The Abrupt Transition into Online Learning during Covid-19 Pandemic: A South African Hospitality Management Student's Perspective

Anisah Deen[a], Dawn Khuluse[b], Erica Sao Joao[c], [a]Lecturer: University of Johannesburg, Department of Hospitality Management, School of Tourism & Hospitality, Bunting Road Campus, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa, **Orchid id**: 0000-0002-3276-2240, [b]Lecturer: Durban University of Technology, Department of Hospitality & Tourism, 7 Ritson Road, Durban, 4001, South Africa. **Orchid id:** 0000-0002-6206-4355, [c]Lecturer: University of Johannesburg, Department of Hospitality Management, School of Tourism & Hospitality, Bunting Road Campus, Auckland Park, 2006, South Africa. **Orchid id:** 0000-0002-6603-4030 Email: [a]anisahd@uj.ac.za, [b]dawnk@dut.ac.za, [c]ericasj@uj.ac.za

The abrupt transition into online learning has subjected students to a range of challenges and emotions associated with online learning particularly with the high volumes of students who either do not have access to home computers or internet connection. This study aimed to locate the student perspective studying Hospitality Management during this abrupt transition into online learning as a result of Covid-19. Using a quantitative approach, data was collected from two South African universities. Findings revealed several salient issues such as, shortage of daytime data; severe connectivity issues; lack of proper devices to learn online; and the struggles of being away from university residences. Student well-being was also a factor whilst studying away from the classroom and fear of an uncertain future affected their ability to concentrate in their already anxious state. Despite students being able to organise themselves with the desire to complete the required work, the difficulty in working with the learning management system needs to be rectified and modules being offered should be addressed for online pedagogy. Thus, this paper provided substantial insight to inform teaching and learning practice for universities which offer a Hospitality Management programme to subsequently support students' either online or with blending learning.

Key words: *Online learning, Covid-19, hospitality management, students, challenges, pandemic*

Introduction

Since mid-March 2020 South African universities, colleges and schools have been experiencing an exceptional transformation from traditional classroom settings to online classes due to lockdown regulations imposed by the government to combat the spread of Covid-19 (Bao, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). However, due to the relentless spread of Covid-19, all industries had to swiftly adapt to remote working. In higher education, especially universities that offered and depended on the traditional method of teaching and learning, immediately assumed the online teaching route due to lockdown and social distancing. For vocational programmes such as Hospitality Management and the associated programmes within this discipline, online teaching has resulted in students having the responsibility of learning by themselves without the comfort of the classroom and convenience of laboratories to conduct both the theory and practical learning. The well-being of both academics and students has also come to the fore because of Covid-19. Consequently, students suffered the worst blow during lockdown, especially those who depended on university resources such as computers, access to Wi-fi, lack of peer support and residence for learning. Although being in the generation of technology with software and applications (Pandey et al., 2020) with social networks (Motlagh et al., 2020) and considering the amount of time that students spend on their devices especially in the classroom, many universities have embraced the fourth industrial revolution in their teaching and learning practice (Oke & Fernandes, 2020) by gradually implementing the concept of blended learning. However, the abrupt change into online learning has subjected students to a range of challenges and emotions associated with this online approach. Therefore, this study sought to uncover the challenges that students encountered with online learning during these unprecedented times. Additionally, this paper is aimed at locating ways to overcome these immediate tribulations of students who are studying in the discipline of Hospitality Management for the purpose of improving the student online teaching and learning experience. Findings from this study will provide significant insight that will inform teaching and learning practice for lecturers across universities which offer the Hospitality Management programme to subsequently support students' either online or blending learning. Thus, providing valuable theoretical and practical contribution to higher education pedagogy and online pedagogy by achieving the following objectives: 1) To understand the challenges that students encountered with online learning during Covid-19; and 2) To establish ways to support students' either for online or blended learning during Covid-19. The next section explores previous literature that are related to this study.

Literature review

There is no dispute that Covid-19 wreaked havoc in many sectors of society, but a secondary thought was given to education and specifically higher education. The ripple effects to both academics and students were significant. Although, several institutions were using Learning Management systems already, the thought was perhaps that the migration to online learning would be relatively simple. With the necessity for lockdown resulting in people being required

to stay home, the burden the student was required to bear surfaced later as deadlines for assessments needed to be met for the successful completion of the academic year.

