

Article

Psychosocial Implications, Students Integration/Attrition, and Online Teaching and Learning in South Africa's Higher Education Institutions in the Context of COVID-19

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Abstract: This article explores the psychosocial impact of online teaching and learning on students, following the decision by South African universities to move teaching and learning from physical contact platforms to cyberspace interactions. South Africa's intervention, like many other countries, adopted the necessary measures that would prevent the spread of the virus among its population, particularly educational institutions. One such measure was the decision to shut down institutions in South Africa and the contingent measure to operationalise teaching and learning using cyberspace. The unprecedented move to online teaching engendered levels of anxiety and fear, and presented a highly disruptive and traumatic experience for many students, especially those from impoverished and rural backgrounds. While focusing on student psychosocial vulnerabilities during this pandemic, the article also presents background factors such as social and economic factors that constrain student success in South Africa's higher education institutions (HEIs), and which became exacerbated during the pandemic. It further explores the behavioural significance of online teaching and learning's impact on the physical and psychological energy that students devote to their academic work. The study is underpinned by psychosocial and student-integration theories, and it weaves the argument articulated by leaning heavily on the secondary data. Lastly, by way of recommendation, the study highlights the unique challenges that the COVID-19 disaster posed for South African students in HEIs and emphasises the need to give symbolic attention to these unique challenges. The study, therefore, is proposing improvement in preparedness and the mitigation of societal disruption in South African society and higher education during future pandemics.

Keywords: COVID-19; remote teaching; psychosocial theory; social integration



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1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 and the seismic spread of the coronavirus necessitated a spontaneous response from international organisations, governments and institutions to redirect routinised aspects of our lives for continuity, sustainability and change, in a time of the pandemic. The South African government was among the first to respond to this disaster with a sense of immediacy. Like many other countries in the world, South Africa had to respond to the precautionary measures taken by the WHO calling on governments to institute a national lockdown, quarantine, self-isolation and water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) practices [1]. These measures entailed suppression of active daily work-life and

the prohibition of public and social gatherings, except for a limited number. These were strategically adopted to mitigate the spread of the disease.

From the outbreak of the disease, different sectors in South Africa, including institutions of higher learning, had to look for creative ways of running their departments or institutions. Hence, online platforms became vital spaces for both work and personal lives. The educational sector, especially higher education institutions, had to swiftly embark on facilitating teaching and learning through various online platforms, in an effort to recover and continue their academic programmes which had been interrupted by the national lockdown in March 2020 [2,3]. The COVID-19 outbreak plunged much of the global higher-education community into unplanned, unprepared, unwanted, and anxious experiments, as various institutions opted for cyberspace teaching and learning [4]. In South Africa, the creation of online communities for teaching and learning produced high levels of anxiety among students with aggravated psychosocial problems which affected students in their daily lives and academic activities.

Cyberspace, otherwise known as online teaching and learning, is a situation in which a 'wide range of programmes use the internet to provide instructional materials and facilitate interaction between teachers and students, and in some cases, among students as well [5]. Online learning can be considered online when teaching and learning take place using the internet. In some instances, online teaching and learning can be combined with face-to-face interaction. This phenomenon is referred to as blended learning or 'hybrid teaching and learning' [5]. However, teaching and learning in most South African higher institutions have always been face-to-face, as cyberspace and hybrid teaching and learning were never practiced, even in the so-called online universities. There is no doubt that the pandemic has had a parallel effect on the fundamental mode of teaching and learning in higher institutions, as the contact mode of teaching has been the tradition. Before the COVID-19 outbreak, most South African universities had already embraced technology literacy by integrating online platforms such as Moodle. According to a study by Badaru and Adu (2022) [6], a significant percentage (34%) of the 26 public universities used Moodle LMS (learning management systems) prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 disaster and during the lockdown period, while the majority (46%) used the Blackboard LMS. Following the outbreak of the coronavirus disease and the strict lockdown measures adopted to mitigate the spread of this disease, government emphasised the critical interventions needed to develop and implement effective multi-modal remote learning systems to provide support to all students and academics at a university [7]. During the lockdown, a few more universities in the country had moved from one LMS platform to another to serve the pedagogical needs of the universities in terms of facilitating online interactions between instructors and students, the dissemination of course materials, announcements, submissions and assessments. Some of the online platforms used by different universities in South Africa included the Vula, Efundu, ClickUp, RUConnected, Sakai, SunLearn, Canvas, and D2LBrightspace [6,8]. However, these platforms do not mean a replacement for the traditional teaching method of face-to-face interaction between an instructor and learners, but rather a remedial solution to ensure sustainability and continuation of academic programmes, especially in a time of disaster such as the coronavirus pandemic. In fact, while online platforms remain opened for teaching and learning in most universities, some studies have shown that physical contact remains the preferred mode of teaching and learning among learners and staff alike [9–12].

