



LECTURERS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING CORONAVIRUS DISEASE-2019 AT UNIVERSITY OF LIMPOPO, SOUTH AFRICA

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Abstract

The outbreak of Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) brought some changes in the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), whereby South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had to quickly transition to online Teaching and Learning (T & L). The implementation of online T & L specifically in Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs) was accompanied by advantages and disadvantages. Many research studies investigate students' perspectives on online T & L, however, there are notable gaps in research concerning lecturers' perceptions on online T & L during COVID-19. Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore lecturers' perceptions toward online T & L during COVID-19 at University of Limpopo (UL), South Africa. A qualitative research approach was adopted to gather perceptions on this subject, using the permanent staff members attached to the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice as a case study. This qualitative study employed an exploratory research design due to the limited literature in this area, non-probability purposive sampling was used 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 results of the study showcase that the online examinations challenges such as students cheating or committing academic misconduct were encountered by the university. The study recommends the university should invest in reliable online proctoring tools that can minimise the manipulation of the assessments offered. Clear policies and guidelines were recommended to maintain online T & L integrity and lastly, the researchers recommend academic workshops that can teach students about the importance of the rules of the examinations and severe punishment if the rules are violated. Overall, the study highlights the value of online T & L and the necessity for ongoing adaptation and support.

Keywords: *Coronavirus-Disease-2019, Learning Management System, Lecturers' perceptions, Online Teaching and Learning, University of Limpopo*

1. INTRODUCTION

The online T & L after the outbreak of COVID-19 became no longer an option but a method that needed to be sustained, well-developed, and extended to meet the current event (Kabilan & Annamalai, 2022). Therefore, Dhawan (2020) indicates that enhancing and enriching online T & L is critical and this cannot be possible without exploring the perceptions of educators and students' preparedness (Readiness), the content, and assessments offered. The perceptions of educators and students are deemed to be of paramount imperative if Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) wish to deliver an effective T & L experience using online platforms (Dhawan, 2020). Online T & L was adopted in HEIs for the continuity of education using online platforms rather than in person, which was not possible due to the COVID-19 pandemic. South African universities were forced to deeply rethink, restore, and redesign the educational system to address the unprecedented situation, moving from traditional classroom-based teaching to online T & L or blended T & L (Mudau, Tshivhase & Randa, 2022). Mudau, Tshivhase and Randa (2022) state that many Historically Disadvantaged Institutions (HDIs), such as the University of Fort Hare (UFH), UL, University of Venda (UNIVEN), University of Western Cape (UWC), University of Zululand (UNIZULU), Walter Sisulu University (WSU), Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), and Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University (SMU) prior to COVID-19, were under-resourced posing a problem for them to

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successfully adapt to online T & L in that short period of time. Zhang, Wang, and Wang (2020) reveal that online T & L is less effective where there is a lack of facilities, infrastructure, and preparedness to teach using technology. In support, Maluleka (2021) showcases that HDUs such as UL encountered challenges due to limited resources and lack of adequate support system (Infrastructure). However, Naylor and Nyanjom (2021) state that some educators felt that they were not unfamiliar with some of the technologies used for online T & L during COVID-19. Mpungose (2020) outlines several factors that were experienced by lecturers using online T & L ranging from unfamiliarity with the online teaching platform, difficulties in monitoring/assessing students' learning, unstable Internet connectivity, electricity challenges, technical problems, and lack of electronic devices such as computers/laptops. Fontaine, Frenette, and Hebert (2020) highlight that in the move to online T & L, the HEIs paid little focus in planning to ensure academic integrity. Therefore, the nature of the assessment whether in person or online, students have a personal incentive to try and obtain the best grades that they can. In that case, some may resort to using unfair means, or as the academic integrity literature may declare, they may act with academic dishonesty or commit academic misconduct (Comas-Forgas, Lancaster, Calvo-Sastre, & Sureda-Negre, 2021). Goff, Johnston, and Bouboulis (2020) argue that if the online assessment processes cannot be trusted as students commit academic conduct, this poses challenges to the validity of qualifications and the credibility of the certificates and degrees offered by HEIs during this era of online T & L. In this study, the researchers explored the perceptions of lecturers towards online T & L during COVID-19 while highlighting the following aspect: Maintaining online T & L integrity and online examinations challenges.

2. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Although the COVID-19 was a concern in all departments in South Africa, the HEIs were overwhelmingly affected by the tragedy it brought (Mosteki, Maluleke & Barkhuizen, 2021). Online T & L emanated as a vital tool for the continuation of education amid COVID-19. In accord, Manolova, Brush, Edelman, and Elam (2020) suggest that online T & L has been an important tool for sustaining skills development during school closures. However, it is also highlighted that it brought forth countless challenges and complications, particularly concerning lecturers' perceptions on the process of adaptation and training, technological infrastructure, pedagogical support and lack of integrity in the assessment and examinations. This study was aimed at exploring lecturers' (Attached to the Department of Criminology and Criminal, UL) perceptions regarding the various challenges that they faced during the transition to online T & L amid the COVID-19 pandemic. By exploring the perceptions, experiences, and effects of online T & L, this study seeks to identify key areas requiring attention or proposition of potential solutions to enhance the effectiveness and maintain the integrity of online T & L.

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 to undertake this study by ensuring an in-depth comprehension through observation or interaction with selected participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The exploratory research design was also followed due to the limited literature available regarding the exploration of 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) argue that when there is little existing knowledge about a phenomenon, exploratory research should be considered. As initially stated, this study was aimed to explore lecturers' perceptions toward online T & L during COVID-19 at UL, South Africa. Moreover, non-probability: Purposive sampling was employed. Oftenly, researchers often choose participants who can provide rich descriptions of answers to solve a problem under research while applying this sampling method. Strydom and Delport (2011) indicated that when a researcher employs purposive sampling, intentionally selects samples based on judgment or because the participants fall under a certain category of a researcher's interests. This sampling method was chosen by the researchers in



this study for several reasons, which include its practicality and their abilities to select participants who are pertinent to this study.

The targeted sample was the permanent 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 to address research problems, evaluate results, and estimate patterns and probabilities. To collect data in this study, the researchers employed semi-structured KIIs. The 10 lecturers were sent the link to answer the interview questions about their perceptions of online T & L using Google Forms. Only Nine (09) participants out of 10 completed the Google Form interview questions and sent them back to the researchers. Inductive TCA was employed to analyse the collected qualitative data. This data analysis tool relates 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 (SSrec), Faculty of Higher Degrees Committee (FHDC), and Turfloop Research Ethics Committee (TREC).

4. PRELIMINARY LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Maintaining online Teaching and Learning integrity and online examination challenges

Watermeyer *et al.* (2020) indicate that lecturers voiced concerns about their students committing academic fraud or violating the ethical codes of the university by submitting work that was not their own (Copying and plagiarism). Another point regarding maintaining online T & L integrity and online examination challenges was raised by Zalat, Hamed and Bolbol (2021) that many medical lecturers reported experiencing challenges and barriers such as difficulties in monitoring students and because of the staff unfamiliarity with the mode of learning, students took advantage of that loophole and committed academic misconducts such as cheating in the examinations. Moreover, Dempsey and Mestry (2023) assert that in cases where institutions could afford to adopt online T & L, numerous educators encountered challenges in conducting tests and examinations using digital platforms. Ramsuraj (2021) concurs that unethical issues that had to do with examinations were prevalent in the adoption of online T & L. The study established instances of copying and students employing specialists to write the tasks offered online.

In terms of maintaining online T & L integrity and its quality, Bekker and Carrim (2021) highlight that lecturers provided assessments offered in South African universities were different, however; their formats and type of questions posed to students changed drastically. Bekker and Carrim (2021) reveal that in online T & L, multiple-choice questions were the most widely used evaluation format, which restricted the use of other forms of extended interactions with assessment methods that call for abilities like organising an academic essay with justifications. Therefore, this prevented students from receiving detailed feedback from formative assessments that pinpointed their areas of strength and offered specific recommendations for development. Bakker and Carrim (2021) suggest that giving comments on student writing, for instance, offers a further chance for interaction between the instructor and the learner where the process of learning is prioritised over focusing on the product. Based on their findings (Bakker & Carrim, 2021), there appears to have been an overall decrease in formative assessments and an increase in summative assessments.

