Online Teaching and Learning Pedagogy: Was the Access Programme in a Fit State?

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Abstract: Unprecedented situations present numerous challenges, as seen during the recent global pandemic, which significantly impacted all areas of human activity. In South Africa, educational institutions shifted to online learning due to government-imposed lockdowns. Traditional and residential institutions faced the most difficulties in this transition. This paper examines students' perceptions of how COVID-19 intensified existing challenges in higher education, particularly within the University Access Programme at one South African university. Key issues identified include physical and mental health disruptions, limited resource access, and a sense of collegiality. This paper provides an analysis of the secondary data gathered from students' assignments discussing their challenges in learning and teaching, using a functionalist perspective to better understand their experiences.
Keywords: Facilitator, functionalism, pedagogy, University Access Programme

This paper focuses on students' experienced challenges of how COVID-19 exacerbated already existing challenges in higher education institutions (HEIs), particularly University Access Programmes (UAP) in one university in South Africa. This HEI in South Africa is among many institutions that introduced UAP to enable access to and participation in higher education for those who do not meet minimum university requirements, in other nations known as widening participation (Marais & Hanekom, 2014; University of the Free State [UFS], 2023). In addition to providing access, it affords beneficial support to be a successful student. Consequently, UAP's mission is to foster "Access with Success" (UFS, 2023, p. 2). As suggested earlier, COVID-19 brought many challenges in almost all aspects of human activities. When the South African government imposed lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus, HEIs were compelled to change from the traditional way of delivery of learning and teaching to complete the academic year.

In our view, traditional and residential institutions endured the most challenges. In that, they adopted an online mode of learning and teaching, which the majority were not accustomed to. Consequently, this transition seems to have exacerbated challenges that students already experience in UAP. In her study, Sekonyela (2021) identified some challenges in preparatory support, such as limited access to learning support centers. Transition to alternative mode of teaching and learning due to COVID-19 seems to have further marginalized students, causing physical and mental health disruptions, limited access to resources, and a limited sense of collegiality.

One challenge was physical and mental disruptions; many students struggled to self-regulate, and that seemed to have contributed to high stress levels. Evidently, Sanderson et al. (2021) study found that due to self-isolation, students seemed to have felt disconnected and no sense of collegiality from the institution(s). Another challenge was limited resources, even

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though the shift to digital pedagogy during COVID-19 enabled the delivery of course content to individuals, it was not without challenges, that is, as access to online learning is highly dependent on the availability of resources as well as proficiency with technology (Kim & Fienup, 2022). Moreover, Adnan and Anwar (2020) assert that students faced additional challenges such as the lack of campus socialization, educators' response time and group study issues.

Physical and Mental Health Disruptions

The imbalance in physical and mental health of students, particularly those in the UAP, was observed during the pandemic. According to the responses given by students at the UAP (assignment), online learning has disadvantaged those who are unable to self-regulate, in that it has caused them turmoil, anxiety, and stress, leading to substance use reported in Sanderson et al. (2021). Some students experienced challenges such as self-managing distractions while using the internet (Akpinar, 2020; Dorsah, 2021), power outages which impacted connectivity, and some households had limited space where students could engage with their studies. Educators and students have been severely affected by the requirements for self-isolation, increasing their risk of experiencing disconnectedness and becoming disengaged from their peers and content participation (Sanderson et al., 2021). Relatively, Akpinar (2020) suggested that some studies revealed that

> tertiary students have developed a negative perspective due to the absence of a classroom-related environment. Tertiary students have cited the ability to interact with their peers and instructors as being a major contributor to improved participation in learning activities (p. 55).