If there are any lessons learnt from this pandemic, it is the need to revolutionise online learning and the building of competency among students and academics in higher education institutions in (South) Africa [13]. Rogers (2002) [14] claims that, the incorporation of online teaching and learning in higher education (HE) is informed by competency and competition. Cyberspace competency is an urgent requirement for fair competition among peers globally. The need for technology competency has become imperative for students and academics to relevantly position themselves in the global-knowledge economy, and to gain real-life cyber skills and secure meaningful employment in the twenty-first cen-

tury [7,15–18]. Hence, most universities in (South) Africa need to readily align themselves with cyberspace technologies for pedagogic and curricular relevance mitigated by the goals of competency and competition. Although virtual learning and teaching platforms have been introduced in most universities in South Africa, the issue of online pedagogic and curricular competency had not been given due attention, not until the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic [19]. The need for technology-competencies development in higher education is critical for the enhancement of teaching and learning activities to meet the demands of a rapidly changing world. As [14] observes, although ‘technology competencies may be a catalyst’, it does not necessarily translate to effective use among its users.

Online teaching during the pandemic, meant a shift from teaching to learning which indeed requires adequate training among its users, including students, academics and support staff. Although multi-modal LMS platforms had been made available in SA’s HEIs, most staff and students were meaningfully engaged in utilizing the LMS infrastructure. In fact, Perisco et al. (2014) [20], cited in [8], ‘assert that simply providing the infrastructure is not sufficient to ensure successful uptake of such a system’. On the part of the students, there have been a lot of challenges in terms of possession and accessibility, including the necessities for online teaching and learning tools such as laptops that are internet-enabled. Moreover, the fluctuating and unstable situation of the electricity supply, especially in rural environments, posed a serious problem to students who were still trying hard to adjust to online pedagogy imposed by the pandemic. As universities transitioned to online teaching, they had to ensure that no student was left behind [19,21]. However, the swift and unplanned move to online teaching and learning afforded students inadequate time for the kind of training required by its users [22–24]. This unprecedented change led to the disruption of the academic year, with far-reaching effects on the academic and social life of students, especially those from rural and disempowered economic backgrounds.

This article focuses on the psycho-social challenges of students in the wake of new pedagogy (online teaching and learning) orchestrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. It further explores the behavioural significance of online teaching and learning’s impact on the physical and psychological energy that students devote to their academic work. The arguments raised in this paper are based on critical engagement with secondary material through a critical literature review and the theoretical frameworks in alignment with the topic under exploration. The article is divided into five sections. The first section provides a brief background to South African higher education and the challenges confronting HEIs. The second section focuses on the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study. The third section deals with academic and social factors that affect student learning, with specific attention to online learning. This is underpinned by students’ psychosocial needs, which constitute the subject matter of this article. The recommendation section and, lastly, the concluding remarks of the chapter, provide a brief discussion on improvements in the preparedness and mitigation of societal disruptions in South African society and higher education.

2. Contextual Analysis

This paper focuses on the psychosocial impact of online teaching and learning on students in South Africa’s HEIs, in the wake of COVID-19. Although COVID-19 is a global phenomenon, some of its impact might be local. The dynamic nature of this disease, like many other social phenomena, calls for critical engagements with the hindsight available to provide contextual foregrounding of its impact on human life across spectrums. This section provides a contextual background to the state of HE in South Africa, and critically engages with the challenges that continue to confront the system amid the coronavirus crisis. This background information is critical as one seeks to grapple with the extent to which socio-economic, structural and systemic factors continue to affect the South African academia in the context of the COVID-19 global challenge [20,25] (Black Academic Caucus 2020; Motala and Menon 2020; Lewin and Mawoyo 2014). How students adjust to the new

ways of remote learning is contingent upon existing structural and systemic measures that enhance or constrain effective learning among students in various institutions.