Online learning

Previously the higher education sector had grappled with disruptions such as strikes, and wars, but the lockdown was at a universal magnitude and the first one of its kind (Williamson et al., 2020). Consequently, students within these higher education institutions had to adapt quickly to online learning and while it may take time to return to campus' resulting in online learning remaining a necessity. Corresponding studies are convinced that the severe education change and an excess of information could have negative repercussion on students as they may be demoralized and depressed, more especially to those that are not acquainted with online learning (Liyanagunawardena et al., 2014). In line with the objectives of this paper, recent research has noted that the dependence on technology is mounting (Baum & Hai, 2020), infrastructure in some rural parts of South Africa require development to support this technology drive. However, gaps exist in the gravity of conditions in which students in South Africa strive to complete their tertiary education especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Similarly, the rapid demand for electronic devices has revolutionised the educational world prematurely and without adequate preparation (Montrieux et al., 2015). It is recommended that for online learning to be successful, the transition must commence with technology resources and students and instructor's training sessions, followed by continual professional assistance (Janse van Rensburg, 2018). Considering that, the introduction of these devices and learning management systems has provided lecturers with new and modern tools to enhance teaching and learning for students, while on the other hand affording education to students by permitting them to download necessary learning materials (Barr & Miller, 2013) and allowing them to learn wherever they may be. It can be surmised that with online learning, a device and sufficient data are essential tools for learning and student success.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been called the catalyst to the sudden digital transformation of the education segment (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Going forward, this pandemic forced traditional universities to go fully online without sufficient preparation or warning and into advanced digital technologies to stimulate education (Dawadi et al., 2020). Given the fact that students and lecturers had to become digitally savvy has caused immense psychological pressure to all sectors since online medium demands an exclusive *"set of technical and pedagogical knowledge and skills"* (Dawadi et al., 2020, p.10). Furthermore, as the lockdown regulations implemented in South Africa also triggered government and the Department of Higher Education to make necessary changes in the university calendars impacting assessments and placement for Work Integrated Learning.

Student Well-being

Well-being refers to general good health which encompasses physiological, psychological and socio-environmental balance within an individual. The well-being of students is not a new concept for universities and perpetual studies have been conducted exploring various avenues surrounding this issue and its impact. For example, student success and retention (Deen & Leonard, 2015; Kahu & Nelson, 2018), student perceptions of their studies and careers (Ezeuduji et al., 2017) and student satisfaction (Osman & Saputra, 2019). As the normal student stresses still exist, for instance new friends, new lecturers, and different styles of teaching, the level of instruction from school to university, and for some, new living and social surroundings. There is also the added culture shock of students from rural to urban areas (Walker, 2020), the dependency of English which is likely to be a second language for many students in South Africa, and then the difference in socioeconomic situations that the student may find themselves in.

There are added stresses of the modern student that differs from decades before. With the encouragement of students with government assistance (NSFAS loans), Walker (2020) suggests that the student that is 'better off' is the government or bursary assisted student, who has sufficient money to live on campus, own a laptop, have sufficient food and toiletries, and has some money left over to assist their family. If the student is in residence, then their focus can be on learning, with fewer distractions than when at home. The student is also likely to share with other students, who may support one another.

In recent years, health services within tertiary institutions have become aware of the growing number of mental health issues (Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019) and, the prevalence of depression, anxiety and stress, all of which have implications on student retention and student success (Kalkbrenner et al., 2019). Notably, these aspects have become a greater concern during the pandemic, necessitating increased student assistance to cope with the daily life challenges that the pandemic poses as well as the changes in the learning environment.

Many students especially in South Africa, the learning environment is quite different to what they are accustomed to. For those students that have moved from home to residences where the learning culture is encouraged, to going back 'home' where it is more challenging. Furthermore, the residences also provide adequate Wi-Fi or internet connection (Pedró et al., 2020) so that work can be done. If not there, being at residence provides access to university facilities such as libraries, computer labs or the institutions study centres and make use of the devices there. Additionally, this study was conducted in South Africa, of which limited access to computers is just one of the challenges that students undergo whilst accessibility to electricity and running water takes precedence.

Although learning management systems have allowed work to be available wherever the student is, this has resulted in other issues for instance, does the student have sufficient data

for the learning material as well as videos and asynchronous lectures? (Walker, 2020). For some students, they are only using a smart phone, which can cause eyestrain, be tiring watching on such a small screen and even completing assessments, for instance online tests and/or essays on this device if needs be.

Higher education institutions closed abruptly due to the pandemic and subsequent lock down, with few having no idea how long the closures would last, with no contingency plans in place except to continue teaching remotely (Pedró et al., 2020). The students were impacted first with the closure of higher education institutions and the stoppage of face-to-face teaching. Furthermore, when government implemented a complete lockdown of the country, students were tackled with several challenges namely, confinement and isolation; returning home; increased anxiety and depression; abandonment because of transport systems and boarder closures (Pedró et al., 2020).

Some institutions were ill prepared for the lecturers to continue their instruction, resulting in academic activities coming to a halt and substantial delay in the academic calendar. Whilst others were able to commence online teaching and other academic activities, relatively quickly. Another concern was that students saw the move to remote learning as only a temporary measure, with module content not adequately covered because the programme was designed for face-to-face instruction and not remotely. Furthermore, undergraduate students benefit from the social and structural support of contact classes, whilst older students and post-graduate students are more successful with remote because of the discipline that is already instilled (Pedró et al., 2020).

Challenges of online learning

Since online education is dependent on technological facilities such as reliable internet connection, data or Wi-Fi, inconsistencies in the availability of these facilities are broadening the challenges of accessing quality education (Dawadi et al., 2020). However, in South Africa as opposed to other countries, access to data is not free. All citizens regardless of being a student or not are required to purchase data from the available South African networks to access the internet. To aid this struggle, some universities have awarded students with data to assist them in accessing online learning. However, to accommodate the large number of students cost effective packages were purchased resulting in majority of data being available for night usage. Therefore, students with poor internet connections and limited data were further challenged by online learning.

