BUSINESS STUDIES ACADEMICS' REFLECTIONS ON TRANSITIONING TO DIGITAL PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN ONE UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

The problem this paper examines is the challenge faced by academics in transitioning to digital pedagogical practices during COVID-19 pandemic in one university in South Africa. The paper reports on the reflections of Business Studies academics on virtual learning and assessment spaces during COVID-19 Pandemic in one University in South Africa. One-to-one-semi-structured interviews were conducted on four purposively selected Business Studies academics. Interview data were analysed using thematic and narrative analyses, with the purpose to examine the lived experiences and reflections of four Business Studies academics on transitioning to digital pedagogical practices during covid-19 pandemic in one university in South Africa. The study found that the case university was not responsive and flexible in promoting virtual learning and assessment spaces during COVID-19 lock-down; and a lack of Blackboard capacity in accommodating large numbers of students. As part of conclusion, the study recommends that the Department of Higher Education and Training should monitor universities, to ensure that all public universities move at the same rate in implementing remote learning; and promote speedy education provisions to both academics and students. The study further recommends that universities invest in infrastructural and social capital; to improve the system and human capacity.

Keywords: Blackboard Constraints, COVID-19 Pandemic, Digital Pedagogical Practices, Digital Skills, E-Tech, Internet Connectivity.

INTRODUCTION

The paper reports on the reflections of Business Studies Academics on Virtual Learning and Assessment Spaces during COVID-19 Pandemic in one University in South Africa. The emergence of COVID-19 pandemic, had caused the education sectors around the world to go for hibernation with other sectors in fear of the viral spread of Corona Virus that had already caused massacre in countries such as China and Italy. The 27 March 2020 marked the first day in which South African educational institutions shut their doors for common mission, to save the lives. In the statement by the Minister of basic Education, the honorable Motshekga (2020) indicates that the COVID-19 lockdown and forced closure of schools, colleges and universities was aimed at slowing "*down the spread of the coronavirus…to contain the virus as quickly as possible and to save lives*". In support, Mishra et al., (2020) stress that "*the whole educational system from*

elementary to tertiary level has been collapsed during the lockdown period of the novel coronavirus disease".

During COVID-19 lockdown, classroom interactions collapsed for many public schools and universities due to lack of readiness in transitioning to virtual learning and lack of educational provisioning. The circumstances brought along by the COVID-19 lockdown initiated a need to replicate classroom interaction, and the virtual learning platforms that offer the required synchronized learning. This need was put in perspective by the Minister of Higher Education and Training, Dr Blade Nzimande who confirms that "*multimodal teaching, learning and assessment is not an option for universities and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges any more - it is a necessity*" (International Labor Organization, 2020: par 3). Multimodal learning or emergency remote learning was not a South African phenomenon alone, but a global phenomenon as COVID-19 was spread in almost all countries. Similarly, Ansari (2020) reports on the situation in Indian higher education and stresses that "*in the wake of this emergency situation, educational institutes around the globe are shifting their operations to online learning*".

Furthermore, the COVID-19 shutdown in 2020 had displayed inequalities in South African higher education in terms of educational provisions; institutional leadership; and academic capacity. When some affluent universities resumed their multi-modal learning on the 20th April 2020, others dragged for the other six weeks without success. At the University of Limpopo, the academic and student interaction resumed on the 1st June 2020. (University of Limpopo, 2020). The Vice Chancellor and Principal, Prof Mahlo Mokgalong officially announced that "*emergency remote teaching and learning programme which will see the academic year resume online*" (University of Limpopo, 2020). The swift shift to virtual learning was a serious challenge to previously disadvantaged universities, than the privileged ones. And for the University of Limpopo, a lot of time was lost, from the 27 March-31 May 2020. During this period teaching and assessment was kept on hold.

On the other hand, affluent universities such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) started with academics training on time, and rolled-out remote learning on the 20th of April 2020. University of Cape Town (UCT) News (2020) highlights that "*remote learning at the university kicked off with orientation week on Monday, 20 April, to help students familiarize themselves with the online learning environment…formal teaching will start on Tuesday, 28 April*". Among other universities in South Africa, the University of Pretoria, the University of Johannesburg and the University of Free State also followed suit immediately after the 20th April 2020. The rolling-out of "*remote learning*" happened at different times, and this revealed embedded and inherited inequalities in higher education.

Thanks to the advances in e-Tech, its "*potential to revolutionize the traditional teaching and learning process…students no longer have to meet in the same place at the same time to learn together from an instructor*" (Baldwin, 2020). Possibilities from virtual or digital learning spaces offered by e-Tech advances have allowed a platform for the rolling out of emergency multimodal learning.

