

Chapter 9

The Digital Shift in Higher Education and the Aftermath of COVID-19: A Wellness Perspective Case in an ODeL Institution

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Abstract

The Coronavirus disease (Covid-19) pandemic became a game changer in higher education and dictated how the pedagogy and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) will be like. The chapter focuses on the shift in higher education during the pandemic and its aftermath from a wellness dimensions perspective. Furthermore, the exploration was done in the College of Education in a comprehensive open distance and e-learning (ODeL) institution. The research question that guided the study was: ***What was the digital shift in higher education during the pandemic and the aftermath of Covid-19 in an open distance and e-learning institution from a wellness perspective?*** The lenses followed were the transactional distance theory of Moore (1997), which bridges the distance between student and the lecturer, and the wellness theory of Hettler (1980), which outlines six dimensions of wellness such as academic, emotional, social, career, physical and career wellness. The third theory, African philosophies (*botho*: humaneness) (Tutu 1999) elucidates on using humaneness, which is an African value of valuing other people and that a person cannot thrive well in isolation and without support from other people. The study was embedded in an interpretivist paradigm and followed a qualitative research approach. In addition, the research design was phenomenological, since experiences were the focus of the study. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants, which

comprised ten academics, four student support staff members and e-mails from students who had complaints. Interviews and document analysis were used. The findings revealed that the ICT challenges experienced during the uploading of assignments and examination papers on the side of students posed challenges, since online examinations were conducted for the first time and this affected the academic wellness of students. The shift to online examinations brought doubts and concerns on authenticity of qualifications for students. Academics' career wellness was suddenly transformed since they had more administrative work to do. Academics showed resilience and were able to show support to students and humaneness (*botho/ ubuntu*). There was a sudden shift in higher education; the 'e' in ODeL was maximised and the aftermath of Covid-19 was virtual platforms were the new normal.

Keywords: Pandemic, Academic wellness, shift in pedagogy, career wellness, online exams, ICT challenges

Introduction

Higher education experienced a shift in pedagogy due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The mode of delivery where blended approach was used suddenly changed to virtual mode. Concomitantly, also the assessment mode was affected and as such institutions had to adapt and follow new ways of assessing. At institutions that use open distance and e-learning (ODEL) such as the University of South Africa (Unisa), a blended approach was followed, but in 2020, a fully online mode of assessment was followed owing to the threat that Covid-19 posed. In the past, Unisa had formative assessment in which a hybrid system was used, where students would either upload assignments online or post hardcopies. Both modalities were permissible, and students would receive feedback through post and online modality. For summative assessment, Unisa had examination centres globally and there were invigilators who were hired to invigilate all examinations, since a face-to-face mode was used. The blended approach that was used for years at an institution which claimed to be an ODeL had to realise that there is an 'e' in the ODeL. The pandemic caused a drastic shift and brought to the surface the 'e', which became an enabler to save the academic year. The development of distance education is very interesting and the way the context plays a role needs a closer look. Let me try to extrapolate the way open distance learning (ODL) evolved over time in the subsequent paragraph.

What Characterises an ODL Context?

According to Moore and Kearsley (1996:6), ODL is defined as a way the study material is disseminated to students in a situation where students and lecturers are not in a face-to-face contact and space and time separates them. The second one, ODL is defined as a mode of distance learning delivery, which involves an appropriate institutional framework (Mukama 2018). The third is taken from the mega-university – the University of South Africa (Unisa) (2008:2), which defines ODL as follows:

ODL is a multi-dimensional concept aimed at bridging the time, geographical, economic, social, educational and communication distance between student and institution, student and academics, student and courseware and student and peers. ODL focuses on removing barriers to access learning, flexibility of learning provision, student-centeredness, supporting students and constructing learning programmes with the expectation that students can succeed.

Tait (2014) outlines how teaching and learning evolved from print, correspondence and postal system in Boston, Massachusetts in 1728; the telephone with synchronous conversation in teaching, radio, television, and currently the use of the internet in an asynchronous dimension which we are now accustomed to. Technological development influenced the space of teaching and learning, and the summary above can be alluded to man devising means of teaching and reaching the greater communities especially those who have other reasons not to attend a contact university, hence ODL and currently ODeL. Globally, in developed and developing countries, ODL/ODeL is used as a mode of accessing higher education. Since 1968, the Open University of the United Kingdom (OU UK) has created a multi-media teaching and learning system, which impacted on the cognitive and affective being of students (Tait 2014:8). It clearly shows that OU UK in a developed country was able to establish an online mechanism within distance education to cater for student support much earlier. In developing countries in Africa, there are a number of universities that have adopted the ODL system in higher education in an attempt to address the UN 2030 Agenda of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) goal number 4 of quality education. It is clear, that shift has been there in higher education, and this continues to occur owing to the dynamic space in which education occurs.

