



## Aftermaths of the Post-Covid-19 Pandemic Experiences: Assessing and Repositioning South African Higher Education

Oluwatoyin Ayodele Ajani; Khumalo, N.P.

Department of Languages and Social Sciences Education, University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa, South Africa

E-mail: oaajani@gmail.com

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### **Abstract**

With the sudden advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, which impacted every sphere of our lives globally, higher education institutions across the world were grounded, and academic activities were seriously affected. The pandemic, which originated in Wuhan, China, did not only affect the Chinese education system but all other higher education institutions across the globe. The pandemic adversely impacted developing countries, especially African countries, where technological advancement continues to struggle. Various African higher education institutions have adopted several measures to continue teaching and learning activities in schools. South African higher education institutions were mostly grounded absolutely. However, after several months of academic stoppage, countermeasures were adopted to continue academic business amid the COVID-19 predicaments. This discursive study was driven by the author's lived experiences of academic observations and research during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this article, the author explores how higher education in South Africa has been affected and how the system can be repositioned for future challenges. The article recommends strategies that can be employed for academic activities in various higher education institutions in the event of a pandemic outbreak to mitigate a serious impact on the educational system. The study will also provide insights to strengthen the curriculum's implementation and practices, making students' learning needs more responsive beyond conventional classrooms.

**Keywords:** *Curriculum; COVID-19; Conventional Classrooms; Online Learning; Higher Education*

### **Introduction**

COVID-19 is the name given to the outbreak of coronavirus disease that occurred in December 2019. The World Health Organization (WHO) dubbed it the 2019 novel coronavirus or '2019-nCoV' in the city of Wuhan, China, and by the year 2020, it had wreaked havoc in many countries and was even referred to as the 2020nCoV. COVID-19 was first identified in the city of Wuhan, China (Bender, 2020).

A chronic illness that can be fatal and even lead to death is how the COVID-19 virus, also known as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV), is described. This illness can be caused by the COVID-19 virus (Meng, Hua, & Bian, 2020). Within a few minutes of coming into contact with an infected person, it is possible to catch the virus from them or contract it yourself. This can happen through the exchange of droplets or through the touching of infected metal surfaces or other materials that have been infected by anyone who has respiratory problems. It has been hypothesized by Bender (2020), as well as by Meng, Hua, and Bian (2020), that the COVID-19 virus infection is either quicker or faster, with elderly people and young children being particularly susceptible to its effects. Once the body has been infected by this virus, there is no way to become immune to it, which means that everyone is at risk for the devastating effects it can have.

Because the school system is dominated by social groups that are prone to mass infection by the deadly virus, it was advised and required all over the world that schools be closed. According to estimates provided by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020), as of April 6, 2020, 1, 576,021,818 students, representing 91.3% of the total number of students enrolled across 188 countries, were expelled from their classrooms. These students were attending school at any given level or phase of the educational process. The Department of Health in South Africa is responsible for reporting and monitoring confirmed cases of COVID-19. On March 20, 2020, the Republic of South Africa went into total lockdown as a result of these cases. Notably, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant and widespread impact on South Africa's higher educational institutions, as the institutions were forced to close their doors to students for several months (Dube, 2020; Ajani & Gamede, 2021; Gamaye & Gamaye, 2022). After a period of several months during which all higher education institutions were placed under lockdown, the Department of Higher Education issued an order mandating that all institutions immediately adopt online learning. Therefore, educational resources were uploaded and made accessible to students through a variety of cutting-edge online platforms (Fox, 2007). Google Classrooms, Moodle (also known as a learning management system, or LMS), WebQuest, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams are among the available platforms. Although the adoption of these online learning platforms comes with a variety of challenges, such as a wide digital divide, problems with networks, a lack of adequate computer skills, load-shedding, and many more, these challenges can be overcome (Ajani & Gamede, 2020; Dube, 2020; Ajani & Gamede, 2021; Maree, 2022). As a result, the appearance of COVID-19 shed further light on the social disparities that have persisted for a long time between students in rural areas and their urban counterparts (Ajani & Gamede, 2020; Dube, 2020). As a result, the obstacles that have been placed in the way of online education during the lockdown in South Africa have resulted in the need for a repositioning of higher education by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) as well as the management of various universities' online curriculum delivery across the nation (Shava, 2022; Ndlovu, 2023). The majority of higher education institutions in South Africa were not ready for this online learning system in an adequate manner, and this fact has not changed (Dube, 2020; Gqokonqana, Olanrewaju & Cloete, 2022).