When students in South Africa were promise by Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education to provide the needy students with data and laptops; was a good gesture in addressing student poverty. In his own words, the Minister highlights: "*on the 30th April 2020, I announced that NSFAS funded students will be provided with digital devices to support their learning in 2020 during the COVID 19 lockdown and when they return to campuses*" (South African Government, 2020).

This study was informed by Technology Acceptance Model (TAM) by Venkatesh and Davies (2000). Its important principles, perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use were used to guide this study. TAM informed the understanding of the Business Studies academics on their perceived level of preparedness by the case study in transitioning to virtual learning and creating learning virtual environments. The learning management system was also looked into.

This paper aimed at contributing to the educational field knowledge of the higher education readiness for the COVID-19 pandemic, status of educational provisioning; and institutional capacity to swiftly address challenges; and how challenges faced by previously disadvantaged universities held them back, when faced by global challenge-COVID-19 pandemic.

The primary objective of the study was to investigate the influence of availability of E-Tech and internet connectivity on university's roll out of virtual teaching and learning spaces. In an attempt to attain this objectives, three main research questions were formulated, namely,

- What is the level of university responsiveness and flexibility in promoting virtual learning and assessment spaces during COVID-19 lockdown?

- Were virtual applications adequate in accommodating a large group of students? Motivate

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The problem this paper examines is the challenge faced by academics in transitioning to digital pedagogical practices during COVID-19 pandemic in one university in South Africa. It is the duty of academics within the higher education systems to strive to improve educational productivity and outcomes for the 21st Century students, accompanied by increased pressure to reduce educational costs has put academia in a dilemma (Bakia et al., 2012).

Mashitoa (2020) found low responsiveness and inflexibility as a primary challenge to deprived universities in South Africa in promoting virtual learning environments (VLE) during COVID-19 lockdown. Mashitoa further identified lack of institutional readiness for the transitioning to virtual learning environments (VLE); inadequacies in the Blackboard Learning Management System; delayed provision of students' laptops and data, and low number of academics using virtual platforms at this university. Mashitoa further argues that "*deprived Education systems across the globe were facing an access constraint as far as E-Tech and internet connectivity; and a need to switch over to virtual teaching, learning and assessment during corona virus (COVID-19) pandemic was not an easy platform*" (2020).

During COVID-19 lockdown, academics were without educational provisions to help them continue carry the mandate of educating the nation from home. Although during COVID-19 lockdown, face-to-face interaction was not possible, and there was a need to transition to virtual learning. Tawana Kupe from the University of Pretoria stresses that "*the reliance on face-to-face or contact teaching was under question because of the rise of digital technologies that were slowly disrupting it*" (ILO, 2020). Tawane further identified the following challenges facing South African higher education; students' lack of access, a lack of adequate training by academics; a lack of adequate virtual applications to accommodate large groups of learners; and a lack of capacity by the Blackboard (ILO, 2020).

Although online learning and emergency learning are addressing challenges of social distancing on classroom capacity, they are prone to "*technological, pedagogical and social challenges*" (Ferri et al., 2020). This methodology can be shackle by internet connectivity

constraints, lack of electronic devices; lack of digital skills, lack of structured content, learners' lack of interactivity and motivation, teachers' lack of social and cognitive presence; lack of human interaction between teachers and students, the lack of physical spaces at home to receive lessons and the lack of support of parents who are frequently working remotely in the same spaces (Ferri et al., 2020; Jereb & Šmitek, 2006).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Interpretivism paradigm- qualitative research. "*Interpretivism paradigm and qualitative methods often seek experiences, understandings and perceptions of individuals for their data to uncover reality rather than rely on numbers of statistics*" (Thanh & Thanh, 2015). One-to-one-semi-structured interviews were conducted on four purposively selected Business Studies academics. Interview data were analyzed using thematic and narrative analyses, with the purpose to examine the lived experiences and reflections of four Business Studies academics on transitioning to digital pedagogical practices during covid-19 pandemic in one university in South Africa. Semi-structured interviews were used to get in-depth and detailed information about the phenomenon through "*a dialogue between researcher and participant*" and it allows for follow-up questions, probes, and comments (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2018). Validation method of triangulation was achieved.

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The research data from interviews was analyzed using content and narrative analysis. The participants were given pseudonyms, Khutjo, Lesetja, Thebola & Keletso. The study emerged with two themes, namely, the case university was not responsive and flexible in promoting virtual learning and assessment spaces during COVID-19 lockdown; and a lack of Blackboard capacity in accommodating large numbers of students, a lack of connectivity (among lecturing staff), coupled by students without laptops and internet connectivity.