Therefore, the introduction of an online mode of teaching and learning took away social relations students would normally have with peers. In Wanner and Palmer's (2015) study, even though the study was conducted before COVID-19 pandemic, Wanner and Palmer's study revealed that online teaching and learning are as challenging as some students suggested, due to limited face-to-face sessions with lecturers, their workload was more and that was time consuming. Some students may struggle with self-regulation or lack self-responsibility for their learning, which may hinder success and progression. Akpinar (2020) further indicated that inability to focus on the information provided subsequent impact in terms of increased stress levels among the students since they would not have understood the content delivered during the lecture and consequently, would not be able to complete their assignments according to the requirements stipulated by the lecturer.

Morley's (2012) study indicates that a significant number of students complain about a lack of learning resources and facilities. Therefore, with online learning effected in HEIs, and with COVID-19 measures in place, some students found themselves waiting either for a family member or relying on a neighbor to access such technology. This can lead to lack of self-responsibility, as these students might not be able to complete assessments on time.

Similarly, Majumdar et al. (2020) comprehend that lockdown as a measure to mitigate the spike in COVID-19 infection led to reduced physical activity and increased screen exposure, which may be leading factors of sleeplessness. In their study, Majumdar et al. (2020) recognize the negative impact of the pandemic on mental health and stress the importance of sleep in physical health. Therefore, strategies to cope with online learning need to be investigated, so as to prepare students for the culture of multimodality and possible future pandemics or the adoption of a blended learning approach.

One key value of higher education is for students to develop the lifelong skill of self-regulation (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011; Wanner & Palmer, 2015). Online learning requires students to take charge of their learning. Ramdass and Zimmerman (2011) postulate that self-

regulation is a proactive process by which individuals reliably compose and oversee their environment, thoughts, and behaviors to achieve their academic goals. Additionally, a self-regulating student can assess the effectiveness of specific strategies for completing learning tasks, monitor progress, and adjust strategies when necessary (Wandler & Imbriale, 2017). Wandler and Imbriale further argue that a positive affiliation exists between self-regulated learning and academic performance in students, and that increased exposure to online learning does not guarantee that students become better self-regulated. In this regard, instructors ought to consider executing techniques to assist students in advancing positive self-regulated strategies.

In their study, Wandler and Imbriale (2017) lay out evidence-based strategies that online instructors can utilize to cultivate self-regulation strategies aimed at making strides in their students' performance. These strategies include but are not limited to scaffolding, cultivating peer-to-peer support, and reminding students of coursework outside their learning environment. Therefore, these strategies must be considered when HEIs strategize the blended teaching and learning implementation.

Limited Access to resources

Although the shift to digital pedagogy during COVID-19 enables the delivery of course content to individuals, access to online learning is highly dependent on the availability of resources as well as proficiency with technology (Kim & Fienup, 2022). Adnan and Anwar's (2020) study of the effectiveness of online learning asserts that students faced additional challenges, such as the lack of campus socialization, educator's response time, and group study issues. Consequently, due to limited and/or lack of campus access, students without resources that potentially necessitated teaching and learning and task completion, some students had to resort to other means to complete academic tasks, that is, relying on family for assistance on technology-related matters.

Access to online learning requires a student to have access to devices (Hubackova & Semradova, 2016). That is, in our view, most HEIs seemed to have overlooked this aspect when decisions to move online were put in place. HEIs, particularly traditional ones, upon student admission, seem not to have communicated to students of the need for devices and Wi-Fi as teaching and learning has moved to online. Therefore, in our view, it had financial implications for some students. Hansen and Reich (2015) point out that the implementation of blended learning, and even an overhaul of online learning, has the potential to marginalize students because of their differentiated backgrounds.

It appears that not all UAP students are proficient with technology prior to entering an institution of higher education. Consequently, when HEIs moved teaching and learning to an online platform to curb the spread and transmission of COVID-19, and also to complete the academic year, this led many students to feel isolated and possibly disconnected from the institution. Similarly, Mncube et al. (2021) assert that

> educators had to adapt to new pedagogical concepts and modes of lecture delivery in which many have not been trained. Learners in the most marginalized groups, who do not have access to digital learning resources or lack the resilience and engagement to learn on their own, are at risk of falling behind (p. 392).