Keeping students motivated in an online platform is another trial that online students face and lecturers alike, especially learners that are not independent and self-motivated (Brittany, 2015). Technical problems and answers for technical support may also hamper the efficiency of online learning (Barr & Miller, 2013). Barr and Miller (2013) further stipulate that online learning is

the curbed opportunity for creating trust and ethical practices such as integrity, reliability and honesty among learners. However, these dishonest learner practices create belief that learners are cheating and producing fraudulent work leading to less support for the students who are encountering issues with connectivity, power outages, insufficient data to name a few. Although a South African study on digital transformation indicated that South African mobile networks reduced data costs to accommodate online teaching and learning, some learners were still not able to access online classes due to poverty (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020).

Blended learning

Research stipulated that blended learning was a dangerous idea and it challenged the status quo with its reported difficulties from students, educators and institutions (Broadbent, 2017; Medina, 2018; Prasad et al., 2018; Rasheed et al., 2020). Regardless, this approach is not a new approach to learning with distance learning institutions. Furthermore, greater focus should be on all stages of education; from primary school through to tertiary education, so that any disruption that may occur does not have such a profound effect (Pedró et al., 2020). One of the ways this can be achieved is to incorporate greater computer skills. This move to fourth industrial revolution requires greater input of systems from governments worldwide so that pupils can be supported. It is also noted that the educators, administrators and students are involved in the planning process so to reduce inequalities and improve inclusion (Rasheed et al., 2020).

Whilst the consequences of the pandemic will vary with each student but the inequalities have become evident, with the emergence of new issues. It is acknowledged that a holistic approach to student well-being as student poverty influences the student and their ability to perform well (Walker, 2020). While it is not our intention to criticize online learning however, we seek to understand the challenges that students encountered with the change and establish ways to support students during the lockdown and the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, it remains to be seen how this abrupt change into online classes has affected the quality of teaching and learning in the institutions of higher learning. Furthermore, studies involving this change are vital for the students, lecturers and universities to facilitate and develop suitable future solutions.

Methodology

Design and sampling

Employing a quantitative approach, the study made use of a newly developed structured questionnaire. Considering all Covid-19 related research being new, this study focussed on specifically locating the challenges that students encountered during online learning and their well-being. This new questionnaire was developed by the researchers to address some of these student hardships because of Covid-19. Considering that protocol of the South African

lockdown stipulates that social distancing was a requirement, an electronic questionnaire was the best option to target a wide geographical area.

Purposive convenience sampling was applied for this study. The two Universities within South Africa namely, the University of Johannesburg (UJ) based in the Gauteng province and the Durban University of Technology (DUT) in KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) were purposely selected as the researchers work at these institutions. Both universities offered the Hospitality Management offering and its associated programmes. Therefore, conveniently targeting the students who were registered and studying within these two universities, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Universities offering options

University of Johannesburg	Durban University of Technology
Diploma in Food & Beverage I, II, III	Diploma in Hospitality Management I, II, III
Hospitality Management Degree I, II, III	Diploma in Catering Management I, II, III
Advanced Diploma in Hospitality Management	Higher Certificate in Hospitality & Leisure
	Higher Certificate in Culinary Skills

The advantage of the electronic survey as once respondents received questionnaire, they could complete the questionnaire at their own convenience. A covering letter was presented on the first page of this survey indicating that they have a choice to participate, anonymity will be practiced and at any point of the survey, they may opt out and not complete it. Table 1 includes the names of the programmes on offer at each of the institutions. Even though the names may be slightly different, the focus of the students in the targeted programmes, is within the hospitality industry. Advantageously, the various Hospitality programmes offered also provided a diverse view of students' perspective in their selected course. A total number of 854 students were registered in programmes offered in Table 1. A combined sample of 299 respondents agreed to participate in the study from both universities and a valid sample of 245 was achieved.

Data Collection

To begin with the data collection ethical consent was sought from the Institutional Research Committee (IREC) of both Universities. Therefore, a rigorous process was followed at both department and faculty level, of which ethical approval was attained (Ethics number UJ - 20STH15 and DUT 121/20). The questionnaire encompassed sections that included online learning (Baum & Hai, 2020; Roddy et al., 2017), well-being (Pedró et al., 2020; Walker, 2020), challenges (Brittany, 2015; Dawadi et al., 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020), independent learning (Roddy et al., 2017) and blended learning (Broadbent, 2017; Medina, 2018; Prasad et al., 2018; Rasheed et al., 2020) as discussed in the literature. Careful consideration was placed on the length and design of the questionnaire for a positive response especially being an electronic survey. After establishing the literature the researchers developed the individual

statements of the Likert-scale based on their first-hand challenges experienced with students during lockdown. These statements can be viewed in the quantitative discussion section (Tables 2) of this paper. An open-ended question was asked to encourage respondents to expand their response in ways that will improve their online experience. Pre-tests were also conducted amongst the researchers and the statistician involved to check sentence structure, format and grammar (Rothgeb et al., 2007). Pre-administration of the URL link, the electronic questionnaire was further pretested for understanding with university students outside the target sample. Once the electronic structured questionnaire was ready, it was then administered by the researchers to the targeted population (Table 1). Emails and WhatsApp messages containing the URL were sent directly to the students. Additionally, the URL was placed on the learning management system for the students to access and answer if they wished to participate.