Since the demise of apartheid and South Africa's ascendancy to democracy in 1994, the response to transformation and social cohesion has been the mainstay of the initiative to redress the inequities and imbalances that characterised the higher education (HE) landscapes in the days of apartheid. In the present democratic dispensation, the system has continued to witness skewed gaps of inequality, albeit national and institutional policies that have been formulated to respond to include opportunities for students across race, class, and gender [20,23,25,26] (Black Academic Caucus 2020; Soudien 2020; Lewin and Mawoyo 2014; Leibowitz 2009; Akoojee and Nkomo 2007). Over twenty years into democracy, South Africa's institutions of higher learning remain some of the most unequal in the global higher-education community [23,25]. These gaps of inequality result from a historical past where educational systems were essentially patterned along racial backgrounds, with the potential to reproduce gendered and classed dichotomies. Despite the major strides taken to transform higher education, narratives continue to reflect gender and racial inequalities caused by economic, social, and political factors and institutional culture which are pervasive to the academic and social integration of many students, especially those of the black race.

Conversely, with the advent of democracy, the South African HE sector has transitioned through major phases, as efforts are continuously made towards achieving the goals of transformation and social cohesion that engendered post-apartheid higher education. While every effort is made to mitigate social inequalities and academic discrepancies, high levels of poverty and other forms of inequality continue to deepen the problems that most students face in South Africa's HEIs [23,25]. The concern raised against marginalised communities in HE is global, and not unique to South Africa. During a Webinar meeting in September 22, 2021 UNESCO called for the initiative to drive access and equal participation of students in the global African HE community during the COVID-19 disaster. In his opening remarks, Prof. Hubert Gijzen, the Regional Director of UNESCO Multisectoral Regional Office for Eastern Africa, among other things underscored the need to increase e-mode access in African universities [27]. Since then, strategies to enhance success have remained dominant discourses in institutions of higher learning, including South Africa.

At a time of immense change in the HE sectors, the South African government and its HEIs have prioritised student choice and needs as major drivers in shaping the HE system. In pursuance of the goals of transformation, various universities around the country have developed strategic plans that should most effectively have a bearing on student and institutional outcomes. However, this has been without meaningful success, as background and structural problems of poverty, unemployment and inequalities continue to affect the mission of redress and inclusion in South Africa's higher education sector [23,25]. Moreover, with the unprecedented outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the student and institutional challenges in addressing issues of transformation became even more complex. The shift from physical contact to remote learning further exacerbated the already existing academic and social problems faced by most students from disempowered economic and rural backgrounds. For a university such as the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), the inevitable decision to move teaching and learning online has met with daunting challenges, ranging from financial, material and social to, of course, academic challenges. In addition, at the University of South Africa (UNISA), the same challenges were experienced not only by the students from diverse backgrounds but also by the full-time and part-time employees, whose job description was merely to support the students' face-to-face teaching and learning encounters at the university. Additionally, some of the students who usually have part-time teaching employment at these universities were affected by this transition, as their services were no longer much needed since teaching was conducted online across campuses. Some of the students who are usually contracted as part-time lecturers or tutors at different campuses during face-to-face learning could not be contracted, as physical learning was conveniently replaced by online lectures and

tutorials across campuses [28]. Although these challenges are typically academic, they are concomitantly seen as threatening the economic and social lives of students and their families, especially those from rural and impoverished backgrounds.