Additionally, as the use of technology has increased rapidly in most HEIs, students are now expected to complete online assessments and engage in online discussions, and COVID-19-related measures such as lockdown further exacerbated and seemed to discriminate against students with no prior technology exposure. Moreover, some students might not have adequate computer training, while others have been exposed to computers before (Hansen & Reich,

2015). Therefore, some students experienced challenges in completing online assessments, which could have been a barrier to academic progress and have a negative impact on student confidence (Fuchs, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2014; Wanner & Palmer, 2015). In addition, Mncube et al. (2021) contend that among the many challenges students experienced, particularly those from undeveloped, remote, and rural areas, was poor Internet connectivity or even lack of electricity; therefore, the use of technology as a mode for teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic further marginalized students. Similarly, "since a computer (rather than a smartphone) and Internet access was essential to access study material, this was also problematic for some students and greatly impacted their learning experience" (Cranfield et al., 2021, p. 403).

Moreover, Im and Kim's (2015) study revealed that when online teaching and learning mode is implemented in HEIs, the expectation would be a need for a collaborative space where students work together on academic-related matters such as assignments (Im & Kim). This collaborative space could encourage students' continued interaction offline, thereby propelling engagement and learning outcomes gained from peers (Wanner & Palmer, 2015). Similarly, during the COVID-19 lockdown, such was the expectation; however, due to challenges, such as internet connectivity, electricity, device(s) access, and, to some extent, not being device savvy, this has prompted many unfavorable experiences for many students.

According to our analytical observation, online learning potentially yields worse performance than traditional learning. Students from marginalized areas were mostly affected by the pandemic due to issues of limited resources vital for digital learning. These include technological devices, internet access, and a reliable learning environment. Sanderson et al. (2021) stipulate that some students have felt the loss of their independence and privacy as they had to return home. Some students were challenged with finding a suitable study space. Owing to these challenges, students' class attendance became poorer. Kim and Fienup (2022) emphasize the importance of regular attendance as it enhances successful end results. Therefore, an increase in absenteeism is expected to reduce the pass rate. However, even with suggested challenges brought by COVID-19 pandemic, Cranfield et al. (2021) study suggested that some students appreciated the use of technology. That is, some students, particularly those studying in South Africa, have seen some improvement in their digital literacy, and others seem to appreciate online learning as it has helped them in becoming independent learners.

Information and communication technology (ICT) has become the linchpin of UAP success. However, it is also important to question the effectiveness of the use of ICT in this program. ICT refers to the use of various collections of technological gear and resources to communicate (Sarkar, 2012). ICT that is widely used in educational fields includes electronic delivery systems such as projectors, the internet, computers (Fu, 2013). He further indicates that access to education seems to have expanded due to ICT. Multimodality can be used to ensure that ICT is not only available to teachers and learners, but they are able to explore how they may collaboratively utilize it to yield satisfactory results, while taking into account individual learning styles (Duhaney, 2012).

Collegiality

In line with collegiality as a strategy, it is paramount to take into account that there is no single approach to independently support students. UAP students are introduced to a lifelong learning skills and competence module. This module was designed to acquaint students with important skills that will help them to become successful university students (UFS, 2023). Among the objectives of this module is to help them discover their learning styles and be able to utilize relevant techniques despite their differences. Moreover, this raises a need for educators to take part in a genuine, sustained inquiry process that recognizes the value of listening to students' concerns about the teaching and learning process (UFS, 2023). Educators

will have a greater impact on students' academic success if they work together to address concerns and develop new strategies for effective learning. This will, in turn, yield good relationships between facilitators and students, instill confidence and, thus, better performance.