ODL Challenges in Third-World Countries

Looking closely at Kenya, which has approximately 12 universities offering ODL programmes, one can argue that this is in response to the rapid expansion of higher education and the demand from communities, in particular the poor and marginalised. A study was commissioned by Commonwealth of Learning conducted by Nyerere (2016) at universities offering ODL programmes in Kenya, including universities such as Nairobi, Maseno University, Kenyatta University, among others. Very interesting findings revealed what developing countries experience in higher education regarding student support. Though there was a high demand of university education in ODL institutions, the enrolment remained low, owing to numerous challenges. Programmes suffered credibility and recognition crises (Nyerere 2016). Open Educational Resources (OERs) were cost effective, and some universities adopted them. Sadly, the use was very low owing to infrastructure and capacity challenges. Furthermore, other findings from Nyerere's (2016) study revealed that staff capacity in module development was inadequate and insufficient funding which affected ICT and e-learning.

In a study conducted at the National Open University of Nigeria (NOUN), an ODL institution, Ojo and Olakulehin (2006) found that students had a positive attitude to ODL, compared to face-to-face institution. In another study by Okopi (2011) on dropout rates of students at NOUN, findings revealed that there was no timely feedback of examinations and assignments, and no prompt responses to students' enquiries, which led to students dropping out, though there was a remedy to be proactive in bringing counselling early in the lives of students before they were frustrated.

Online participation depends on factors such as income, class and access (Theurmer 2019). Inequality in sub-Saharan countries is still prevalent, owing to a number of socio-economic factors. Again, participating in online learning depends on access to tools and to data. In rural communities, there is still a challenge of access to electricity, while in urban or suburban areas, most African countries experience power outages. Students who live in such areas are often cut off from online participation about their studies. In supporting the students from low socio-economic backgrounds, those students who are on financial aid do receive data bundles so that they are able to study using online platforms. Hence the digital divide is not so evident. Furthermore, laptops were also availed to enable students in an ODeL context to access study material and upload assignments easily. Higher education views digital platforms as the digital eco-

system (Tiwana 2013; Schreieck 2016) that must be ethical. For the digital platform to be ethical in higher education, it must be seen as a supportive tool towards student success, rather than causing a divide. Hence, the service providers such as MTN, Vodacom and others who came on board to provide data to students are part of the ecosystem that enables online learning, student engagement and student support.

People in both the global north and global south embrace ODeL and has gained mainstream acceptance (Qayyum & Zawacki-Richter 2019). Adult students preferred learning through ODL, although currently, even younger students as old as 19 years old are found at ODL institutions. Student support in ODL/ODEL plays an important role so that student retention and student success are maintained in a positive way. A study conducted by Qayyum and Zawacki-Richter (2019) revealed that in India, distance education lacks quality programmes for both online and correspondence education. In contrast, in Turkey, it was found that there is a balance between residential programmes and open distance education. Lessons need to be learnt on how the developed countries managed to maintain quality ODL programmes. In developing countries, there are challenges of electricity and internet, which may be a hindrance to the success of ODL/ODEL, since students need to be connected to post assignments, to be on discussion forums, and engage with peers, tutors and lecturers. South Africa, Zimbabwe and Nigeria experience a challenge of frequent electricity cuts and this causes a disruption for students who study using internet connectivity most of the time. Owing to poverty and unemployment in South Africa, funding is extended to students to be able to get books, food and other amenities necessary for their education. The fund called the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) is the government student bursary scheme, which supports students financially to alleviate poverty. The students who receive NSFAS funding also receive laptops and data that will enable them to write and send assignments (e-News Unisa 2019). Another challenge may be the data and access to laptops or computers and free Wi-Fi hotspots for students who do not have a bursary or financial aid. This poses a dilemma if students are employed, but they do not qualify for a bursary. This is where additional support should be availed by the counselling unit of an ODeL institution. Therefore, it is important that universities should know how to communicate effectively with students and use the cheapest way of communicating, for instance, the use of a short message service (SMS) and WhatsApp. The ICT, library services, counselling units, tutor services, and first-year experience unit are capacitated to