The Case University was Not Responsive and Flexible in Promoting Virtual Learning and Assessment Spaces during Covid-19 Lock-Down

The research participants responded to the research question, '*what is the level of university responsiveness and flexibility in promoting virtual learning and assessment spaces during COVID-19 lockdown?*'

The research finding revealed that the case university was not responsive and flexible enough in the implementation of multimodal/ remote learning and creation of virtual learning and assessment spaces during COVID-19 lockdown. This finding is in line with Mashitoa (2020) who identified lack of readiness by some universities in facilitating transitioning from classroom interaction to virtual learning spaces. The rolling out of COVID-19 emergency plan was delayed until the 1st of June 2020, whereas the initial plan was to roll it out on the 20th of April 2020. This delay caused a backlog for teaching, learning and assessment; and has put students and lecturers under pressure of completing the curriculum, and completing the required number of assessments for compilation of the semester mark.

This was Reflected by Lecturers' Narratives: Khujto that explains that: "*My university was not responsive and flexible enough, and I think students had a great influence on*

decisions taken. I was ready to offer virtual teaching and assessment, but I was denied such a space by COVID-19 rules and regulation issued by my university management".

Lesetja stresses that: "*...everything was put on hold for an extremely long time*".

Thebola highlights that: "*I was ready to offer emergency remote learning on the 20th April 2020, but I was not having internet facilities. I was offered 3G at the later stage, and this solved my challenge.*"

On the other hand, Keletso explains that: "*My university lacked capacity, lecturers were not adequately trained, and majority of students who were from deprived families could not afford to own a laptop or purchase data for internet connectivity. Teaching and learning had to be put on hold, until the Department of Higher Education and Training could offer such facilities for learners*".

The reasons for delay lie with the management for failure to move swiftly to the introduction of remote learning. Furthermore, students were cited as a challenge, and influence on management decisions to move forward. Some lectures were ready, but not afforded virtual teaching and assessment spaces, whereas, others were challenged by a lack of internet connectivity. Poor students were without laptops and internet connectivity. This study is in line with Manzoor & Ramzan (2020) findings that majority of students have "*no internet connectivity and laptops for online classes. ... The online mode of the teaching learning process is often discriminatory to poor and marginalized students*". In support Das & Das (2020) argues that "*During that same pandemic, students from rural regions and marginalized areas primarily face immense technical challenges*"

A Lack of Blackboard Capacity in Accommodating a Large Numbers of Students

This theme emerges from the research question, "*were virtual applications adequate in accommodating a large group of students? Motivate*".

The research finding identified a lack of Blackboard capacity in accommodating a large number of students. It was identified that some Business Management lectures took beyond 650 students, per session. Academics were complaining that they are failing to manage the real classroom interaction in such classes. They found such classes similar to viewing video or recording, since classroom interaction is not possible in such a virtual space.

Keletso stresses that: *"the university' Blackboard Learning platform had no capacity to accommodate a large number of students in our modules".*

This finding shows that the university's lack of capacity is due to Blackboard Learning management System incapacities and limitations in accommodating a large number of students. The revamping of the whole Blackboard system for increased capacity and the inclusion of Blackboard Collaborate, did not succeed in addressing capacity limitation and lack of required interaction. This finding is in line with Tawana Kupe who identified a lack of capacity by the Blackboard (ILO, 2020). As part of strategy to address Learning System capacity challenge, the Mizoram University has developed its own Learning Management System in the wake of the suspension of the formal teaching-learning process due to the imposed lockdown by the government of India.

CONCLUSION

The study sought to answer two main research questions, namely, 'what is the level of university responsiveness and flexibility in promoting virtual learning and assessment spaces during COVID-19 lockdown?' And, 'were virtual applications adequate in accommodating a large group of students? Motivate'. From the reflections of Business Studies Academics one can conclude that the case university was not responsive and flexible enough in addressing transitioning from face-to-face contact classes to virtual learning spaces during COVID-19 lockdown. Blackboard Learning Management System adopted by the university was found to have capacity limitation. The call to save the academic year became a difficult objective for both academics and students, during COVID-19 lockdown in 2020.

RECOMMENDATION

The study recommends that the Department of Higher Education and Training should monitor universities, to ensure that all public universities move at the same rate in implementing remote learning; and promote speedy education provisions to both academics and students.

The study further recommends that universities invest in infrastructural and social capital; to improve system and human capacity.

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