From our observation, it was evident that there was a need for a comfortable space for learning and peer engagement, as aspects that increase students' confidence and improve the learning process (Harwood et al., 2015). Therefore, students need to have a welcoming space online, where they feel safe to discuss with their peers and voice subject-related concerns (Speirs et al., 2017). Additionally, readily available supportive space has the potential to afford one the ability to confidently identify difficult subject matter and seek assistance (Waller et al., 2017). Cranfield et al. (2021) study found that during the COVID-19 lockdown, Welsh and South African students missed the in-person interaction with other students. This can be attributed to the notion that South African students are accustomed to face-to-face interaction, and they learn best when engaging with others face-to-face. Consequently, enhance subject understanding and foster student independence in their learning process (Wanner & Palmer, 2015).

While Mncube et al. (2021) point out that "the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the deficiencies of the current system in higher education institutions and the necessity for more educators training in digital technology in order to fit into agile education system of the world" (p. 393), and Cranfield et al. (2021) seem to share same sentiments. Van Herpen et al. (2020) maintain that first-year student performance is positively influenced by social networks (i.e., friendships, or giving/receiving information on course-related matters to or from peers). As well as positive relationships between student–peer interaction and academic performance, establishing a social network also gives students a sense of belonging, which helps them assume the role of HE student.

Van Herpen et al. (2020) assert that student–faculty interaction in HE is important. That is, the existence of good relationships and interactions (formal) between students and faculty members is vital, in that it focuses on academic development and performance consequently benefits students (e.g., giving clear instructions and stimulating meaningful learning). Moreover, Van Herpen et al. suggest that when the environment afforded to students allows for interactions that contribute to students' satisfaction with the HE experiences, increase student commitment to graduate, and lower attrition rates.

Functionalism as Framework

August Comte (1798 – 1857) known as the father of sociology (Sadovnik & Coughlan, 2016) and one of the main contributors to functionalism. The study of Sociology was developed by Comte, as he saw the need to theorize about nature and the dynamic of societies (Ferrante, 2016). His view of functionalism posits that in society, individuals cannot exist in isolation (Ferrante, 2016; Stewart & Zaaiman, 2015; Turner, 2014).

As articulated in the preceding paragraph, functionalism postulates that for society to thrive and function smoothly, all parts and institutions (e.g., education) within society need one another. Functionalism best shows that when all parts that exist within an institution function interdependently, the institution functions smoothly and equilibrium is maintained. Hence, functionalist proponents point to the performed functions and dysfunctions within social institutions. That is, manifest and latent functions and dysfunctions. Therefore, for these proponents such as Robert K. Merton, within every social institution there are noticeable functions (manifest and latent) and dysfunctions (manifest and latent) that necessitate and ensure equilibrium, order and stability (Benokraitis, 2016; Ferrante, 2016; Henslin, 2008).

Furthermore, by manifest, Ferrante (2016) articulates that Merton maintains that such actions are intended and recognized to help some part of a system. He also pointed out that

latent, as those actions that have unintended and unrecognized consequences that can help a system adjust (Benokraitis, 2016; Ferrante, 2016; Henslin, 2008). Merton also accentuates that human actions can also hurt a system, and refers to these actions as latent dysfunctions, however in this case, the consequences are usually unintended.

Therefore, in this regard, attention will be paid to the dysfunctions performed by institutions of higher education that is intended and unintended dysfunctions due to shift from traditional teaching and learning to online during COVID-19 lockdown. These dysfunctions seem to exacerbate whether intentionally or unintentionally the already existing challenges particularly in the UAP.

Methodology

Secondary data was collected and analyzed. Johnston (2014) secondary data analysis is analysis of data that was collected by someone else for another primary purpose. The use of this existing data provides a viable option for researchers who may have limited time and resources. Similarly, for Church (2002), in secondary data analysis individuals who were not involved in the collection of the data analyze the data. Secondary data analysis may be based on the published data, or it may be based on the original data. Therefore, data used in this paper was initially for grading purposes, not as we are utilizing, hence it qualifies as secondary data. Our data is deduced from students' compiled assignments, that is, students from our multi-campuses were given a social issue that they needed to analyze, and use own experiences, choose power sharing model to explain social issues, and apply sociological perspective of choice to given issues. Additionally, at a later stage, students had to conduct oral presentation, however, presentation did not form part of our data, but propelled documenting student experiences. Our population size was 210 students. Data were collected from a total of 20 group assignments, with each group made of 3 to 5 members, and each assignment having an equal chance of being selected for analysis. During data collection, we analyzed identified recurring themes. Below figure is partial assignment instructions:

Figure 1
Sociology Assignment Instructions

1. **SYNOPSIS**

Education is deemed to be a basic human right, however, in 2020, COVID-19 was declared pandemic. Due to this pandemic, our lives changed, that is, the way we live. Covid-19 affected many if not all institutions in society, including the way we learn. Students experienced learning in a very different way than their predecessors. In South Africa, school closures were announced on 18 March 2020, interrupting the learning of almost 17 million learners from pre-school to secondary school. Close to 2,3 million students enrolled in post-school education and training institutions were affected by the implementation of the strict lockdown rules. New educational policies and regulations, including the adjustment of the academic time-table, new teaching programmes, mode of delivery, catch up of the curriculum, health and safety measures as well as financial relief packages were designed for the education sector.

Adopted from: http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15197

2. **OVERALL AIM OF THE ASSIGNMENT**

To use sociological theory to analyse social issue in South Africa:

- Effects of COVID-19 on learning and teaching in Higher Education Institution(s) in South Africa.

3. **WHAT IS EXPECTED OF STUDENTS**

To achieve this aim, students will:

- Select power-sharing model(s) applicable to the provided social issue. Use this model(s) to explain how the social issue occurred (e.g. who made certain decisions, how, what).
- Provide a detailed discussion of facts related to a provided social issue.
- Select one sociological perspective that in your view, would seem to explain provided social issue best and, using reading material e.g. online sources, use this perspective to explain how the social issue occurs.

Discussion of Findings

Findings suggest that students experienced physical and mental disruptions, which mainly were based on challenges to self-regulate, and disconnectedness to the environment which in this case is the institution of learning. Additionally, limited access to resources such as access to online learning, and proficiency with technology. Lastly, collegiality was challenged in that the on-screen facilitator and student relationship was almost limited, and as such, impacted student confidence. Therefore, it is worth noting that the strategies discussed below are interconnected as they influence each other. For example, a strategy that is intended for mental health might also translate into collegiality.

The table below provides a summary of findings:

Table 1

Summary of Key findings

Category	Main Findings	Functionalist Interpretation
Physical & Mental Health	Students struggled with self-regulation, anxiety, and fear of asking questions.	**Dysfunction**: Breakdown in student-institution interdependence (e.g., lack of support systems disrupts academic progress). **Manifest Function**: Education socialises students. **Latent Dysfunction:** Pandemic exacerbated stress, hindering socialisation.
Disconnectedness	Alienation is due to a lack of resources (devices, internet) and reliance on recordings.	**Dysfunction**: Unequal resource access creates 'strain', marginalising students and weakening system cohesion.
Limited Resources	Marginalised students lacked devices/connectivity, and delayed submissions.	**Dysfunction**: Resource inequality disrupts equilibrium; systems fail when parts lack support.
Technology Proficiency	Poor instructor ICT training → communication gaps.	**Dysfunction**: Rapid shift to online learning (COVID-19) outpaced institutional adaptation, causing role strain for educators/students.
Collegiality	Weak facilitator-student relationships reduced confidence.	**Dysfunction**: Lack of 'organic solidarity' in virtual spaces undermines academic collective consciousness.
Systemic Deficiencies	COVID-19 exposed gaps in HEIs (e.g., digital training needs).	**Functional Adaptation**: Institutions must evolve to restore equilibrium.

Key findings:
1. **Interdependence**: Students' struggles (e.g., isolation, tech gaps) reflect institutional failures to adapt roles/functions during crisis.
2. **Manifest vs Latent Functions**:
   o Manifest: online learning aimed at maintaining education (overt goal).
   o Latent Dysfunction: unintended consequences (e.g., alienation, inequality).