deal with large number of students and to have efficient communication methods. The lecturers should also ensure that their way of teaching online is relevant and fulfils the students' needs, since most young students are digital natives. In supporting students effectively, timeous and detailed feedback will motivate the students not to drop out of programmes. An early identification of students at risk enables the university personnel to intervene timeously in supporting the students. The students at risk may be those who do not send assignments on time, or those experiencing challenges in academic writing. Intervention, which is timeous, may be of help so that students are able to continue smoothly with their studies though an ODL/ODEL.

The staff that are recruited at ODeL institutions are expected to have knowledge and skills of teaching and assessing using either blended or online modalities. The young cohort of academics are expected to be competent and innovative in using online platforms and to use teaching applications on learning management systems (Jäger-Biela, Kasper & König 2020). In higher education, academics must prepare the students for the global context and equip them with the use of digital tools so that they are competent upon completion of their qualifications. Not only pedagogic content knowledge is important, but also technological pedagogic knowledge (TPK) (Mishra & Koehler 2006:1025).

Owing to the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a sudden shift in teaching and learning and assessment and a rapid swift to fully online and e-assessment was introduced to students who were taken by surprise. Although at ODeL institutions digital pedagogy was used even though not fully applied, Covid-19 hastened the application in assessment and teaching, which might have caused some discomfort. From the study conducted by Dhawan (2020), there are lessons learnt that during the Covid-19 pandemic, certain skills are necessary in conducting assessment such as problem solving, critical thinking and adaptability to survive in a crisis moment. Sean Michael Morris of Colorado Denver School of Education states, 'Digital pedagogy as an emerging field may always need to be and not something hastily discovered in the aftermath of a crisis. The work of digital pedagogy was never to be a quick solution for every teacher in every situation' (Lederman 2020). Hence, in this chapter, the aim is to explore,

the digital shift in higher education during the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath in an ODeL institution from a wellness perspective.

Theoretical Framework

The lenses followed were the transactional distance theory of Moore (2005), the wellness theory of Hettler (1980), and African Philosophies (botho) humaneness (Tutu 1999). The transactional distance theory helped the researcher to understand the distance between the lecturers and the students, how teaching and learning were mitigated during the pandemic and how dialogue was enabled. In using the wellness theory, the researcher understood the situation that arose during the pandemic affecting the physical, emotional, social, career, spiritual and academic wellness of both students and academic lecturers. Furthermore, the African philosophy of *botho* (humaneness) as a lens helped the researcher to realise the caring attitude that was displayed by academics in an attempt to save the academic year. *Ubuntu* as an African philosophy, which is also used as a theoretical framework and is core to teaching and learning and student support. *Ubuntu* (humaneness) is explained as follows by Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999:34–35), ‘a person is a person through other people ... the concept shows interconnectedness of human society’. Within an ODeL context, the interaction between students and stakeholders that render services must show an *Ubuntu* ethos. This philosophy of *Ubuntu* was key when a shift in pedagogy occurred, since there was no face-to-face interaction, but an online teaching was the sole modality.

Methodology

The study was embedded in an interpretivist paradigm, which is defined by Wagner, Kawulich and Garner (2012) as a paradigm that addresses understanding the world as others experience it. Furthermore, Creswell (2012) defines interpretivism as a worldview wherein individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work. The choice of an interpretivist paradigm was influenced by the nature of the study, which is more on the exploratory side and fed more on experiences and narratives from academics, students and support staff in higher education. The ontological nature of higher education gave an impetus to the study and how a shift in pedagogy occurred. Furthermore, the qualitative method provided an in-depth grounding to the study within a naturalistic environment (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smit 2009) in which data collection occurred, even though it was mostly through online platforms. The design was phenomenological (Creswell 2012), owing to the descriptive nature of experiences sought from both academics, students and support staff. Sampling

was purposive by nature as described by Wagner *et al.* (2012), and only those with experience in a module for at least five years were selected to participate in the study. I sampled ten lecturers who taught modules which had more than 5 000 students. Big modules would give a clear picture on what students' experiences were after Covid-19, how the shift was in pedagogy managing teaching learning and assessment, and the wellness of both academics and the students. Four student support staff members were also purposively sampled to be part of the study. From the students' side, only e-mails with complaints from ten lecturers with more than 5 000 students were sampled.