Data analysis

With the assistance of a statistician, the valid data was captured and uploaded to the statistical software known as the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 26.0 for descriptive data analysis. Frequencies and tables were then used to describe the results to assess what the responses meant collectively. Due to the large response rate of the open-ended responses, it was analysed using thematic analysis which has been common approach especially for lengthy qualitative data.

Results and discussion

Majority of the respondents (77%) were female with the remaining of 23% were male. The age distribution was as follows: between 18 and 20 years of age (43%), 21 and less than 23 years of age (38%), while the rest were 24 years and older (19%). In terms of ethnicity, the sample was dominated by Black (94%), followed by Indian (2%), and Coloured (2%) and White (2%).

The following section examines the results and discusses the challenges that students encountered with online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic, thereby addressing the first objective of the paper. Descriptive results in Table 2 contains the analysis for each construct (challenges, online learning, well-being, independent learning and blended learning) relating to the student perspectives of their transition into online learning. These results demonstrated a somewhat even split from the students, either in agreement or disagreement.

Challenges that students encountered during online learning

Noting that the majority of the respondents (56%) found online learning difficult and time cannot be managed effectively. This could be the result of technological difficulty as more than half reported that connectivity was an issue during online learning as pointed out by recent studies by Dawadi et al. (2020) and Walker (2020). A significant number of respondents

indicated that insufficient data was an issue to keep up with online lectures and considering that students in South Africa undergo difficulties in accessing electricity, running water and poverty (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). These issues should have been expected especially if students were not residing on campus grounds due to the country's lockdown. A similar study in Pakistan displayed almost identical results with just over half of the sampled students reported major problems with internet access (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Findings validate that the two sampled universities did try and assist students where possible by providing data thus findings report insufficient data was not an issue (41%). These findings support that the provision of data to students from their universities assisted the online learning process. Aside from NSFAS, this was a new process for South African universities as government loans were distributed to the students to manage independently.

The following results appear to have a correlation in terms of the response rate. Those who have indicated that they prefer the structure and set up of the classroom environment (69%) may also have stipulated that their home environment is not conducive for learning (60%) and prefer one-on-one interaction with their fellow students and lecturers (73%). Arguably, an earlier study conducted in the United States revealed that learners enjoyed doing work at their own pace and time. Moreover, they also liked the fact that they can download learning materials, replicate broadcasts and modules as often as they like (Johnson, 2014). Findings in this study reveal that students (62.5%) found this aspect difficult supporting that online learning route without warning or preparation was challenging.

Student perspective of Online learning

Findings reveal that more than 50% do not have a positive perspective to online learning and they did not easily adapt to learning away from university. In line with these findings are from the study in Pakistan where only 10% of their students felt that learning online is more interesting than traditional face-to-face learning (Adnan & Anwar 2020). Some researchers believe that the reasons for this may be the lack of emotional and social presence in the online environment. For example, Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) suggests that the face-to-face environment can provide the socio-emotional support more easily. Hence it was not surprising that a similar number of respondents (64.1%) expressed that they are no longer enjoying their course.

