flexible learning pathways, connectivity issues, and self-management skills.

### **Online Preparedness**

Students indicated that they received induction on online learning in various degrees from their institutions. Institutions which were already using online platforms as part of blended learning before COVID-19 started inducting first year students on online learning during the institutions' orientation weeks, which took place just before the beginning of the teaching period from mid-January to early March. With institutions which had not started on blended learning prior to COVID-19, they inducted their students online. Information on how to access and engage with online content was sent through diverse platforms like learning management systems, emails and WhatsApp. Although information was made available on platforms accessible to students, some students indicated that they lacked technology skills, an issue which students argued was barely addressed by their institutions. In other words, responses from students indicate that institutions concentrated on how to access online learning platforms and neglected the issue of student

computer skills. In terms of student preparedness for, and comfort with online learning at the commencement of actual online learning, students proffered varying degrees ranging from not prepared at all, to very prepared and very comfortable. Bearing in mind that the study focus is on students who did not have prior experience with online learning, the efficacy of induction received played a crucial role in ensuring effectiveness of the transition to full online learning. It was noted that the consistent and continual availability of information on online learning gradually eased the transition to online learning for this subpopulation of students. The overall impression, however, was that this subpopulation of students was not prepared for online lectures when they commenced. Contrary to the findings of this group, a study by Chung et al. (2020) indicate that the overall learner preparedness was above average even though students were “thrown into the deep end”. Unlike their study, the current study did not delve into gender as a variable in assessing the issue of student online preparedness, although findings from Chung et al. (2020) indicate that both male and female students did not exhibit any significant differences in their overall readiness for online learning.

### **Beyond the Lecture Session - Lecturer and Institutional Support**

Students experienced lecturer support in a positive manner overall. Students indicated that lecturers were always available on different platforms. Most lecturers were said to be available on the WhatsApp platform and were always ready to offer assistance to students. One student had the following to say about his lecturers;

From my side I can say that most of my lecturers were available 24/7 on WhatsApp. Sometimes I would send a message late at night because that is when I would have free bundles and they would respond there and there and help me with my challenges.

The response above from one of the students shows that lecturers' availability to assist students contributed towards positive experiences. However, the opposite may be true from the lecturers' lens. Being available 24/7 means lecturers were deprived of rest, family time as well as time to

adequately prepare for their teaching. It is possible that such a scenario may have resulted in unprepared and ineffective teaching as well as negative lecturer mental, emotional and physical well-being.

Findings also showed that lecturers responded to emails timeously and extra study materials were made available on different platforms that were accessible to students. Another outstanding form of support was in relation to online assessment deadlines. Apart from giving students a lot of time to work on and submit their work, students were also given a number of attempts to submit online assessments.

In terms of institutional support, there was an indication that some institutions provided data to students who could not afford, some allowed students to get to campuses to access wi-fi, while some offered mental health support through online workshops and webinars. There were however some institutions which seemed to silent in terms of support.

### **Synchronous Learning**

Students had mixed experiences with synchronous lectures. There are students who felt that real time online lectures were not different from the traditional face-to-face lectures, except for the absence of physical beings. Adnan & Anwar (2020) also indicate the same finding. This group of people did not experience any learning challenges from online learning. The findings indicated a second group of students who felt that online real time lectures were better, and they enjoyed them more than traditional face-to-face. Among other reasons, students indicated that they experienced no disruptions from classmates as they would in physical classrooms. Students also reported that they felt comfortable participating in online class interactions because the blank screen provided a 'safe hub' for them to participate without the stress of others knowing what they know, and what they do not know.

There was yet another group of students which was identified, which felt that their experience of synchronous learning in 2020 was not that comfortable. These students indicated that real time online lectures lacked the human and social element. The unavailability (so to speak) of the lecturer and classmates made learning difficult and uninteresting. Concentration levels were also reported to be low and further worsened by the monotony of

listening to lecturers' voices for too long. Some students indicated that real time online lectures without the video component were not motivating and should not be made too long. The video component was disconnected because video tend to consume more bandwidth than text and audio, so this was done to minimise on data cost, which is expensive and beyond the reach of many in South Africa. Others felt that most lectures were rushed and students were not given enough time to grasp, digest concepts learned and ask questions during the lectures. This is in line with Dumford & Miller (2018) study, that reports less exposure to effective teaching practises and lower quality interactions.