3. **Solutions Align with Functionalism:**
   o Resource Provision (devices, training) → Restores equilibrium
   o Community Building (forums, peer support) → Replaces lost 'mechanical solidarity'.

Physical and Mental Health Disruptions

Self-Regulate

The imbalance in the physical and mental health of students, particularly those in the University Access Programme (UAP), can be linked to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the students' compiled and submitted assignments. It was challenging for them to engage with online material, as many suggested that the course content was new, and coming from high school and into this new environment was challenging. That is, students were unfamiliar with university expectations, such as how to study certain modules and plan study time. This seems to corroborate with Wanner and Palmer's (2015) assertion that some students may struggle with

self-regulation and even more so with responsibility. Consequently, students indicated that this caused anxiety, similar to what was also suggested in Sanderson et al. (2021), that is, that students' and educators' self-isolation caused stress. Furthermore, some suggested that they were scared to ask questions online, as they did not want to appear as not good enough. Accordingly, from the functionalist point of view, when parts do not function interdependently, they will not thrive and will cease to exist. Hence, when students suggested that they were scared to ask questions that could potentially lead them to not successfully complete modules and hinder progress.

Therefore, as suggested in Wandler and Imbriale's (2017) study, there is a need for strategies that online instructors can utilize to cultivate self-regulation aimed at facilitating students' performance, thereby leading to progress. Furthermore, affording students a space outside the learning environment to engage with peers can be one way to cultivate support with potentially successful results.

Online learning requires students to take charge of their learning (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011), and, as a result, in some assignments, we deduced that some students felt like they had enough time to study. However they procrastinate most of the time, and such behaviors lead to feeling overwhelmed. Observably, we believe that students, particularly UAPs as first years, need others, such as facilitators and peers, for them to understand course content, and this will lead to progress (Wandler & Imbriale, 2017) as suggested by functionalist proponents that for parts to thrive, they need to be interdependent.

Disconnectedness

A significant number of students complain about a lack of learning resources and facilities (Morley, 2012). Therefore, with online learning taking momentum in HEIs and COVID-19 measures in place, some students found themselves waiting either for a family member or relying on a neighbor to access such technology. Therefore, this, according to some students, made them unable to attend lectures, and they felt like they were not part of the class, in that they had to rely on recordings of what transpired during sessions. As a result, at times they were not able to participate. According to functionalist proponents such as Merton (in Ferrante, 2016), this can be seen as a dysfunction, as the students' inability to participate hurts part of the system, consequently leading to underperformance.

As Majumdar et al. (2020) comprehended, lockdown measures to mitigate the spike in COVID-19 infection led to reduced physical activity and increased screen exposure, which may be leading factors of sleeplessness. From the students' point of view, being on screen all the time felt impersonal. Some further articulated that they lost loved ones, and they therefore missed that personal touch from peers, and even a moment to forget a bit about personal losses due to COVID-19. Furthermore, some students suggested that they felt alone, and that they did not feel like real university students.

Limited Access to resources

Access to Online Learning

Hubackova and Semradova (2016) recognize the importance of device access as a key requirement for online learning. This is evident in our research, where most students felt marginalized, that is, students complain that they do not have the devices they need to succeed in online learning. Marginalized students without adequate network coverage struggled to complete assessments on time, negatively impacting their academic progress, as postulated by functionalists that when parts do not co-exist, such leads to disruptions in the system's

functioning (Benokraitis, 2016; Ferrante, 2016; Henslin, 2008). Students reported that returning to their homes affected their sense of autonomy and independence. Some students alluded that their disadvantaged homes did not have a suitable and reliable place to study. This corresponds with the assertion that the use of technology in teaching and learning has alienated students, as remote students face additional challenges such as poor internet connectivity and even power shortages (Mncube et al., 2021).