Table 2. Descriptive analysis for constructs

Statements	Mean	Std. D	Disagree	Neither agree or disagree	Agree
Challenges	**3.55**	**0.777**			
Online learning is difficult for me, I cannot manage my time effectively	3.41	1.220	28.1%	15.9%	55.9%
I consistently have connectivity issues	3.54	1.175	24.5%	15.1%	60.5%
I don't have sufficient data to keep up with all my lectures	3.09	1.280	42.2%	15.9%	41.7%
I prefer the structure and set up of the classroom environment	3.88	1.068	10.2%	20.8%	69%
Online learning is difficult for me, my home environment is not conducive for learning	3.57	1.212	23.3%	17.1%	59.6%
I prefer the one and one interaction with my fellow students and lecturers	3.93	0.990	7.8%	19.2%	73%
I find it difficult listening to pre-recorded lectures in my own time than attending class	3.61	1.271	23.3%	14.3%	62.5%
I find it difficult to understand the content of my modules effectively	3.38	1.147	26.1%	20.8%	52.6%
Reliability statistics (Challenges), Cronbach's alpha = 0.818, number of items = 8					
Online learning	**3.05**	**0.584**			
I enjoy online learning more than the teaching in the classroom	2.46	1.229	56.3%	22.9%	20.8%
I easily adapted to learning away from University	2.58	1.173	56.4%	16.7%	26.9%
I am enjoying the course I am studying now more than I did when I was attending lectures	2.35	1.159	64.1%	16.7%	19.2%
I find online learning to beneficial to my University experience	2.57	1.170	54.7%	20.0%	25.3%
I require constant contact from my lecturer in order for me to study online	3.52	1.020	16%	29.9%	54.1%
I achieved better results at the end of Semester 1	3.30	1.127	23.2%	30.6%	46.1%
Collaborative classroom engagement motivates learning and promotes better understanding to the subject matter	3.74	1.099	12.2%	21.2%	66.5%
I would have preferred to stay at university residence during lockdown	3.85	1.294	17.2%	14.3%	68.4%
Reliability statistics (Online Learning), Cronbach's alpha = 0.706, number of items = 6					
Well-Being	**3.50**	**0.685**			
I am anxious studying on my own	3.21	1.113	31.4%	20%	48.6%
Being confined in lockdown has affected how productive I am towards my studies	3.81	1.057	13.1%	15.2%	71.7%
I feel I cannot cope emotionally being away from the classroom	3.44	1.091	22.1%	24.5%	53.4%
I feel I don't know what is going to happen with my studies	3.56	1.192	23.3%	15.9%	60.8%
Going in to online learning was scary for me	3.92	1.065	12.3%	11.5%	76.3%
The fear of the unknown due to Covid-19 affects my ability to concentrate	3.64	1.120	18.8%	15.5%	65.7%
The employment of my parents adds to my emotional stress during this time	3.67	1.244	20.8%	15.5%	63.6%
My lecturers were generally unsympathetic to my living conditions	2.73	1.103	43.7%	32.7%	23.6%
Reliability statistics (Well-being), Cronbach's alpha = 0.759, number of items = 8					
Independent Learning	**3.65**	**0.724**			
I find it difficult to cope with independent learning	3.34	1.147	26.9%	20%	53.1%
Going to class keeps me on track	4.09	0.954	8.1%	13.1%	78.8%
I found it difficult to listen to a 20 minute lecture	3.19	1.208	33.5%	20.8%	45.7%
I found the module content too difficult to understand without the lecturer present	3.52	1.126	21.7%	21.6%	56.7%
Tests and assessments come around too quickly to be properly prepared	3.84	1.004	13%	14%	73%
This process required too much self-discipline	4.24	0.835	4%	8.6%	87.4%
The online learning platform is a challenge for me	3.53	1.114	19.6%	22.9%	57.6%
My family life is not conducive to learning independently at home	3.44	1.150	22.4%	24.5%	53.1%
Reliability statistics (Independent Learning), Cronbach's alpha = 0.829, number of items = 8					
Blended Learning	**3.20**	**0.691**			
I am able to prioritise my work whilst being at home	2.85	1.146	42.1%	24.5%	33.4%
I liked creating my own schedule	3.47	0.969	20%	22%	58%
The comradery with my friends helps my learning	3.47	1.008	20.1%	22.1%	57.8%
I would like to continue with a combination of online and face-to-face teaching	3.71	1.173	17.5%	13.5%	69%
I found that I am enjoying the course I am studying now more than I did when I was attending lectures	2.48	1.260	57.5%	21.2%	21.3%
Reliability statistics (Blended Learning), Cronbach's alpha = 0.629, number of items = 3					

Positively these authors further mention that this emotional presence will eventually emerge as part of the transition into the online environment (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). Whilst just over half of the respondents (54.1%) indicated that they require constant contact from their lecturers to study online, a previous study did warn that becoming an online learner places different demands on students (Roddy et al., 2017). However, despite the resistance to online learning indicated in these findings, students seemed to have performed better than they did in

the classroom and collaborative classroom engagement motivated learning. Notably respondents still preferred to stay at residences during the lockdown as students had access to Wi-Fi and electricity as stipulated in the literature.

Student perspective of their well-being

When analysing the students' well-being, it was evident that students have been highly distressed demonstrating feelings of anxiety and being confined in lockdown has affected their productivity towards their studies. These findings are in line with Dawadi et al. (2020) which stipulated that Covid-19 had an emotional impact on human beings. These authors further stated that students are "*going through a great deal of anxiety*" because of the pandemic (Dawadi et al., 2020, p.7). The above results can imply why students are emotionally not coping with studying away from the classroom and their fear of online learning. Findings from an online learning study conducted prior to Covid-19 presented similar issues amongst students such as anxiety associated with technology, being out of one's comfort zone and difficulties in peer interactions (Gillet-Swan, 2017). Students (65.7%) disclosed that fear of the unknown caused by Covid-19 affected their ability to concentrate. The plausible explanation would be that their parent's employment status further added to their emotional stress. These findings demonstrate that students underwent considerable strain with the sudden change into online learning and the tension elicited by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Student perspectives of independent learning

A substantial number of students felt that attending classes kept them on track and that independent learning was difficult for them. These findings are not surprising given their choice of registering with traditional universities. However, a recent online study in India did not replicate these findings as majority students preferred recorded and live classes that can be recorded for flexible learning (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Findings (87%) revealed that independent learning required too much self-discipline and their family life is not conducive to learning independently (58%).

