READINESS OF LECTURERS TO OFFER ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING CORONAVIRUS DISEASE-2019 AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

Understanding the perceptions of lecturers' readiness to teach online during Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) is essential, as their preparedness significantly influences the success of online learning outcomes. In addition, for lecturers to be properly ready for online Teaching and Leaning (T & L), it requires having the necessary skills, competencies, and infrastructures at their positions. Therefore, this study was conducted to determine the readiness of lecturers to offer online T & L during COVID-19 in one of the departments at the University of Limpopo (UL). A qualitative research approach was employed in this study to determine the lecturers' readiness to offer online T & L. Because there is not much research done at UL regarding the readiness of lecturers to offer online T & L amid COVID-19, this qualitative study was exploratory in nature. The non-probability: Purposive sampling was adopted to select 10 participants. Data was collected using semi-structured Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) conducted by Google Forms and 9 out of the 10 participants completed the interview questions. Inductive Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) was applied to analyse the qualitative data. The findings of the study indicate that a significant number of lecturers experienced a lack of preparedness which was attributed mostly to inadequate training and limited prior experience with online digital platforms such as Blackboard. However, other findings highlight that the university took measures to mitigate the issue of readiness on lecturers by providing comprehensive training programmes. Moreover, the results showcase the need for continuous training and proactive adaptation to online T & L to sustain the readiness and effectiveness of online T & L. The study provides a set of recommendations for the university to enhance online T & L in response to the readiness of lecturers to offer online T & L starting from: The necessity of comprehensive institutional programmes that focus on both technological skills and pedagogical strategies to better equip lecturers, mentorship programmes to support lecturers, regular evaluations of training workshops are suggested and the university is urged to always have contingency plans for T & L and it is also recommended that UL should partner with other institutions to share insights in order to enhance online educational practices.

Keywords: *Coronavirus-Disease-2019, Higher Education Institutions, Lecturers, Online Teaching and Learning, Readiness.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of online T & L is important for the success of educational and institutional ambitions in the Higher Institutions Education (HEIs) environment (Aziz, Aziz, Norwahi, Nordin, Zaini, Shaidin and Azhar, 2022). In the case of COVID-19, the HEIs were forced to diversify and execute strategies to mitigate the educational negative effects of the pandemic and ensure the continuity of education. However, the primary challenge of online T & L was the preparedness (Readiness) of the institutions (Beans, 2022). Moreover, Aziz *et al.* (2022) indicated that because of the lack of readiness, lecturers' digital proficiencies were found to be inadequate and more so in the lesson plan formulation. Furthermore, some lecturers are perceived to be digitally literate and can conduct online classes but still struggle to successfully convey online content effectively (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). In contrast, Mokoena-de-beer and Moloko (2022) reveal that lecturers in their study were poorly ready to develop and offer online lessons; instead, there were a lot of trial-and-error instances. Gunness and Teeroovengadum (2021) (in Mokoena-de-beer & Moloko, 2022) on the study

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of nurse experience with online T & L stated that lack of preparedness to use online platforms for T & L such as Learning Management System (LMS) resulted in lecturers' unease in employing certain tools that could improve online education. This unease stemmed from the nurse's lack of proficiency in utilising the system. However, a small number of institutions in sub-Saharan Africa amid COVID-19 showcased preparedness and sufficient resources to deliver effective online education (Zhong, Liu, Liu & Zhong, 2020). In support, Beans (2022) highlight that there were other elements that immensely contributed to preparing lecturers and students for online T & L ranging from; Lecturer and students" individual positive attitude, belief towards moving to online, support from the institutions in professional development and access to technological resources. Therefore, this study aims to determine the readiness of lecturers to offer online T & L at the UL. As said by Mousa, Aldeen, Nasir, and Hamdi (2020), readiness should be considered as a critical factor when determining the success in the implementation of online T & L. Therefore, this study highlighted the readiness of the lecturers in offering online T & L during COVID-19 and how their readiness affected online T & L.

2. PROBLEM EXPOSITION

Ever since the outbreak of COVID-19, the demand for online T & L at HEIs globally has increased with great a number. An expression of agreement was raised by Gumede and Badriparsad (2021) who stated that COVID-19 in South Africa drastically changed the learning environment to align with the new way of T & L online. However, lecturers in a Historically Disadvantaged Institution (HDI) like UL were left with no choice but to immerse themselves in online T & L despite their readiness to offer the subjected T & L methods. Crawford, Butler-Henderson, Rudolph, Malkawi, Glowatz, Burton, Magni, and Lam (2020) in the study focusing on HEIs in 20 countries discovered that the most recurring complaint raised was the readiness of lecturers which was deemed as an obstacle. Many studies regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to online T & L revolve around the issue of experiences, perspectives, and strategies to better online T & L while disregarding the readiness of lecturers to offer online T & L. Because without the lecturers showing readiness to teach online, the success of online T & L might be very low. Moreover, there is a scarcity of research conducted particularly in HDIs in South Africa highlighting the issue of readiness of lecturers to offer T & L online. Therefore, this study focused on the readiness of lecturers to offer online T & L during COVID-19. The researchers underscored problems concerning the readiness of lecturers such as the lack of preparedness, insufficient training programmes and the absence of support from the institution.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this study, a qualitative research approach was employed. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) define qualitative research as a comprehensive method that embraces an interpretative, naturalistic perspective toward the subject matter. Moreover, qualitative research aims to immerse the researchers into the phenomenon by ensuring an in-depth comprehension through observation or interaction with selected participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). This study employed an exploratory research design due to the limited literature available regarding the readiness of lecturers to offer online T & L during the COVID-19 pandemic within the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice of UL. In support, Grinnell, Unrau and Williams (2009) state that when there is little existing knowledge about a phenomenon, exploratory research should be considered.