Proficiency with Technology

The remarkable role played by the education sector in developing individuals over the years necessitated the need for the sector to grow accustomed to social change. Online classes were therefore implemented so as to rescue education from the long-term effects of COVID-19. However, the sudden shift left insufficient time for ICT training for online instructors. A correlation was found between a lack of ICT training and ineffective communication between instructors and students. Insufficient ICT training poses challenges for online instructors if they cannot deliver online lectures effectively. During this time, students reported that they relied on emails to communicate with their instructors, causing delays as they were unable to raise concerns about coursework on the online class platform. Moreover, students also find it difficult to participate in online discussions or complete online assessments without prior computer skills (Hansen & Reich, 2015). Thus, as Mncube et al. (2021) suggest, the COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the shortcomings of the current system in higher education and the need for more digital technology training for instructors to adapt to a rapidly changing global education system.

To ensure that all students can use online platforms, it is essential to provide marginalised students with funding for devices such as computers and internet access. We argue that this initiative will pave the way for offering easy-to-use online consulting services that are available to all students.

Collegiality

Facilitator and Student Relationship

Wandler and Imbriale (2017) argue that a positive affiliation exists between self-regulated learning and academic performance in students, and that increased exposure to online learning does not guarantee that students become better self-regulated. In this regard, instructors ought to consider executing techniques to assist students in advancing positive self-regulated strategies. Educators need to create an environment where students feel safe and comfortable to voice their concerns about their lessons**.** This is important for building student confidence and improving student-facilitator relationships. Therefore, students suggested that a relationship did not really exist between them and facilitators, in that sometimes students were uncomfortable in raising concerns, and unclear expectations from facilitators.

In Van Herpen et al. (2020), for transitioning students, there seems to be a particular concern, developing a sense of belonging in HE and building relationships with peers and faculty. In this regard, a sense of belonging depicts feeling at home at university and that the student fits in, that the student is a member of one or more communities there, and that they are supported at the HEI. Developing a positive sense of belonging in HE is associated with the decision not to leave when a student experiences challenges in adapting to the HE environment. For our students, due to not engaging with facilitators and their peers on a face-to-face basis, it was difficult to build relations. People develop a sense of belonging by giving meaning to experiences in a setting. Therefore, for students, the lack of face-to-face encounters meant that

there was no support, and to them, it meant that being a university student meant being on their own.

Student Confidence

Students mentioned the need for a welcoming online platform, where they felt safe to discuss subject-related matters with their peers (Speirs et al., 2017). Additionally, for students, online learning did not afford the space to confidently identify difficult subject matters (Waller et al., 2017); they needed that personal touch. Cranfield et al. (2021) study found that due to our traditional standing of teaching and learning in South Africa, that is, students being accustomed to face-to-face engagements, students implied that they did not learn best on the online platform and missed the in-person interaction with peers. Consequently, this new mode of teaching and learning did not enhance subject understanding but rather seemed to foster independence in the learning process (Wanner & Palmer, 2015).

As indicated in Mncube et al. (2021), COVID-19 revealed the deficiencies in higher education institutions. Therefore, identification of such deficiencies suggests the need for educators and students to engage in training in digital technology to stay abreast of the changing education system of the world, as pointed out by Cranfield et al. (2021). Similarly, Van Herpen et al. (2020) maintain that social networks positively influence first-year student performance, as they utilize such networks to share and receive course-related information. In addition, the established social networks seem to provide students with a sense of collegiality, which results in increased academic performance, consequently fostering students in assuming their role in HE. Furthermore, it is important to keep students' feelings of uncertainty at bay and keep students' minds open for positive cues and experiences of belonging in HE by informing them that such self-doubts are common in the transition into HE (Van Herpen et al., 2020) and alerting students of the kind of support a facilitator can afford them.

We advocate for institutions to cultivate an environment of compassion and support among students and academic staff. This can encourage students to seek help when needed. One way to accomplish this is by implementing online forums led by students to share their experiences and strategies for coping, thereby strengthening a sense of belonging (community) instead of isolation.