Studies on the effects that COVID-19 has had on the educational systems in a variety of countries, including South Africa, have been carried out by many different researchers (Abdulmir & Hafidh, 2020; Dube, 2020; Pincus, Hannor-Walker, Wright & Justice, 2020; Meng, Hua, & Bian, 2020; Gondauri, Mikautadze, & Batiashvili, 2020; Holshue et al., 2020; Usak, Masalimova, Cherdymova, & Shaidullina, 2020; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021). Despite this, there is still a gap in the need for higher education institutions to reposition their teaching and learning activities for online access, particularly in light of the lessons learned from the impact the pandemic had on the educational system (Bao, 2020; Pincus et al., 2020; Sintema, 2020; Yan, 2020; Ajani & Gamede, 2021).

Dube (2020), Maree (2022), and Shava (2022) argue that to strengthen educational planning for future situations, it is necessary for the repositioning of the education system in South Africa, to include an analysis of the effects that COVID-19 had on each institution. As a result, educational institutions will

be able to put into place efficient safeguards that will reduce the suspensions of class instructions, which impact the academic calendar. In the event of a pandemic (Lee et al., 2003; Maree, 2022; Ndlovu, 2023) or any other type of emergency, the preventive measures will make it possible for students to continue their education in a variety of different ways. The purpose of this article is to raise awareness about the repositioning of higher education institutions for future preparation for the outbreak of pandemics or crises that can have an impact on the educational system.

Several studies have determined how the COVID-19 pandemic altered the way that teaching and learning are conducted within the world's educational systems (Dube, 2020; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021; Gamede, Ajani, & Afolabi, 2022; Shava, 2022). The studies provided additional evidence that knowledge-building is occurring at an increasing rate in educational institutions all over the world. As a consequence of this, the educational system in South Africa, and particularly the institutions of higher education, should evaluate and prioritize the various methods of curriculum delivery to effectively deal with a future pandemic outbreak (Adu, Badaru, Duku & Adu, 2022).

### **Recommendations to Higher Education**

Because uninterrupted teaching and learning activities are necessary for a streamlined academic calendar, instructional delivery should be improved and designed for online delivery in the various contexts that exist in South Africa. As a result, this review article presents a variety of approaches to how higher education can respond to the emergence of educational problems that can arise due to the outbreak of pandemics like COVID-19.

### **Integration of the Students' Learning Environment and Content into the Curriculum**

Learning content as well as the environments in which students are learning should be taken into consideration by educational institutions at the higher level (Singaram, Naidoo & Singh, 2022). It is of the utmost importance that the educational programme be as responsive as possible to the needs of the world in its current state at this time. Teaching and learning will be made available to all students (Turkoglu, 2019; Gqokonqana, Olanrewaju & Cloete, 2022), as opposed to only a selected group of students in higher education institutions, if basic student environments are incorporated into the learning content that is included in the curriculum (Dube, 2020). This is because teaching and learning will be made available to all students in basic student environments. This is because every single student will come face-to-face with a wide range of health and environmental issues and will be required to find solutions to those problems. According to Turkoglu (2019), it is possible to create educational resources that are centred on the settings of students and to put them to use in the classroom for instruction delivery for a larger audience in the community (Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021; Shava, 2022; Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022).