The instruments used for data collection were an interview guide for ten lecturers and four student support staff members, and document analysis from e-mails sent by students who had challenges, as well as responses from lecturers and student support staff. The interviews asked questions that sought clarity on how assessment was switched from venue-based examination centres to online platforms and the preparation that went into the process. Furthermore, clarity was sought on the actual exam management, which was online and the exam integrity. In addition, academics were asked to give an account of how students reacted to the change to online platforms and the success and challenges thereof. The support staff were asked questions on how they participated in the online examination process and how they supported the students. E-mails that were sent pertaining to assignments and examinations were analysed on the type of query and the challenges that were experienced by students. Moreover, data were analysed manually following Henning *et al.*'s (2009) colour coding, forming categories and collapsing them into themes. The themes that emerged were as follows:

- *Online assessment and ICT challenges;*
- *Doubts on authenticity of online assessments;*
- *Academics Career Wellness transformed;*
- *Maximising the e in ODeL – The Aftermath of Covid-19; and*
- *Physical, Emotional, Social, Spiritual Wellness challenges.*

Discussion of Findings

Theme 1: Online Assessment and ICT Challenges

There were successes in the shift regarding moving from hardcopy posting of assignments and courier systems to moving swiftly to submissions via online platforms. The successes were marked by agility on the side of academics to

adapt and inform students to use the LMS-sakai platform to submit their assignment and abandon the hardcopy posting system. Another success was marked by academics who shifted from the traditional way of setting question papers and learnt a new skill of setting question papers using SAMIGO randomised multiple-choice questions. To some academics, this was a new thing and a skill in itself to create a pool of questions to set a question paper. In addition, the academics had a shift in acquiring skills of using Microsoft Forms as an alternate platform to allow students to submit the scripts, should they fail to submit using the LMS-sakai platform. The links were attached as an autoreply on e-mails from academics and also put on the module site as an announcement to enable all students to succeed in submitting their answer scripts. This is how the announcement looked like to enable a shift from venue-based exams to online exams:

NB. Kindly put this auto reply on your email

If you are unable to upload your answer sheet on the relevant platform myExam or myAdmin kindly use the link as the last resort

CEDU: <https://tinyurl.com/CEDUOCT/NOV20> contingency link

The ICT challenges may be summarised as follows:

- Challenges experienced during the uploading of assignments and examination papers posed a threat on the side of students.
- Students further experienced challenges in downloading question papers that caused a delay in commencement of examination.
- In addition, the problem of uploading of exam scripts was experienced by some students.
- Students from informal settlements, townships, deep rural areas experienced a challenge with connectivity.
- The diverse contexts also have different challenges regarding electricity, connectivity to internet and other societal factors which may either affect the examinations run online compared to when students were writing the venue-based examinations.
- The challenges during exams led to the writing of aegrotat exams or a deferment in the exam in June 2020, writing again in October 2020.
- Other students experienced loadshedding in their areas, as this is common in South Africa.

- Other international students missed the time zone and could not upload the scripts within the given time frames.
- Another challenge was the handwritten scripts, which were blurred and students got a deferment to have a second opportunity.
- Owing to large cohort of students submitting papers simultaneously, the LMS could not manage the stress level but crashed.
- Sadly, some students were supposed to complete their qualifications and owing to challenges in low bandwidth in their respective locations, the scripts could not go through and students had to write aegrotat exams in the subsequent exam session.

These are some of the emails with queries that were received by lecturers or student support staff:

Student 1 on e-mail:

Dear Dr xxxx

I was unable to use the internet at that time to upload my exam on the suggested site and on this link which was mentioned on the unisa website. I had an internet connection problem because my VPN was not working. So, I could not connect to the internet. Even though I tried using my phone to upload, it did not work because the internet on my phone works with a VPN as well.

Student 2 issue on corrupt script on e-mail:

Dear Mr yyyy

How many times have I sent emails with my student number yet you don't see it. Like I said you and your markers handle students' matters trivially; your office is not in order, you know you did not mark my script and I will not be disorganised by your carelessness, From December onwards the dates that I will prioritize are of my hospital appointments. I have been saying there is nothing wrong with my script this proofs [proves] it.