The experiences from the three identified groups of student population point to the issue of diverse student learning paths, which is not peculiar to online learning. Lectures should therefore take this diversity in learning preferences and inclinations into consideration when planning synchronous lectures in order to meet diverse student needs.

### **Technology**

Apart from student experiences with the actual teaching and learning process, there are factors that have direct bearing on students' experiences with online learning. These are issues to do with the technological aspect of online learning. This includes the issue of the availability of appropriate gadgets, availability of data, internet connectivity, online literacy.

**Availability of appropriate electronic gadgets.** While online learning offered an alternative to the traditional face-to-face learning during COVID-19, the issue of the unavailability of appropriate electronic gadgets to access online platforms was raised. There were students who indicated that their experience of online learning was affected by the unavailability of appropriate electronic gadgets. While some students did not have laptops and computers at home, their cell phones were not compatible with the learning and teaching applications adopted by their institutions. During the interviews, some participants indicated that they could not attend synchronous lectures and had to ask their classmates with appropriate gadgets to download lectures and other learning materials from learning management platforms and post them on the WhatsApp platform. According

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to one participant, although online learning during COVID-19 further widened the divide between the haves and the have-nots, he witnessed the spirit of compassion and teamwork among students who barely knew one another but were just united by the need to salvage the year. In some instances, students who stayed in the same neighbourhood would gather in one place, despite COVID-19 regulations and use one device to access online learning. Students who were involved in this indicated that the coming together made them feel good and took away the isolation that is normally associated with online learning.

**Internet connectivity.** Students indicated that online learning was affected by issues of internet connectivity. This sentiment was echoed by students who were accessing online learning from rural and urban South Africa as well as student staying beyond the South African borders. This has resulted in students missing synchronous learning. Students further indicated that internet connectivity was better around midnight and this was when they would wake up and access recorded online lectures or do online assessments. The issue of connectivity was further hampered by electricity loadshedding in SA, particularly during the winter period. Network interruptions posed immense challenges particularly when it came to online assignments and examinations. This led to students sometimes trying to upload assessments for several times and in some cases the assessments would hang for long times.

### **Mental Health and Emotional Well-being**

For some learners, online learning impacted on their mental health and emotional well-being. The constant struggle with network connectivity particularly during assessments and examination caused a lot of stress and anxiety amongst students. S13 had the following to say;

Tjo, this online learning thing has caused me misery and stress. Sometimes my assignment would hang for hours literary and I would not sleep until it goes through. It was worse when I had more than one assignment due on the same day or on consecutive days. This is not good for anybody's health I tell you.

While S13 talked about stress and anxiety during assessment times, some students experienced stress and anxiety throughout the year because of issues of gadgets, connectivity, electricity. Students who used internet cafes, malls and other people's homes indicated that it was not easy, particularly taking into account COVID-19 transmissions. S30 indicated that she would pray every day that the family that was helping her with internet would not get sick with COVID-19, lest they blame it on her which added to issues of mental health. This shows that for some students, accessing online learning was marred by technological, mental health and socio-economic challenges. The technological and socio-economic divide was further widened during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was further compounded by the fact that most people lost jobs and some had their salaries cut and could not buy appropriate gadgets and enough data for their children.

A sense of isolation during online learning was also experienced by some students. This sense of isolation was experienced by students who engaged in both synchronous and asynchronous learning. Data from the research indicated that synchronous learning lacked both lecturer-student interaction and student-student interaction and collaboration. The lack of the video component exacerbated the problem. Both students and lecturers could not switch on their videos because of data issues. Students thus became tired of staring at screens without connecting with their lecturers and classmates' faces and they felt alone in the virtual classrooms. A Human Resources student S10 indicated that he did not feel like he was in a lecture session and the absence of classmates faces and voices made him feel so alone.

### **Physical Learning Environment**

Students' learning experiences are also impacted by the environment in which learning takes place. The sample for this research consisted of students who accessed online learning from their homes, university campuses (just for the access of wi-fi hotspots, no formal classes), internet cafés and malls. These different environments impacted students in different ways. Data gathered from students who were learning from home indicated various degrees of convenience offered by this environment. For some students, their homes offered convenient and conducive environment for learning. Students



had their own spaces within the home which were conducive for and dedicated to learning, while others complained of overcrowded homes, noise within the homes and noise from surrounding homes, particularly in high density residential areas as well as informal settlements. Students in the latter home environments experienced difficulties learning in such environments and indicated that they missed most synchronous lectures and had to depend on recorded lectures which they would download and listen to at night when other household members and people from surrounding houses would have gone to bed.