It is possible to generate citizens who are environmentally literate and who can illustrate environmental health concerns for social action by integrating the environment of the pupils into the learning curriculum. This will allow for the generation of environmentally aware and socially active citizens (Keselman, Levin, Kramer, Matzkin, & Dutcher, 2011; Adu et al., 2022). This is done to adapt to the real issues that the students face or experience in their various communities and, as a result, to raise awareness and improve positive attitudes among the student body as a whole (Amin, Mahadi, Ibrahim, Yaacob, & Nasir, 2012; Dube, 2020; Pincus, Hannor-Walker, Wright & Justice, 2020). This will strengthen informed practices, which will allow education policies to be more effectively drive change. The integration will make it possible for professors to become aware of the obstacles that stand in the way of online teaching and learning, and it will show them how to overcome obstacles such as time restraints, the pressures of having guidelines imposed on them, and a lack of sufficient knowledge, amongst others. This integration will also make it possible for lecturers to become aware of the obstacles that stand in the way of online teaching and learning (Keselman, Levin, Kramer, Matzkin, & Dutcher, 2011; Singh, Steele, & Singh, 2021). Despite this, environmental knowledge is held in very high regard because it provides

them with information on how to deal with pandemics of any kind. Because of this, teaching and learning can go on regardless of any future environmental concerns that may arise (Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022).

### **The Connection between Environmental Awareness and Educational Instruction**

Aftermath lessons from COVID-19 showed that students' awareness of their surroundings plays an important part in the education they receive at all levels (Gqokonqana et al., 2022). Because of this, the education that children obtain in their classrooms is the foundation for the responsiveness of society. The difficulty for educational institutions lies in the task of bringing students' attention to pressing societal problems, particularly, those relating to health (Maree, 2022). Schools all over the world were forced to close as a direct result of the pandemic that was caused by COVID-19; as a direct result of this, environmental hygiene should be a priority in schools to prevent the transmission and outbreak of infectious diseases in the future (Dube, 2020; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021; Gamage & Gamage, 2022). Students need to be instructed on how to avoid contracting infectious diseases, not only so they can gain knowledge about the topic but also so they can model appropriate behaviour (Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022). It is possible to provide the students with health management tools that will enable them to practice procedures until good hygiene becomes ingrained in the culture of the school. This can be done in a variety of ways. The university needs to understand the relationship between the learning content and the environment in which the students are immersed to accomplish the goal. This will make it possible for the university to develop more effective policies that educate students on how to stop the spread of pandemic viruses and control those that are already in circulation (Singh et al., 2021; Adu et al., 2022; Gamede et al., 2022). Therefore, effective health and environmental policies should be crafted and incorporated into curricula to create a framework for a sustainable environment that encourages diversity in students. This will help ensure that students have access to a broad range of educational opportunities.

### **Integration of Various Online Learning Platforms into Classroom Instruction and Study**

An institution of higher education needs to have a set of values and principles that takes into consideration the requirements that have been communicated by its various stakeholders (Gamede, et al., 2022). These requirements can be found in the institution's mission statement (Dube, 2020). One important aspect that must be considered is the level of access that students have to various forms of educational technology that can be used in the process of locating information in different parts of the world (Gamage & Gamage, 2022; Singaram et al., 2022).

The delivery of educational institutions' curricula needs to be improved, and one way to do this is by offering student support services that continuously monitor and put into practice effective knowledge construction (Ndlovu, 2023). This should be framed not only within the confines of the academic world but also within the community. Due to the widespread COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions at the tertiary level should place a higher priority on the online delivery of academic content, career counselling, and even the students' overall well-being (Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022). This is because the pandemic is anticipated to have a significant impact on the total population across the world. The most effective means by which educational content can be communicated across national boundaries to students studying in universities (McBride, Van Orman, Wera, & Leino, 2010; Dube, 2020; Pincus et al., 2020). This is extremely important since the number of students in South Africa is steadily increasing, but the country does not currently possess enough physical facilities to accommodate all of them (Hinderaker, 2013; Pedrelli, Nyer, Yeung, Zulauf, & Wilens, 2015; Dalky & Gharaibeh, 2018; Singh et al., 2021). Traditional classroom practices have to contend with the challenge of overcrowded classrooms or classrooms that are inadequate for the delivery of curriculum in the vast majority of higher education institutions (Ajani, 2020; Yilmaz & Temizkan, 2022).