These are some of the evidence from students who were disadvantaged by technology, either owing to connectivity challenge or failure to convert the script to a PDF document. As academics had to adapt quickly and equip themselves with ICT knowledge, students were also able to move from the

comfort zone of using hardcopies and move to online platforms for formative assessments in sending assignments and summative assessments for the examination purposes. This shift caused by Covid-19, where Unisa moved from a blended mode to fully online, also challenged the teacher training programmes to put emphasis on the digital competence in all modules. This is in line with Jäger-Biela *et al.*'s (2020) advice that early-career teachers should have digital competency during their training.

Theme 2: Doubts on Authenticity of Online Assessments

The shift to online examinations brought doubts and concerns pertaining to the authenticity of qualifications for students. From the interviews with academics, the findings revealed that all ten academics preferred the past practice of venue-based examinations, where invigilators would oversee the examination for the entire duration and students were not allowed to have notes or any writing on their arms or palms. They still believed that close monitoring ensured credibility and authenticity of all exam papers. The academics also upheld the disciplinary processes that were carried out during venue-based summative assessment periods. They also expressed whether professional bodies will not query the qualifications completed during Covid-19 and the use of online examinations.

Academic 1 said: *I wonder if the teachers who are graduating through online examinations will really be having the pedagogic content knowledge of their subject.*

Academic 2 said: *Maybe the online assessment opened our eyes on how we question so that we minimize copying and students should express their insight on the subject matter.*

Academic 7 said: *With 4IR technology maybe it is the right time to explore other avenues of testing knowledge and move away from traditional practices.*

From the deliberations of academics during interviews, it was clear that they were not convinced that online assessment was reliable during summative assessment periods. Furthermore, some consoled themselves that an invigilation application was used only on exit-level modules, which allowed the use of a mobile phone to accommodate students from low socio-economic backgrounds.

Academic 4 said: *When the university brought in an Invigilator App, I was relieved that my module will be invigilated and students will not copy. Since they were taking selfie photos at least twice or thrice I was assured that they will behave.*

The findings of the study also revealed that some academics used straightforward multiple-choice questions in June 2020. However, for the October-November examinations, they changed the ordinary multiple-choice questions to randomised multiple-choice questions. During the June assessment period, they realised that students used an app called Telegram to share answers. Fortunately, there were honest students who reported their friends in the Telegram group that they were sharing answers and they saw this as an act which compromised the examination process. Two academics who experienced this reported the students to the university disciplinary committee and they got zero for their examination. Agility was further noticed in how these academics were able to switch from one mode to a randomised one.

For the postgraduate papers, Turnitin was used to detect plagiarised work, even though this had its own challenges where handwritten exam scripts could not be read by the Turnitin mechanism. The handwritten scripts would have a report of a 0% or a 100% similarity index. Academics felt that this was not a genuine reading from the Turnitin report. They resorted to a stringent marking process and comparing the answers to identify and discrepancies. Indeed, there were culprits who were caught even at postgraduate or honours level.

The case study findings clearly reveal that students cheat, whether writing venue-based or non-venue-based exams. Previous studies also support these findings. For example, Kaczmarczyk (2001) highlights that there is some anecdotal evidence which suggests students today cheat less in distance learning than with traditional instruction. However, Rowe (2004) points to the identification of students in online exams that there is no assurance, even when one uses Invigilator Apps and takes selfie photos. The problem is confirmation that in online assessment one cannot really confirm that student are in fact who they say they are. These are some of the doubts that characterise online examinations. The shift in higher education is riddled with changes and agility that academics are confronted with.

As a college, we normally conduct exam analysis to assess if a module performance is declining or increasing in pass rates. From module analysis we do a generic analysis to see the overall college performance. The table below outlines the pass rate for the college.