The outbreak of coronavirus has had a serious impact on the global community of higher education. In the early days of the disaster, concerns were focused on the disruption that the pandemic would bring to students and institutions. In South Africa, like many parts of the world, efforts to contain the virus ranged from the suspension of academic activities and the extension or postponement of academic terms to the closure of schools and universities in mid-March. This closure was further extended by the national lockdown, which continued to keep both students and staff away from their institutional environments. With the disruption of academic activities, unplanned and unprepared measures were taken to mitigate the challenges posed by COVID-19 in HEIs [10,29]. The unending impact of the coronavirus pandemic on HEIs has led to vigorous engagements, in which universities are continually seeking new pedagogical approaches and offering continuous training to staff and students, to hone their cyber skills. From when the crisis began, a proliferation of platforms including seminars, workshops, and movements, have been organised to discuss and assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students, staff, and institutions of South Africa's HE [24,25,30] (BAC 2020; Government South Africa 2020; University in South Africa 2020). Universities across the country resorted to teaching remotely, so that students could complete the 2020 academic year. The challenges posed by these new developments, and especially how students were affected, has remained a major concern during this crisis.

One of the major goals that were factored in behind the creation of these platforms was the need to address issues of inequalities, which were worsened by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The BAC (Black Academic Caucus) platform formed by academics from the University of Cape Town (UCT), for example, noted that 'COVID-19 is likely not only to show but exacerbate the already existing inequalities' in South African society, 'given the extremely high population densities within poor black neighbourhood's [25]'. While universities continued with renewed efforts to make provision for vulnerable students, bearing in mind the ramifications of the COVID-19 crisis, the extent of vulnerability of a great number of students during this time constituted a deeply moral challenge [25].

3. Online Learning Prior to and during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Studying by correspondence and the use of technological instruments to facilitate teaching and learning are not new phenomena in South Africa's higher education sector. However, the same cannot be said about the introduction of online learning, which witnessed universities transitioning from traditional (classroom-contact) pedagogy to e-learning, at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, in 2004, the draft white paper on e-education was set to guide South Africa's HEIs to implement online modal platforms that should facilitate the process of teaching and learning in a more flexible manner (Draft White Paper on e-Education, notice 1869 of 2004). Consequently, ICT resources, tools and applications have since been employed by various public universities, focusing on the interaction among academics and learners and the online environment, as well as collaborative learning [31].

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, universities in South Africa had been using advanced technological facilities and multi-modal remote systems to provide support to all students and the university. Online systems such as Edmodo, Google classroom, Moodle, video conferencing platforms such as WhatsApp, TEAMS, ZOOM, and the use of audio-visual installed facilities in boardrooms or lecture venues (These installed audio-visual facilities enable lecturers and students to interact across campuses during a lecture or meeting.) had been in existence across universities in the country. However, not many academics and students had, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, committed themselves to learning about these platforms, let alone utilising them [11,32] (Johnson 2022; Ojong and Mhandu 2022; Mashau and Nyawo 2021). The unprecedented and unplanned shift to full online teaching and learning operations was disruptive and disorientating for many students and

academics, who were inadequately equipped to respond the new pedagogic imperatives orchestrated by the pandemic.

Many academics across universities struggled to abruptly switch to online platforms, including holding meeting on Teams [6,33]. Although academics had laptops and were supplied with data on their personal phones, they did not possess the technical skills to incorporate technology for teaching and learning. During summative assessment, uploading question papers was a challenge for most of them, and this often resulted in the shifting of examination times and dates. As a result, academics had to conceptualise other methods of assessing students by re-writing their module, whereby continuous assessment was introduced.

In many universities, COVID-19 threw the academic calendar into uncertainty. Even a university such as UNISA, which is an online university, was not prepared for this transition. It must be noted that, although being an online university, student assessments prior to the pandemic were carried out entirely manually. Venues were sought, invigilators appointed, and students converged at examination centres to write their examination. During COVID-19, students had to abruptly switch to online examinations, without having undergone any form of training. Most of them faced several challenges of unfamiliarity with the online platforms, lack of laptops, and a lack of data and internet connectivity. This was because UNISA is an African university that serves mainly students from disadvantaged backgrounds from the deep rural areas that are without internet connectivity in the country. The university supplied all students with data; however, internet connectivity was a challenge, and most of them ended up having to repeat the modules.