Students should have access to online services for teaching and learning, medical counselling, teleconferencing for mental health, and any other online services that are relevant. The students should be

made to have adequate access to these services, and they should be offered to them. These services ought to be accessible to students within the comfort and discretion of their own homes (Hinderaker, 2013). According to the findings of a study that was carried out by McBride, Van Orman, Wera, and Leino (2010), a variety of online platforms should be made available to students for use in all activities, including teaching and learning. This recommendation was made considering the findings of the study. Online platforms will contribute to improved academic outcomes for students attending higher education institutions if student participation in these platforms is increased (Pedrelli et al., 2015; Shava, 2022).

In addition, for a fundamental understanding of COVID-19, educational institutions of higher learning should also develop a management protocol and flow chart that can quantify the extent to which students make use of a variety of different learning platforms (Gamede et al., 2022; Maree, 2022; Shava, 2022; Ndlovu, 2023). This should be done to ensure that students have access to the most up-to-date and relevant information (Usak, et al., 2020). Gqokonqana et al. (2022) argue that to make accommodations for all students, the information that is provided should include a mapping of the symptoms, risks, and management guidelines that should be looked for when contextualizing the learning content of every course to the environment of each school. The administration of the school is obligated to offer the students support for them to be academically successful and to keep their mental health in good condition (Barr & Miller, 2013; Dalky & Gharaibeh, 2018; Gamage & Gamage, 2022).

Many educational institutions can advance the acceptance of online education by encouraging the adoption and use of many different educational technologies by students (Maree, 2022). The dissemination of information via the Internet then makes it possible to accomplish the goals of teaching and learning (Ajani & Gamede, 2021; Ndlovu, 2023).

### **Academic Institutions' Abilities to Provide Online Learning Instruction**

As a direct result of the pandemic that was caused by the COVID-19 virus, higher education institutions all over the world have made the transition away from conventional classroom settings and toward online learning (Dube, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Ajani, 2021; Shava, 2022).

Students have the advantage of being able to access learning whenever it is most convenient for them, and they can participate in learning activities without having to leave the convenience of their own homes (Adu et al., 2022; Singaram et al., 2022). This provides students with several distinct advantages (Shava, 2022). Therefore, a significant shift toward online instruction does not require face-to-face interaction between lecturers and students, as well as among students. This applies to both the lecturers and the students themselves (Dube, 2020; Ndlovu, 2023). This helps prevent and control the spread of the virus during the pandemic by eliminating the need for face-to-face interaction, which was a prerequisite for its transmission (Adu et al., 2022). Higher education institutions in South Africa should get their programmes prepared to be delivered online to take preventative measures against the possibility of an outbreak of the epidemic in the future (Gamede et al., 2022; Gqokonqana et al., 2022; Ndlovu, 2023). This calls for the skills that students should learn to be aligned with the content of the modules that are presented in an online format. If universities follow this course of action, they will be able to speed up their responses to the requests made by students for continuous learning (Maree, 2022).

Although the online delivery of the curriculum may present some challenges for the lecturers since they will need to acquire online-driven competencies to effectively plan, implement, and evaluate the performance of their students. These challenges can be mitigated by providing the lecturers with adequate computer training on the digital transfer of learning content to ensure that the curriculum is effectively delivered through electronic delivery (Shava, 2022). Students who have a variety of educational needs can have access to a variety of different learning devices that come with innovative teaching tools, have their learning delivered to them, and be encouraged to learn through the utilization of a variety of these learning devices. The technological devices can be designed for a variety of learning

contents, choices of academics, responsive curriculum, and supportive assessments, all of which are necessary and significant for the successful delivery of lessons in an online environment (Barr & Miller, 2013; Adu et al., 2022; Gqokonqana et al., 2022; Maree, 2022). If this is the case, then this presents an opportunity for academics to receive additional training for online learning instruction at higher education institutions, which opens the door for this opportunity (Adu et al., 2022). Academic training can help students learn more efficiently in educational programming that is designed to facilitate goals that are aligned with the learning goals of higher education institutions (Dube, 2020).