Table 1: Generic Pass Rate Pre-Covid and During Covid

PRE-Covid			DURING Covid
	May/June 2018	May/June 2019	May/June 2020
Admitted	274 482	189 232	115 562
Wrote	264 828	184 797	111 451
Passed	221 263	155 822	105 013
Failed	23 631	16 527	1 700
Normal Pass rate	83,5%	84,3%	94,2%

Table 2 Generic Pass rate during Covid-19

Nov 2020	DURING Covid-19
Wrote	406510
Passed	353 655
Pass Rate	87%

Table 1 above depicts an increase of only 0,8% in the pass rate from 2018 to 2019 and between 2019 and 2020, there was a leap in pass rate of 9,9% during Covid-19 when students were engaged in online assessments during May/June. In November 2020, there was a drop in the pass rate from 94,3% to 87%. The drop in the pass rate may be the manner in which the academics responded after realising how students cheated during the May/June examinations. Ordinary multiple-type questions were changed to randomised multiple choice questions. Exit-level modules were proctored through an invigilator application to curb cheating. Owing to warning letters that were received by those who cheated during the May/June examinations, this might have acted as a deterrent.

Theme 3: Academics Career Wellness Transformed

The study revealed a shift in the career wellness of academics in a number of areas. The technological skill of quite a number of academics was heightened since they were expected to upload question papers after setting them. Many complained that they were now turned into administrative staff members.

Participant 5 said: *I am no longer sure whether I am an academic or an administrative staff member. I find myself formatting question papers and uploading*

them whereas during venue-based exam these duties were performed by the Directorate of Assessment and Administration. I now know how to use other functions on the Learning Management System such as MyExams. I wonder what is the role of administrative staff?

Participant 6 said: *I found myself seated in front of my computer for four hours when my students were writing my paper. I was responding to calls guiding them on how to download the question paper. Some were crying saying their computers are spooling and can't get access to a question paper. I was turned into a counsellor and had to calm them down when they were crying. During the upload time of answer sheets, it would be the same some due to low connectivity they could not upload their papers.*

The utterances of Participants 5 and 6 clearly show that there was an increase in workload and a shift in the academic role to that of being and administrator. Owing to the shift to online examinations, there were many workshops to update academics on how to go about online examinations. The hours of working online also shifted from normal office hours of 8:00 to 16:00, to 8:00 to 18:00, 19:00 or 20:00. Some exam sessions ended at 20:00 in the evening and that would cause the lecturer to be online to assist and also be ready to respond to phone calls when students called. Academics showed resilience and were able to support the students. This resulted into a shift in career wellness and blurred roles. Some were stressed, because they were not used to working for long hours and doing duties that were new to them. Unfortunately, some already had a difficulty of balancing the key performance areas of teaching, research and engaged scholarship. These findings are similar to a study conducted by Houston, Meyer and Paewai (2006) and Veletsianot and Houlden (2020), who report that some staff members cannot balance teaching, research and service obligations.

Theme 4: Maximising the e in ODeL – The Aftermath of Covid-19

It was clear from all responses by interviewees that the move to online assessment of formative and summative assessments needed some support regarding digital pedagogy. Some advanced skills were needed in administering teaching and offering support to students in an online environment. Owing to a shift from a blended approach to fully online, the discomfort of student sending assignments via the LMS was a challenge for those who were used to courier

systems of hardcopy assignments. For summative assessments, venues were used and that was the norm for Unisa students. A sudden move to online assessment came with a number of challenges for both students and academics. The shift to online assessment came both benefits and challenges experienced by students and academics. For assignments sent via the LMS, immediate feedback was received after marking, instead of waiting for courier delivery, which took weeks to deliver the marked assignment. This is supported by the view by Singh and Thurman (2019), who assert that online learning has some flexibility. The shift to fully online platforms began when the lockdown period was announced and there was a crisis of getting formative assessments submitted via couriers. Academics requested students to submit their assignments via the LMS and there was unhappiness amongst those who were used to submitting hardcopies. Some insisted on submitting assignments via e-mails, claiming that they could not use the LMS and it created more work for assessment division to capture all marks manually.

Upon this experience, the University Management prepared videos for students to view and learn how to submit question papers using the LMS from an ordinary phone. Lecturers also prepared video lessons with the view of preparing students for online examinations and learning online. There was also a move to prepare more webinars on how to convert and scan the exam script into a portable document file (PDF) and to submit it using a phone. Covid-19 forced all institutions to adopt online pedagogy and to move at a rapid speed. Even though Unisa was known as an ODeL environment, the 'e' was not fully implemented. The 'e' was seemingly rapidly brought to the surface by the pandemic and a rapid shift was realised by both ICT, academics, support staff and students. The use of proctoring tools was also explored during this online assessment period to curb plagiarism and to maintain the academic integrity of qualifications. Academics learnt how to use an Invigilator App and study the report thereof. This shift to online assessment was beneficial for 4IR and maximising the 'e' within the ODeL context. On the other hand, it excluded students who struggled with connectivity and with a poor bandwidth, with the result that they had to write supplementary examinations in October and November 2020.