Data gathered indicated that some students would meet on campuses during Alert Level 3 and 4 and attend online classes as a group. This applied to students from four different institutions. They created these lecture/study groups in reaction to a number of challenges they were facing from the home environment. This environment according to students from this group offered a conducive quiet environment which was difficult to find in some homes, it offered uninterrupted connectivity and students were therefore able to access synchronous lectures, it offered the social aspects that lacked when students attend classes in their own homes. The lecture/study groups mitigated against the isolation experienced by most students. S36 indicated that it was through such groups that she learned how to navigate her institution's online learning management system. Generally, the experience was positive, and students believe that it contributed towards the successful completion of their first year of studies.

### **Interaction**

Learning is a social construction and interaction within the learning environment is a crucial element in the success of learning activities. Interaction takes place in different forms and in this study, lecturer-student as well as student-student interaction is considered. According to Dhawan (2020), synchronous learning can provide a lot of opportunities for social interaction. However, from the current study, the overall feeling was that interaction was very limited in terms of lecturer-student interaction in real time lectures. Generally, students felt that lecturers rushed through lectures and did not give students time to ask questions. Some students also indicated that some lecturers would simply read through their slides, thereby making

lectures monotonous and boring. One student actually called such lectures “sleeping pills”. Lecturer-student interaction however took place ‘outside lectures’ through emails, phone calls and social media platforms, especially WhatsApp. What could not be confirmed in this study was whether lecturers had challenges in preparing interactive real time activities since lectures were not part of the study.

Student-student interaction was almost non-existent in some of the real time lectures. Students indicated that their audios and the chat functions were disabled during synchronous lectures. Asked why such crucial functionalities were disabled, students pointed out that it was to avoid disruptions from some students. However, some lecturers would allow student-student interaction on discussion boards. It was also noted that interaction was vibrant on WhatsApp groups. Apart from the ‘formalised’ class WhatsApp groups, students also formed their own study groups and would sometimes collaborate with students from sister campuses. Students indicated that they benefitted from these interactions both academically and socially. The same was also noted by Yan et al. (2021), who argue that interactions are beneficial to students’ emotional well-being and learning performance. S12, S19, S20 stated that the student-student lecture/study groups did not only keep them sane, the social groups also kept them in ‘class’ and contributed towards the successful completion of the academic year.

### **Flexibility in Learning**

One of the things that students pointed out as having contributed to the positive experiences of online learning is the flexibility that is offered by online learning. Online learning offered students the opportunity to engage in learning at a time and place of their convenience. It offered choices where students could opt for synchronous or asynchronous learning. Students also had the opportunity to go over lectures many times until they understood, they could go over recorded lectures and find out information that they could have missed or misunderstood during lectures, which was not possible with face-to-face traditional lectures. Students were satisfied with this aspect of online learning.

### **Self-management Skills**

In as much as online learning offers flexibility in learning, it also demands certain skills from students for learning to take place. It calls for independent learning and time management skills. Students indicated that the presence of lectures and additional learning materials online gave them the comfort that they could skip lectures and play catch up later since the learning materials were always available. This however led to procrastination, which according to S3, S7, S23 and S30 resulted in too much pressure towards assessment submission dates. Students also indicated that they struggled where they received learning materials from lecturers in asynchronous learning. The 'absence' of the lecturer, even in recorded lectures made learning difficulty for some students. This means that students' experiences were also impacted upon by their unique learning pathways. Students who preferred and were good at independent learning had no challenges with asynchronous learning and the lack of social interaction associated with it. Students also needed to manage themselves and be disciplined and committed to their studies since this was different from high school where everything was put in place with teachers and school administration ensuring that students attend all lessons and do all their work on time.