4. Psychosocial Theory

Amid a crisis of this nature, some students more than others are better equipped academically and have a greater ability to cope and succeed under such circumstances. Students from low-income socioeconomic backgrounds have been the most affected. The success of these student is conditioned by the degree to which students are satisfied with their experience and feel comfortable and affirmed in their learning interactions with online platforms [33]. It is important to consider both the sociological and psychological perspectives while dealing with student persistence and success during disasters and disruptions. From a sociological perspective, students' persistence and success are contingent on the dynamic relationships between an individual student and other actors within their learning environment [29,34]. The more students feel socially integrated with their academic environments, the greater likelihood of their persistence to graduation [35]. Having said that, from a psychological perspective, it is believed that students' appropriate relationships with peers, faculty and staff shape behaviour, which in turn influences their academic performance and social adjustment to university life [36,37]. As stated earlier, the paper utilises the psychosocial and social-integration theoretical frameworks to understand the personal and social conditions that affect students' learning and their ability to succeed in times of crisis.

Psychosocial theory is used in this work to understand the psychological and social problems that South African students are faced with during the COVID-19 global and national disaster. Derived from psychological behaviour and social conditions, psychosocial theory focuses on human relations in a social context and addresses social influences on individual behaviour. The theory emerged to deal with social adjustment or interpersonal relations [35,38,39], and demonstrates an individual response to social change. Frosh (2003:4) [38] notes that the development of psychosocial theory offered new ways of understanding the relationships between individuals and their society, 'encompassing both the individual focus on psychology and the broader historical concerns of sociology ... [with] a unique opportunity to study a "socially aware" psychology alongside an "individual sensitive" sociology'.

Some scholars have identified the complexities associated with the psychosocial theoretical framework and underscored the need to locate it within a particular context for

comprehensive analysis [40,41] (Reay 2005; Redman 2005; Beard, Clegg and Smith 2007; Hey and Leathwood 2009). Embodied within the psychoanalytical framework, Hey and Leathwood (2009:106) [39] argue that even so, ‘there is no theoretical alliance between those defining a broad psychoanalytically inflected psycho-social position, making it a matter of intellectual preference of how scholars evaluate the claims of the psychic, social, biological and embodied in notions of desire, emotion and affect’. Further to this claim is the idea that these terms coexist to manifest enlivened tensions that play across the field of psychoanalysis. In a similar approach, Clarke’s review of the ‘psycho-analytical sociology’ emphasises the need to recognise the ‘rich legacy work on emotion [with an effort] . . . to hold onto rather than eliminate the tensions between the biological, interactional, social constructivism and psychoanalysis (Clarke 2006 cited in Hey and Leathwood 2009:106) [39]. Psychosocial theory is hereby used to understand the state of South African higher education. The theory shows how some of the sociocultural relations within higher education struggle, entailing a need for the affective, and how they constitute an area for the social regulation of the South African student body, in the context of COVID-19.

Over the past three decades, psychologically related studies have focused on understanding how humans’ function in demanding situations, with resilience being examined across various contexts, including business organisations, education and communities [42–44]. The COVID-19 pandemic has produced significant psychological problems, compounded by existing social processes that account for individual and societal responses amid a crisis. The COVID-19 crisis has brought not only the risk of death, but also mounting psychological pressures among individuals across different social communities, including the higher education community. In South Africa, this pandemic has produced different levels of anxiety, fear, and confusion in the lives of many students, who fear their chances of completing their programmes for the 2020 academic year. Pillay and Ruggunan (2022) [45] for example, in their study highlight tweeted messages from UKZN students expressing their panic and frustrations once contact learning was replaced by online learning. Once a notice was served to the university community announcing the migration of teaching and learning to online, students immediately took to twitter with #UKZNisNotReady, detailing their lived experiences during this pandemic [45]. These students, who mostly come from quintile 1–3 schools (Quintile schools are non-fee-paying schools, mostly located in rural communities of South Africa.), are the most affected during this crisis. Due to structural socioeconomic factors such as poor internet connectivity, overcrowded households and lack of smart electronic gadgets, the majority of students were overwhelmed with fear and anxiety, frustrated by the thought that they would not complete the 2020 academic year [19,45].