Other challenges associated with online assessment and the rapid shift to fully online platforms were load shedding, which is a systematic challenge, and it disadvantaged some students. To mitigate these challenges, the university was flexible in its rules, since all students were given permission to have a second

assessment opportunity if evidence could be provided of a loadshedding period in an area. In the aftermath of Covid-19, there will be no more turning back to hardcopy assignment and venue-based summative assessment. The utilisation of online examinations has been embraced. Even in 2021, Unisa had the June/July fully online assessment and September to December examinations will be conducted on online platforms. To ensure that the online assessment at Unisa has been fully embraced, furniture was sold in all examination centres that were used as venues for face-to-face assessment centres so that data could be purchased for all students. Students from 2020 were provided with 10 Gb of data during the day and 20 Gb during the night. The lessons learnt by staff members of Unisa is that we are all lifelong learners; new digital pedagogy was introduced and caused a paradigm shift for all in higher education. These findings reveal that academics and support staff in higher education should be prepared for any disaster. As Dhawan (2020) asserts, that there will always be unexpected situations that push us out of our comfort zones and the norm in our teaching space. Furthermore, the findings at Unisa clearly indicates that our ICT systems must be ready and adopt a high innovative ICT systems (Tull, Dabner & Ayebi-Arthur 2017). The digital shift experienced at Unisa harnessed the digital skills and improved the e-learning and the online teaching. Furthermore, the online assessment is acceptable for the majority of students and proctoring tools, though some are unhappy about the online platforms.

Theme 5: Physical, Emotional, Social, Spiritual Wellness Challenges

Findings further revealed that there was uncertainty and panic pertaining to physical well-being on the part of the academics owing to the loss of family members as a result of the pandemic. Academics felt isolated and understood what students were going through and tried to show kindness (*botho*) in responding to students' queries. Both academics and students were traumatised by the pandemic and were uncertain whether the academic year would be a success. Student support staff received many e-mails pertaining to teaching practice, and fear and frustration were expressed by students. From the interviews, it was clear that pain and loss characterised all ten interviewees as they juggled between the shift in the work environment of assessment and personal lives. Loss of family members caused depression in some and they were forced to consult psychologists. The difficulty was isolation from other colleagues and

that brought too much strain on individuals to cope. One academic expressed that he was afraid of taking leave and overburdening other colleagues with his work. He forced himself to finish the marking of examination scripts.

The emotional trauma was also seen in e-mails from students who lost parents or loved ones because of a missed examination opportunity. The student support office received many e-mails from students, seeking advice on how to get a second opportunity to write the online examinations. Most were requested to apply for an aegrotat examination. Some e-mails from students threatened staff members, because students got only 1%, which indicated a corrupt file, causing unhappiness amongst students. A student would resend the exam script and claim that from his/her side the script was fine. Some used even unpalatable language to academics. What is sad is that students were oblivious that their lecturers were also stressed and did not know what to do to save corrupt scripts from students.

Furthermore, there were no policy guidelines on online examinations. The shift to online examinations caused a disruption on assessment practices in higher education. An increase in workload on staff members owing to the death of colleagues within the university brought trauma to the leadership of departments, staff members and students who wrote e-mails that were not answered. Concomitant to all these burdens, frustrations, loss of loved ones, colleagues affected the wellbeing of academics, student support team and students. All these heartaches that came in 2020 and 2021 owing to the pandemic Covid-19 caused a shift in higher education. Martin (2020) asserts that relationships, motivation and mental health, amongst others, should be taken into consideration when online education is carried out.