### **Digital Literacy**

The American Library Association's digital literacy task force defines digital literacy as the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills. In the public eye, school learners and tertiary students are regarded as digitally literate, and even called digital natives, because "they are always on their cell phones". Using a cell phone for communicating with family and friends is, however, a far cry from finding from the cognitive and technical skills required for online learning. Despite South Africa having been rated as a country with the highest digital literacy in Africa (Siemens, 2017), research shows that in 2020, 68.4% of students in SA reported that they had difficulty adapting to the online environment, thus emphasising the general lack of digital literacy among learners (Hanekom, 2020). This is not a challenge experienced in developing countries only where online learning has been met with different challenges with regards to

issues of digital readiness. Barbour and LaBonte (2017) estimated that even in countries where online learning is growing rapidly, such as USA and Canada, less than 10% of the K-12 student population had prior experience with this format and the majority find it problematic to adapt to online learning. This resonates with findings of the current study where students found it difficult to navigate the online learning systems. The data gathered indicated that students faced problems in uploading assessments onto the learning management systems in the right way and format despite getting instructions from lecturers. They also encountered problems in navigating the learning management systems in general. One student reported that different lecturers created different virtual spaces on the learning management systems for different things and that just added to the confusion. Her recommendation was that all lectures should use the same format to help students like her who are not that technologically savvy. On the other hand, some students also complained that some lectures were using different online platforms for the same modules or subjects which led to students missing some of the work.

### **Online Appropriateness**

Students also voiced out that online learning was not appropriate for some courses. This came from Information Technology and Chemical Engineering students. To begin with, they argued that some of the software that is needed to perform certain activities is too expensive and would also need gadgets that they did not afford. Secondly, some practical activities require proper laboratories and hands-on practice. They therefore felt that although they passed their first-year modules, they have not been equipped with full knowledge in such modules.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Based on the findings of this study, students' online experiences were impacted upon by a variety of factors which resulted in both positive and negative experiences. Factors that impacted learners' online experiences included those that had to do directly with technology and learning online as well as other factors that were not directly linked to technology and online

learning, but still indirectly impacted learners' online experiences. It should also be noted that different factors impacted learners' experiences in different ways.

Government needs to address issues of digital literacy and readiness and ensure that the right infrastructure is available in all areas. Issues of equitable distribution of technological infrastructure countrywide is crucial if issues of online learning are to be successful in lockdown situations like the current COVID-19 induced one. Some students had serious challenges with poor network and connectivity, and this impacted greatly on their learning experiences.

It was also noted from the study that there is need for institutions to invest in online learning technologies as well as compatible gadgets for students. Some students had to risk COVID-19 infections and join lecture groups, not because they were not comfortable learning from their homes, but because they did not have appropriate gadgets to use for online learning. Some institutions supported their students by providing gadgets like laptops and this is highly commendable. Students need equal access to learning resources to avoid situations where some are disadvantaged because lack of appropriate gadgets.

Issues of digital literacy should be taken seriously from as early as kindergarten. With the fourth industrial revolution having been fast-tracked by COVID-19, it is prudent to ensure that learners are assisted to be technologically savvy from an early age. After all, nobody knows when this corona pandemic would end, and until it does, classes have to go on at all levels of education. Governments can learn from the experiences of the first-time online students of this pandemic and put in place policies and initiatives for early digital socialisation in schools. This should not be left to private schools and schools in towns and cities, it should happen across the country to include rural schools as well so that no learner is left behind in such instances.

In making decisions to shift to online learning, institutions should also consider the physical and social environment that learners find themselves in. Considering the acute social divide in South Africa, there are students who stay in overcrowded areas which are not conducive to learning. From the current study, such students struggled to remain in 'school' and even

risked contracting COVID-19 by visiting friends' houses, malls or their college or university campuses in order to find conducive environments for learning. It is therefore crucial that institutions also take this issue of the learning environment into consideration and help students in whatever way possible.

## Notes

[1] In South Africa, educational qualifications are categorised under vocational and general qualifications, and are placed at different National Qualification Framework (NQF) levels. A diploma is placed under vocational qualifications with NQF level 6, whereas a bachelor's degree is placed under general qualifications with NQF level 7.

[2] South Africa uses an alert level system to determine the level of restrictions to be applied during a national state of disaster. Covid 19 was declared a national state of disaster in SA on the 26th of March 2020 and alert levels were put in place. Levels range from Alert Level 1 (which indicates low COVID-19 spread and restrictions on people movement) to Alert Level 5 (which indicates high COVID-19 spread and more stringent restrictions on people movement)

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