## **Enhancement of Research Activities, Data Monitoring, and Evidence-Based Practices**

It is an expectation placed on institutions of higher education that they will demonstrate responsiveness to the student body that they serve. The standards for the performance of higher education institutions are being raised by a variety of stakeholders, including government entities, accreditation agencies, and other interested parties. As a result, the expectations for these institutions have also been raised to a higher level (Gamede et al., 2022). Because stakeholders expect institutions to provide evidence to back up their claims of excellence and effectiveness, higher education needs to demonstrate that it is both effective and efficient in the educational administration it provides (Maree, 2022). Aside from that, the current era is one of global transition, and even the pandemic has altered the way that educational systems ought to operate to be effective. Because of this, a significant amount of evidence is required to determine how educational institutions of higher learning ought to respond to the educational, economic, and employment crises. The production of research reports on the influence that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on the educational system in South Africa has become an even more pressing necessity (Dube, 2020; Maree, 2022; Shava, 2022; Ndlovu, 2023).

These are opportunities that educational institutions at the tertiary level need to seize to enhance the data monitoring, documentation, and evidence-based practices of the services and programmes that they offer to the students at their institutions. In recent years, many innovative educational programmes have been introduced; however, these developments are not subjected to thorough evaluation (Ndlovu, 2023). For instance, there ought to be a greater number of studies carried out and published in educational institutions (Hinderaker, 2013; Maree, 2022; Shava, 2022). There is a need for more scientific data on how students across a variety of campuses, both locally and nationally, accept and make use of technology. This data is needed at both the local and national levels. Because of this, carrying out research, carrying out evaluations, and developing strategic plans are necessary for the success of students. These research efforts will be sufficient in meeting future challenges because they will provide information that is necessary for transparency and accountability (Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021). As a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the faculty, researchers, and professionals working in higher education in South Africa need to engage in and strengthen their efforts in research, evaluation, and strategic planning to document the best processes, increase evidence-based practices, and improve student learning in higher education (Adu et al., 2022; Singaram et al., 2022). This is necessary to both make preparations for future pandemics and to deal with the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Implications for Further Research**

In this article, both the pedagogical and policy implications are broken down in considerable detail. For educational institutions to provide an adequate response to the danger posed by the pandemic, the curricular interventions at those institutions need to be re-evaluated and prepared for readiness towards online learning. In a similar vein, the curriculum should be rooted in the various environmental contexts of the students (Gamede et al., 2022). This will allow the students to reflect on the realities that surround them outside of the realm of academia, which is the focus of the curriculum (Ndlovu, 2023). This discursive paper presents, in addition to the academic implications, policy implications to help craft environmentally friendly curriculum policies that can strengthen the learning systems in universities.

These policy implications can help strengthen the learning systems in universities. This article has the potential to serve as a reference for further research that is conducted in the future on the effects that COVID-19 has on the effectiveness of the educational system. On the other hand, the scientific community is lacking a great deal of information regarding the impact that COVID-19 will have on higher education in terms of the curriculum that will be delivered. In subsequent research, there should be an investigation into how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the educational system. Additionally, there should be a collection of scientific evidence regarding how educational institutions can successfully deliver curricula for a variety of programmes even during times of emergency or pandemic.

Academics should receive adequate and consistent training to maximize the potential of the many different learning technologies that can be used for teaching and learning in a variety of contexts within higher education institutions.

### **Conclusion**

The COVID-19 pandemic has influenced higher education all over the world, which has resulted in the closure of thousands of institutions to implement social distancing measures. The utilization of educational technologies creates challenges for educational institutions all over the world, particularly in South Africa, particularly in the areas of planning, implementation, and evaluation. On the other hand, the global pandemic presented South Africa with opportunities to modernize its educational approach to the delivery of curriculum and to shift its focus to the development of educational technologies. These opportunities were presented as a result of the global pandemic. Because of this, the higher education institutions in South Africa have a responsibility to seize the opportunity to strengthen their evidence-based practices, provide online learning materials that are easy to access, and make the curriculum responsive to the needs of the changing times in the country.

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