Ubuntu/botho humaneness kicked in at the university and it started to organise mental health workshops and coping strategies. There were workshops for emotional intelligence on how to respond to angry students to student support staff members. In addition, a new culture developed of starting meetings with a moment of silence or prayer so that we could encourage one another. The truth is that we needed one another as a community of academics, administrative staff and students. As Tutu (1999) asserts, the philosophy of *Ubuntu/botho* with a notion of no man is an island, the I am because you are should map the way forward, even when we have moved to online pedagogy. Some departments started to have a debriefing meeting once a month that was held via Microsoft Teams simply to support one another and to show *Ubuntu/botho* humaneness. These seminars held online were an attempt to bridge the gap and to improve the social, emotional and spiritual wellness. Some interviewees expressed that prayer

was a haven for them and it helped them to cope with their work. The following excerpts are examples from participants of the study:

Student support member: *To be honest, I found my mailbox flooded with emails of frustrated and angry students who were not happy with the results. Some whose scripts were corrupt threatened suing the lecturer. I found myself praying first before I responded to emails in trying to calm them down.*

Academic participant: *I was also experiencing my own crises from my family and had to do my work with the new normal which brought me to tears. Before I responded to an email, I would calm down first because a retaliation would cost me my job.*

An e-mail from an angry student: *This university is useless I submitted my exam script which was fine even now it is fine from my side I am now told that it is corrupt, and I must rewrite in October November another exam. No, I can't do that I am paying a lot of money.*

Covid-19 indeed caused a digital shift in higher education and the assessment practices that were online saved the academic year even though the wellbeing of many were compromised. Change normally brings shock and support must be maximised in higher education. As Dhawan (2020) states, these sudden changes owing to Covid-19 demand humanity and unity. The support staff in ICT extended support to academics during the digital shift when most staff members work remotely. The humanity extended was commendable. Furthermore, the digital literacy was even extended to students who were not willing to abandon the practice of writing on paper and submit assignments. Currently, all assignments are submitted via online modalities, which is a positive gain in digital shift.

Trustworthiness of the Study and the Use of Lenses

In ensuring that the findings of the study are trustworthy, the transcribed interviews were verified with participants to ensure credibility. The researcher, since she is an insider, had to bracket to avoid bias in interpreting the data. Furthermore, for dependability, a critical reader had to go through the findings to audit trial data. In addition, the current study findings may not be generalised,

but I provide thick, rich descriptions of findings from interviews and documents such as real e-mails from students.

The theoretical lenses used in the study such as wellness theory, transactional distance theory and the African philosophy of *Ubuntu/botho* humaneness helped the researcher to understand what participants experienced during the pandemic in an ODeL institution. The three theories also helped to interpret data from a wellness and *Ubuntu/botho* humaneness perspective and what the transactional distance theory dictates. It was easy to understand the frustration of participants and how they showed resilience.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted on a small scale with ten academics and four student support staff members in one college. Future similar studies may be conducted on a larger scale using mixed methods to get more reliable data that may be generalised.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made for the study:

- Online teaching, learning and assessment are no longer an option, but a necessity for Unisa and will continue even for future years.
- Academic integrity needs to be worked on and improvements are needed.
- More guidance to students should be provided on videos for online exams.
- Use of social media to communicate with students.
- Radical paradigm shift and transformation in assessment types that are innovative are urgently needed for online platforms.

Conclusion

The agility seen in saving the academic year is highly commendable, including how the students agreed to move to online assessments, even though this was a sudden move. The findings also revealed that though there were challenges with

ICT, connectivity and load shedding, many students were able to write and managed to submit assessments successfully. Furthermore, resilience was shown by all stakeholders – academics, students and support staff. Despite their own wellbeing challenges, all managed to sail through the year and it was completed successfully. The benefits seen in using online assessments is the flexibility thereof, which minimized transport challenges and work-related matters. This saved money for the students to move from their homes to the exam venue, compared to the past. Since data were provided by the university, that was also a bonus for the students who come from a low socio-economic group. However, the issue of tools remains a challenge, since many do not have laptops and computers, but write on paper, take a photo of a script and then submit it. These online platforms revealed that Unisa has a student population that is diverse. There is a digital divide among the student population; some are excluded when we move to fully online platforms. It was evident that the ICT infrastructure needs to be upgraded, owing to the challenges experienced of systems that crash when there are uploads of many students in modules with more than 30 000 students. Going forward, this will need immediate attention from the university. What needs more attention is the use of proctoring systems and verification of students' identity throughout the assessment duration. This will assist in ensuring the credibility and validity of the online assessments and that the qualifications accreditation is not compromised. The human element of academics, support staff and students are central to the shift that was experienced in the institution. Furthermore, the wellness of individuals matters the most, even when we move to fully online platforms.

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