Therefore, the aim of the study is to determine the readiness of lecturers to offer online T & L during COVID-19. Moreover, non-probability: Purposive sampling was employed. This sampling method enabled the researchers to select suitable participants to provide detailed information on this subject. Strydom and Delport (2011) indicate that when a researcher employs purposive sampling, intentionally selects samples based on judgment or because the participants fall under a certain category of the researchers' interest. Purposive sampling was chosen by the researchers in this study for several reasons, which include its practicality and the researcher's ability to select participants who are pertinent to the research study. The targeted sample was the staff members, specifically

lecturers. Out of the Thirteen (13) lecturers, only Ten (10) lecturers formed part of this study, excluding the contracted Research Assistants (RAs).

According to Simplelearn (2021), data collection involves selecting, assessing, and analysing precise information from various sources or participants to address research problems, evaluate results, and estimate patterns and probabilities. To collect data in this study, the researchers employed semi-structured KIIs. Ten (10) lecturers were sent the link to answer the interview questions in a Google Form. Only Nine (09) participants out of 10 completed the Google Form interview questions and sent them back to the researcher. The inductive TCA was employed to analyse the collected qualitative data, this refers to the process of distinguishing, assembling, and discerning themes from a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Therefore, in this study, the Six (06) phases of thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were applied to analyse data: Familiarising yourself with your data, generate initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report. Most significantly, ethical clearance to conduct this study was sought to ensure that the study adhered to ethical considerations from the following ethical committees: Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC), School of Social Sciences Research Committee (ScREC), Faculty of Higher Degrees Committee (FHDC), and Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC).

4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Dayal (2023) reports that many lecturers indicated signs of unpreparedness for online T & L. Almahasees, Mohsen and Amin (2021) provide a similar perspective by pointing out that the unpreparedness of lecturers for online T & L was caused by insufficient training and the lack of previous familiarity with the online T & L and provided a solution by highlighting that continuous training and experience are needed for teaching online. Chrysanthos (2020) suggests that the swift shift to digital learning resulted in insufficient training on online platforms, affecting the learning experience and causing decreased motivation for the online T & L mode. Moreover, Makgahlela, Mothiba, Mokwena, and Mphekgwana (2021) suggest that they should have been more proactive in introducing online teaching technologies and providing effective training programmes. Mashau and Nyowe (2021) stipulate that students display more characteristics of unpreparedness than lecturers (staff) for online learning; for example, the University of KwaZulu Natal (UKZN) has innumerable students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds who enter the university without adequate computer literacy.

Therefore, many of them struggle with using LMS (Moodle) because of the lack of the necessary level of preparation to navigate it. Garg, Marji, Goyal and Ismail (2020) note that some universities were ill-equipped to deal with the rapid shift from contact-based instruction to online education methods. On the other hand, it appears that some lecturers and students were not prepared for online education as the sole alternative method of instruction. Moorhouse (2020) indicates that many students were worried about their academic future because they did not know what to expect in the online T & L method, and several students indicated signs of unpreparedness for online learning. To the researcher's knowledge, in UL's Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice, most of the modules were venue-based and the Blackboard (LMS) was mostly utilised to post notes and announcements and prior to COVID-19, all class attendance was venue-based.

Thus, virtual learning for some came as a concept that was outside of their experience and knowledge. Mbombi, Muthelo, and Phukubye (2021) discovered that many staff members were unprepared for online learning because, in their study concerning online learning, 18.4% of staff members (lecturers) showed interest in online T & L platforms while 81.4% of academic staff expressed no interest in the T & L. Martin, Budhrani and Wang (2019) and Buabeng-Andoh and Yidana (2015) contend that staff are very important in implementing virtual learning and its success. Therefore, the unpreparedness of staff negatively affects online T & L practices. Makgahlela *et al.* (2021) assert that from the beginning of the 21st century, governments, and institutions of learning ought to have realised the changes that the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) was going to have on the traditional culture of online education. Therefore, plans on how to introduce online teaching

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technologies while capacitating and training both staff and students on their use should have been rolled out a long time ago. Hence, when one compares universities in Europe, America, and some parts of Asia, most institutions of learning in Africa were caught off-guard by the pandemic because they were not prepared for online T & L, as they lacked the infrastructure and access to technological devices (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020).