Student perspective of blended Learning

Positively, findings also revealed that students can prioritise work whilst at home and more than half enjoyed creating their own schedule and that the comradery with friends helps with learning. Remarkably, almost 70% expressed that they would like to continue with blended learning. This finding is promising as it is still unknown to when traditional universities may resume consistent face-to-face teaching. It's also possible once the pandemic does settle down, blended learning may continue (Muthuprasad et al., 2021).

Open ended-responses

To meet the second objective of this paper, one open-ended question asked respondents to indicate possible ways to improve their online experience. These qualitative textual data was analysed using coding (Grønmo, 2019), whereby the researchers can develop a better understanding of the situation being investigated. There were 214 responses to this question, however some respondents included more than one idea into their response, resulting in 260 ideas shared. Similar responses were then grouped to formulate a theme. Some responses were very brief and concise for example, *'Amount of data provided'* (R07), while other respondents gave more detail. Four prominent themes emerged from the responses; namely *Tools, Assessments*, *Classes* and *Lecturer interactions, and Personal circumstances.* There were several other statements made that will be discussed too. The general tone of the responses was that students want to achieve the necessary results to allow them to articulate into the next year. Therefore, the desire is to get work done on time and to finish the year. For example, one respondent indicated: *"I will do my best to complete all the assignments in time and l will also try my best to go to different places so that I can get network so that I will pass at the end of the year."* (R83).

Theme 1 - Tools

For this study, tools refer to the data, connection and devices that students utilise and learning management systems (LMS); for instance, Blackboard and Moodle are the learning platforms used at the sampled institutions. Majority of the respondents noted that uncapped data, a stable Wi-Fi or internet connection and a laptop were necessities. Out of the responses to this question, data is mentioned 86 times. Online lectures should be free for the students. One respondent suggested: "*(The institution) should provide data for ALL students and think about decreasing the cost for each module. It is not fair to pay the full price for a module and then have to buy your own data.*" (R37). Whilst several respondents indicated that they were grateful for the night data that the institutions had provided but it resulted in them having to turn their day around. Also, most of the lecturers did their live lesson during the day so the student was then required to listen to the recording at night resulting in them not being able to ask questions in real time. However, many indicated that a laptop is essential because working on a smart phone screen was too difficult over extended periods of time. For example, a respondent suggested: "*If we could all received data on time and be provided with devices to use.*" (R97). Furthermore, in certain areas the frequent power outages interfered with students requiring to charge their phones and devices. Students receiving financial aid (NSFAS) noted that the student already have financial problems and now they need to have their own device, data and then Wi-Fi and this was not achievable. Additionally, students felt that they needed more instruction on how to use the learning management system. Collaborate on BlackBoard, BlackBoard Ultra and Zoom lecturers worked well but were not so effective on WhatsApp.

Theme 2 – Assessments

Assessments appeared in several comments because students are aware that is how their competence is measured. The students want longer time allocations for tests and because they are using smartphones, not so many long questions that need too much typing. Respondents indicated: "*Add more time during tests and exams*" (R06) and *"Give sufficient time to do assignments."* (R49). The students want to be able to back track in their tests so that they can concentrate and answer the questions that they do know and then go back if time permits to attempt the other questions. Therefore, the respondents feel more time needs to be allocated for assignment type assessments to meet the required deadlines. Although assessment integrity is important to maintain for both institutions, it should be noted that students are familiar with each other, some more than others. Therefore, how can an institution maintain integrity when the loyalty between friends or fellow students is greater than towards to the institution of study.

Theme 3 – Classes and lecturer interactions

Classes and lecturer interactions refers to how the information was shared and the communication between the student and lecturer. The students were grateful for the recorded lectures being available to students as well as all the other material provided to them on their learning platforms. However, asking questions when the student does not understand is not possible when they are listening to a recording and especially when the student only has night data remaining which posed to be problematic. Whilst the student suggested that a timetable should be specifically designed for online teaching that would include only three live lectures per day. It was suggested that the lectures could be longer than the customary time meaning the student should then focus on those modules of that day only. An alternative would be to ensure that all modules are included in the week. Working with the face-to-face timetable does not work because the classes are then spread out everywhere and the students have difficulty organising their time. There should also be a timetable for all the assessments so that they do not get packed into one or two weeks but are distributed throughout the semester. If students are listening to the lectures at another time, they get confused as to when certain assessments are due. This will also allow an even spread of classes so that there are not a lot of classes in one week and then only a few in another. The open-ended findings further revealed that the communication between student and lecturer needs to be improved. Students felt like lecturers did not understand or were not compassionate enough. They taught and carried on without thinking about the students having problems like power cuts, poor connection and/or no data.

Theme 4 – Personal circumstances

Whilst personal circumstances refer to students challenges with family and their living conditions. Many indicated a need for a quiet place to work and several requesting going back to residence because of the conducive learning environment, reduced disturbances because of siblings and household chores that needed to be done. Several students also indicated that they

want to go back to residence because of the availability of Wi-Fi, stable connectivity and a quiet place to study. Social media was a disruption. Other students noted that the support from their classmates was missed. Time management and planning became the necessary tools to cope with the workload and some students indicated that the notes should have been sent to them to facilitate their learning.