5. FINDINGS, THEMES IDENTIFICATIONS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this section, the study delved into the key theme related to the perceptions of participants on online T & L during COVID-19. Therefore, the following theme was presented: Maintaining online T & L integrity, and online examinations challenges. The theme provides a detailed exploration of the participants' perspectives and experiences, referencing relevant literature to support their claims. 5.1 Theme 1: Maintaining online Teaching and Learning integrity and online examinations challenges

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When participants were asked about their perceptions regarding online T & L, they raised concerns about the adaptations of online T & L and online examinations as their recorded verbatim expressions refers herein:

“Conducting online lessons was not much of a concern, but the main problem was the students writing exams or tests online because it created freedom for students to cheat and the goal of the exam which is to test students’ genuine knowledge was unachievable and lack of monitoring of the examinations led to cheating ” (P2).

“Online T & L compromised the quality of education because the protracting tools were not comprehended by them in the beginning” (P7).

The participants presented challenges related to examinations, including issues of cheating or dishonesty in the examinations, and further outlined that the challenges of examinations led to the unattainability of testing whether the students understood the set of questions in the examinations. Dempsey and Mestry (2023) asserted that in cases where institutions could afford to adapt to online learning, many educators encountered challenges when tests and examinations using digital platforms. The study revealed instances of copying and students employing specialists to write the tasks offered online, thereby compromising the integrity of modules and degrees. Radu, Schnakovszky, Herghelegiu, Ciubotariu, and Cristea (2020) provided that one of the factors that affected the production of online T & L was ineffective online examinations, which included cheating. A study conducted by Zalut *et al.* (2021) found that many medical lecturers reported experiencing challenges and barriers such as difficulties in monitoring students and because of the staff’s unfamiliarity with the mode of learning, students took advantage of that and committed academic misconduct such as cheating in the examinations.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the identified study themes, the researchers provided the following recommendations for relevant stakeholders to follow:

1. Given the challenges highlighted by participants regarding cheating or dishonesty during examination/tests.’
2. UL should invest to reliable online proctoring tools that can minimise the manipulation of the assessments through various methods such as webcam surveillance, screen monitoring and browser locking. Therefore, this will assist in maintaining the integrity of online T & L.
3. Improving and creating clear policies and guidelines for maintaining online T & L is recommended. Academic workshops teaching students about the importance of the rules of the examinations and the punishment that align with the misconducts committed is recommended.
4. The importance of comprehensive training programmes for the faculty and students to improve their proficiency in online platforms, such as the Blackboard Learn and Collaborate. Overall, a call for investment in technological infrastructure and security measures to safeguard the integrity of online examinations should be urgently staged.
5. UL should employ online learning tools that detect plagiarism, verify the profile of the students, and identify academic misconduct using tools such as Turnitin and proctoring tools/online invigilating tools.
6. Clear policies and guidelines tailored for the online T & L should be introduced at UL.

7. CONCLUSION

This study explored the perceptions of lecturers towards online T & L during COVID-19. The researchers acquired mixed perceptions of online T & L, with some participants coupled with the reviewed literature studies showcasing the necessity of this intervention, while others pointed out several challenges. Therefore, the results of this study shed light on the major issues and difficulties associated with preserving the integrity of online tests/exams and T & Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants voiced serious concerns about how simple it would be for students to cheat in an online environment, undercutting the main goal of tests, which is to accurately measure students' knowledge. This problem was made worse by the absence of efficient monitoring instruments, which



undermined academic integrity and the quality of instruction. To address these challenges, the study recommends a multifaceted approach involving the adoption of reliable online proctoring tools, such as webcam surveillance, screen monitoring, and browser locking, to prevent cheating. It also suggests the development of clear policies and guidelines for maintaining academic integrity in online settings. Tools like Turnitin has been recommended to detect plagiarism and verify student identities, ensuring that academic standards are upheld.

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