As a result, student education in rural Africa has been more impacted by the pandemic when compared to some developed parts of the world, United Nations Scientific and Cultural Organisation [UNISCO] (2020). It is important to stress that the unpreparedness of instructors and students was commonly caused by the fact that various educational technological devices and systems that were deployed for pedagogy at the universities were very important but most of them were complicated in how to effectively use them (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). Thus, they needed to be properly explained to the students and lecturers for effective use (McLoughlin & Lee, 2007). In the case of technology being deployed at HEIs, Hodges (2020) proposed that the effectiveness of online learning and its growth relies on having the essential institutional infrastructures, management, and support structure in position, along with the provision of opportunities and sufficient training of staff for online T & L. To address these challenges, UL intervened by providing training workshops and empowering both lecturers and students to prepare them for online T & L (Chiramba, 2021).

5. STUDY RESULTS, THEMES IDENTIFICATION AND DISCUSSIONS
5.1 Theme 1: Lack of preparedness for online Teaching and Learning
Dayal (2023) reported that many lecturers indicated signs of unpreparedness for online T & L. Moreover, Almahasees *et al.* (2021) point out that the unpreparedness of lecturers for online T & L was caused by insufficient training and the lack of previous familiarity with teaching online. Therefore, **P3** substantiate the literature by saying that *"There was a lack of sufficient training offered for online T & L particularly the use of Blackboard''*. In addition, **P7** states that *"Honestly, at first it was an unprepared circumstance which turned to be a sophisticated exercise with a coupled of trainings''*. Chrysanthos (2020) suggested that the swift shift to digital learning resulted in insufficient training on online platforms, affecting the learning experience and causing decreased motivation for the online T & L modes.

5.2 Theme 2: Adequacy of Training for online Teaching and learning
Hodges (2020) proposed that the effectiveness of online T & L and its growth relies on having the essential institutional infrastructures, management, and support structure in position, along with the provision of opportunities and sufficient training of staff and students for online T & L. Some of the participants in this study admitted that the technology and training offered by the institution in preparation for online T & L was imperative. For instance, **P1** said that *"The ICT department hosted numerous and frequent workshops to train staff members on how to access and use technology-enhanced learning e.g., Blackboard, etc."* **P8** added that *"More trainings were offered by the ICT support team, and it really helped".* Zalat, Hamed and Bolbol (2021) supported **P1** and **P8** responses by indicating that the institutions provided intensive training to all staff members before officially implementing online T & L.

5.3 Theme 3: Call for ongoing training, proactiveness and willingness to adapt
Some participants in this study pointed out that insufficient training was one of the factors that affected the progress of online T & L. Therefore, participants suggested the need for continuous training and proactive measures to ensure the readiness of students and staff for the present and future purposes. To strengthen the statements, **P8** said that there should be *"Continuous trainings and staff willingness to attend to such".* Furthermore, **P3** said that to improve online T & L *"Advanced training on how to use the platform meant for the online training should be put into effect''*. These assertions align with Makgahlela *et al.* (2020) showcased that UL should prioritise ongoing training and technology advancements for future preparation and reliance on online education. Almahassees *et al.*

(2021) stated that continuous training and experience are needed for the offering of adequate online T & L.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored the readiness of the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice lecturers to offer online T & L during COVID-19 at the UL. The literature of this study consistently highlighted that lecturers were unprepared to offer online T & L because of the challenges such as Insufficient training, and inadequate infrastructural support. However, other literature showcased that some institutions were well equipped with infrastructural support, and technology and received adequate training to mitigate the challenges associated with the readiness of lecturers to offer teachings online. The findings of the study also illustrated the significant issue of readiness of lecturers to offer effective online T & L stemming from insufficient training, lack of familiarity with digital platforms and adequate infrastructural support and lack of advanced technology. However, some participants in this study acknowledged the role that the university played in ensuring that training/workshops, advanced technology, and electronic devices were provided. But still, the findings advocated more training for lecturers, willingness to adapt to online T & L and lecturers and students having access to technology/resources required to navigate online T & L. Therefore, it is concluded that recognising that online T & L is surpassing contact learning, the university should adopt proactive approaches. This should involve anticipating the evolution of online education and staying updated on technological advancements. Since the participants in this study highlighted that some trainings were inadequate, there should be an evaluation of the quality of training workshops regularly to ensure that they meet the needs of the lecturers.

To improve the readiness of lecturers, the ICT is recommended to continue assisting lecturers with technical support. Stemming from the study themes of the findings, the researchers recommended the following aspects: Comprehensive institution programmes that focus on technological skills and pedagogical strategies, establishment of mentorship programmes to assist educators in adapting to online learning, especially those who may have limited prior experience in using online T & L tools, the institution is recommended to always have contingency plan for T & L, educators who have insufficient knowledge on online T & L should collaborate with those that are proficient in this area, develop a culture of continuous learning by encouraging educators to pursue ongoing professional development in online teaching, the university should collaborate with other institutions to share insights and knowledge for online T & L. Moreover, UL should provide comprehensive training programmes that will advise lecturers on technological skills and establish mentorship programmes for educators on online T & L. The ICT is urged to continue supporting lecturers with technical support. The institution is also recommended to collaborate with other institutions to share insights and resources.

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