Discussion

In summary, the general feel is that students are keen to learn but there is frustration around aspects that students feel the institutions should resolve. The two sampled institutions did provide the students with data but there was inadequate daytime data resulting in students needing to listen to a recording instead attending lectures. This provides reasoning to why there were similar figures in the quantitative findings. The switch to online learning was too abrupt, with insufficient instruction on both the learning platforms and how the work would be steered from lecturers. Drawing on the studies by Dawadi et al. (2020) and Walker (2020), these findings agreed that connection and data are essential tools for modern education. As students were working with a smart phone which is frustrating because the screen is too small and longer pieces of work were too difficult to achieve which is the likely reason students repeatedly mention the necessity of devices. Poor connectivity is the result of a weak infrastructure and students experience power outages too. Along with financial problems or those who receive government financial aid, are particularly vulnerable when trying to achieve the imposed deadlines. Walker (2020) indicates that the student is better off with a governmental financial aid, it appears in this study staying at residences would improve the students living and working conditions. Especially that the demands of home life cause added stresses to these students. Social media was an aid when students were supporting each other or communicating with lecturers but could also be a disruptor. Although the availability of the study material to students provides that flexibility, students are hindered by the lack of infrastructure and data. Researchers note that these disparities in the availability of resources for students highlights the inequalities that still exist within our society (Crawford et al., 2020; Pedró et al., 2020). Some students indicated that the online was generally positive but poor connectivity was a challenge. The students were able to work at their own pace and when it was convenient. The switch to online required the students to plan so that they could cope with the workload.

Conclusion

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic all industries had to abide to social distancing and swiftly move to remote working. Consequently, South African universities were forced to transform their teaching and learning from traditional to online learning without haste resulting in a strain for both student and lecturers alike. However, the difficulty of working with the learning platform should be addressed and the manner of which modules are offered should be directed towards online or blended pedagogy. In saying this, if South African institutions plan to

continue with blended learning or online learning, findings from this study should prompt government to include a device to facilitate learning to the students that are on government financial aid. Although the study aimed to understand the challenges that students encountered, with a certain level of frustration being noted in their responses, students were successful, the curriculum was completed and many progressed to the next level. Their determination should be admired but at the same time, the findings in this study should guide the institutions in future decisions so to assist the students better.

Limitations and future studies

Although the scope of this study was limited to two South African Universities, the data attained was compelling as the rich open-ended data presented in this paper provided specific explanations and a deeper understanding from the student perspective. Additionally, this paper will assist teaching and learning practice for lecturers across universities which offer the Hospitality Management programme. This paper targeted mainly students and excluded the lecturers at these higher education institutes. Thus, future studies may focus on the lecturer well-being and challenges in higher education during lockdown and online learning.

REFERENCES

Adnan, M. & Anwar, K. (2020). Online learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Students' perspectives. *Journal of Pedagigical Socialogy & Psychology*, 2(1),45-51. Retrived from: http://www.doi.org/10.33902/JPSP.%202020261309

Bao, W. (2020). COVID-19 and online teaching in higher education: A case study of Peking University. *Human Behavior and Emerging Technologies*, *2*(2), 113-115. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1002/hbe2.191

Barr, B., & Miller, S. F. (2013). *Higher education: the online teaching and learning experience* Retrieved from: https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED543912.pdf

Baum, T., & Hai, N. T. T. (2020). Hospitality, tourism, human rights and the impact of COVID-19. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, *32*(7), 2397-2407. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-03-2020-0242

Brittany, G. (2015). *Online learning revealing the benefits and challenges*, St John Fisher College, School of Education]. Retrieved from: https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/education_ETD_masters/303

Broadbent, J. (2017). Comparing online and blended learner's self-regulated learning strategies and academic performance. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *33*, 24-32. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2017.01.004

Cleveland-Innes, M. & Campbell, P. (2012). Emotional presence, learning, and the online learning environment. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning,* 13(4), 269-292. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i4.1234

Crawford, J., Butler-Henderson, K., Rudolph, J., Malkawi, B., Glowatz, M., Burton, R., Magni, P., & Lam, S. (2020). COVID-19: 20 countries' higher education intra-period digital pedagogy responses. *Journal of Applied Learning & Teaching*, *3*(1), 1-20.

Dawadi, S., Giri, R., & Simkhada, P. (2020). Impact of COVID-19 on the Education Sector in Nepal-Challenges and Coping Strategies. *Sage Submissions*. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.31124/advance.12344336.v1

Deen, A., & Leonard, L. (2015). Exploring potential challenges of first year student retention and success rates: A case of the school of tourism and hospitality, University of Johannesburg, South Africa. *African Journal for Physical Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, *21*(Supplement 2), 233-241.

Ezeuduji, I. O., Chibe, M. E., & Nyathela, T. (2017). Hospitality management study programme and students' perceptions: universities in South Africa. *Journal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, *17*(4), 313-324. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/15313220.2017.1399850

Gillet-Swan, J. (2017). The challenges of online learning supporting and engaging the isolated learner. *Journal of Learning Design, 10*, (1), 20-30. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.5204/jld.v9i3.293

Grønmo, S. (2019). *Social research methods: Qualitative, quantitative and mixed methods approaches*. Sage: London.