Conclusion

In line with the UAP's mission of "access with success," the sudden shift to online teaching and learning due to COVID-19 restrictions, to some degree, threatened and challenged this mission. It became apparent that students were not aware of self-regulated learning and how to use it effectively. Additionally, while there is no doubt that all students are capable of self-regulation to some degree, there is a need to encourage self-regulated learning strategies among students, especially UAP students, to ensure that multimodality works smoothly.

As many human activities were disrupted due to COVID-19 restrictions, residential institutions seem to have experienced the most challenges. Not did only these restrictions impact institutional operations on the ground, but they also affected mostly teaching and learning. In that, most residential institutions had to adapt to an online mode of learning and teaching to ensure completion of the academic year. Discomfort and challenges came to the fore due to adopting online learning and teaching. Data from students' assignments revealed some challenges students experienced, such as physical and mental health disruptions, limited access to resources, and collegiality.

A score of students complained about a lack of access to learning resources and facilities. Due to many students lacking access to resources, some found themselves relying on

a family and/or neighbor to access such technology as a smartphone or computer; consequently, some could not attend facilitation sessions. Therefore, being unable to attend facilitation sessions for many students meant they were disconnected from the rest of the class. They found themselves forced to rely on lecture recordings, hence at times, they were not opportune in participating. According to Merton (in Ferrante, 2016), this can be seen as a dysfunction, as the students' inability to participate hurts part of the system, consequently leading to underperformance.

Lockdown measures led to reduced physical activity, such as face-to-face social engagement, and heightened screen exposure, which is associated with sleeplessness. Furthermore, the physical inability of students to engage led some students to feel alone and disconnected from the institution and from their studies, similarly, being on screen all the time felt impersonal. Some students lost loved ones, about personal losses due to COVID-19.

Recommendation for further research would be investigating how and to what extent the COVID period imposed and led to a shift in teaching and learning for the current student cohort, consequently impacting class attendance and resulting in underperformance.

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Notes on Contributors

Dr Lerato M Sekonyela, is an advocate for Higher Education for all, is the University Access Programme (UAP) Coordinator at the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) at the University of the Free State. The programme is some nations known as "Widening Participation" or "Alternative education" is intended for students not qualifying for mainstream programmes. There is a growing need for similar programmes as pathways to access higher education, as many students are unable to meet university admission requirements. She is a former Module Coordinator in the Department of Sociology and Academic Facilitator at the Department of Psychology in the University Access Programme at the University of the Free State (UFS) in South Africa. Her research interests have centred on University Access Programme as one of the social justice programme to enable student access with success to higher education: students experienced challenges, a strategy to improve the academic support of first-year students in a university access programme, and Academic facilitators as interdisciplinary agents in the University Access Programme are some of her works. Dr.

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Nosisa James, is an inquisitive individual with a passion for understanding human dynamics. My academic journey began with a Higher Certificate in Sociology and Communication Science, which laid the foundation for my future studies. I then pursued a Bachelor of Social Science degree majoring in Psychology and Sociology. During this time, I developed an understanding of the complexities of human relationships and social structures. My undergraduate studies sparked a desire to further explore the intricacies of human behavior and social change, leading me to pursue an Honors degree in Psychology. As an Academic Facilitator in the Department of Sociology, I've had the opportunity to engage in advanced research and critical thinking, further refining my understanding of the complex dynamics that shape human relationships and societies. This role has not only honed my research skills but also allowed me to apply theoretical knowledge in practical settings, fostering a deeper appreciation for the nuances of social interactions. My research interests focus on exploring how people learn, develop, and interact with each other. I am particularly drawn to investigating social change and identifying innovative solutions to complex problems in human relationships. Through my work, I intend to contribute to a deeper understanding of how individuals and societies can thrive, and to inform strategies that promote positive social change and improved social relationships.

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