Janse van Rensburg, E. S. (2018). Effective online teaching and learning practices for undergraduate health sciences students: An integrative review. *International Journal of Africa Nursing Sciences*, *9*, 73-80. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijans.2018.08.004

Johnson, S. (2014). Applying the seven principles of good practice: technology as a lever-in an online research course. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, *13*(2). Retrieved from: https://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/pdf/13.2.2.pdf

Kahu, E. R., & Nelson, K. (2018). Student engagement in the educational interface: understanding the mechanisms of student success. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *37*(1), 58-71. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2017.1344197

Kalkbrenner, M. T., Jolley, A. L., & Hays, D. G. (2019). Faculty views on college student mental health: Implications for retention and student success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, *0*(0). Retrieved from: https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1521025119867639

Kaminer, D., & Shabalala, N. (2019). Developing a student mental health policy for a South African university: Consultation, contestation and compromise. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, *33*(5), 196-212.

Liyanagunawardena, T. R., Williams, S., & Adams, A. A. (2014). The impact and reach of MOOCs: a developing countries' perspective. *eLearning Papers*. Retrieved from: http://centaur.reading.ac.uk/38250/1/ELearning_2014_SpecialEdition-ImpactAndReachofMOOCs.pdf

Medina, L. C. (2018). Blended learning: Deficits and prospects in higher education. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *34*(1), 42-56.

Mhlanga, D., & Moloi, T. (2020). COVID-19 and the digital transformation of Eeducation: What are we learning on 4IR in South Africa? *Education Sciences*, *10*(7). Retrieved from: https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/covid-19-digital-transformation-education-what/docview/2423627830/se-2?accountid=10612

Montrieux, H., Vanderlinde, R., Schellens, T., & De Marez, L. (2015). Teaching and learning with mobile technology: A qualitative explorative study about the introduction of tablet devices in secondary education. *PloS one*, *10*(12), e0144008-e0144008. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0144008

Motlagh, H. S., Khafaie, H., Arastoo, A. A., Cheraghi, M., & Khafaie, M. A. (2020). Application of social network in traditional sciences education on the vocabulary acquisition of secondary English learner students. *Education and Information Technologies*, *25*, 3071–3085. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10639-020-10108-4

Muthuprasad, T., Aiswarya, S., Aditya, K.S. & Jha, G.K. (2021). Students'perception and preference for online education in India duringCOVID -19 pandemic. *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, *3*, (1), 1-11. Retreived from: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2020.100101

Oke, A., & Fernandes, F. A. P. (2020). Innovations in teaching and learning: Exploring the perceptions of the education sector on the 4th industrial revolution (4IR). *Journal of Open Innovation: Technology, Market, and Complexity*, *6*(2), 1-22.

Osman, A. R., & Saputra, R. S. (2019). A pragmatic model of student satisfaction: a viewpoint of private higher education. *Quality Assurance in Education*, *27*(2), 142-165. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-05-2017-0019

Pandey, M., Litoriya, R., & Pandey, P. (2020). Validation of existing software effort estimation techniques in context with mobile software applications. *Wireless Personal Communications*, *110*(4), 1659-1677. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11277 -019-06805-0

Pedró, F., Quenteiro, J. A., Ramos, D., & Maneiro, S. (2020). *COVID-19 and higher education: Today and tomorrow. Impact analysis, policy responses and recommendations. UNESCO IESALC report.* Retrieved from: http://www.iesalc. unesco.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-EN-090420-2.pdf

Prasad, P. W. C., Maag, A., Redestowicz, M., & Hoe, L. S. (2018). Unfamiliar technology: Reaction of international students to blended learning. *Computers & Education*, *122*, 92-103. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2018.03. 016

Rasheed, R. A., Kamsin, A., & Abdullah, N. A. (2020). Challenges in the online component of blended learning: A systematic review. *Computers & Education*, *144*, 103701. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2019.103701

Roddy, C., Amiet, D. L., Chung, J., Holt, C., Shaw, L., McKenzie, S., Garivaldis, F., Lodge, J. M., & Mundy, M. E. (2017). Applying best practice online learning, teaching, and support to intensive online environments: An integrative review. *Frontiers in Education*, *2*(59). Retrieved from: https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/feduc. 2017.00059

Rothgeb, J., Willis, G., & Forsyth, B. (2007). Questionnaire pretesting methods: Do different techniques and different organizations produce similar results? *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology/Bulletin de Méthodologie Sociologique*, *96*(1), 5-31.

Walker, M. (2020). The well-being of South African university students from low-income households. *Oxford Development Studies*, *48*(1), 56-69.

Williamson, B., Eynon, R., & Potter, J. (2020). Pandemic politics, pedagogies and practices: digital technologies and distance education during the coronavirus emergency. *Learning, Media and Technology*, *45*(2), 107-114. Retrieved from: https://doi.org/ 10.1080/17439884.2020.1761641