5. Student-Integration Theory

The classical approach to student attrition, persistence and success uses theories that focus on the integration of students into higher education. Classical writers have used the student-integration theory to explain variance in the academic progress of students resulting from students’ integration in their institution of higher learning [46,47]. Consistent with this approach, Tinto (1993) uses the student-integration model to explain the social and academic integration of students. For social integration, Tinto advances a model that integrates academic and social factors as complementary but independent processes by which students adjust to university or college life. Students’ integration is influenced by the extent to which a student finds the social environment of the institution congenial to their preferences. Such preferences are usually shaped by that student’s background, aspirations, and values [35]. Students’ persistence is influenced by the level of their academic and social integration within the institution, based on the collective consciousness. Tinto (1993) argues that students who usually drop out of school are those who struggle to effectively distance themselves from their former networks of interaction, and who struggle to adopt new values and behaviour that represent the new culture of the institution they are attending. However, before the outbreak of COVID-19, most students had already established a

network conducive to learning, and in the context of a pandemic the network was distorted, as they were left to re-negotiate a new learning environment (online pedagogy) which automatically negatively impacted their performance and possibly led to their withdrawal from the institution.

Nevertheless, many studies alluding to the student-integration theory in higher education have identified that there is no set of factors comprehensive enough to explain the integration theory. Educational institutions consist of an academic system and a social system, and hence the need to make a distinction between the two systems is critical for conceptual understanding [48]. Academic integration is seen to be in line with academic achievements through students' interaction with the faculty, while social integration refers to students' engagement with peers in the extracurricular activities of the institution (Tinto 1993). Unfortunately, the distinction between academic and social integration conveyed by Tinto (1993) and other researchers has produced some conceptual and measurement problems. What is seen as academic integration in one context is seen as social integration in another. While Tinto (1993) defines students' interaction with the faculty as academic integration, other authors [49] define it as social integration. This distinction is amplified in the observation by [46] who distinguish between two kinds of faculty contacts. The first kind sees contacts with faculty involving discussion and advice as academic integration, while the second one, considered to be social integration, involves out-of-classroom interactions, and constitutes informal social contacts with faculty.

In the context of this article, we try to provide an understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the academic and social integration of students, particularly those from rural and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Social integration plays a critical role in students' integration and their sense of belonging to an institution. The readiness with which students are collectively conscious and adjust to the academic and social changes that are made in their institution, in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, is a cause for concern. The disruption caused by this pandemic to the academic activities of higher education institutions potentially left most students in a disintegrated, fragmented, and disenfranchised state of mind, caused by fear and anxiety about their success. Students and lecturers were concerned about whether students would successfully make it through the 2020 academic year, as new pedagogic imperatives demanded a shift to virtual teaching and learning practices across universities in the country. Given the untimely transition of these practices, the already vulnerable and disadvantaged black-student community were the most affected, as poor living conditions and underdevelopment of their rural communities posed a great challenge towards their social and academic integration. For example, during this time, it was impossible for students to access support structures such as the Student Counselling Centre and extramural academic support such as the Writing Place, operating at UKZN (The Writing Place was instituted in 1998 under the College of Humanities Student Mentorship initiative, meant to assist junior students with academic writing by postgraduate students. Part of the mentorship programme was to assist first year students to familiarise themselves with the academic and social environments of the university). This transition was not made suitable for many students, who have continued to suffer from frustration and anxiety as they feel less integrated (socially and academically) with their institutional environment.

It is important to look at the impact that global and national disasters of this nature have on the HEIs as far as they usually relate to new and/or exacerbated challenges that students face in their institutions. Some of the problems created by the COVID-19 disaster in South Africa's HEIs relate to issues of student access, resilience, persistence, and attrition or success. Shaik et al. (2022) [50] claim that universities as contextual environments must focus on promoting resilience by engaging with the social and physical ecology of staff, and [students] (emphasis added in the original), by providing support and resources to facilitate resilience during times of disaster. Pedagogic migration to remote online learning has posed challenges that are unique to certain groups of students. In the context of this pandemic, Tinto's (1993) student-integration model, and Bean's (1983) [51] student-

attrition model are critical in explaining the discourse of access, persistence, and success of students during a disaster. What one experiences around the state of the South African HE is a socially fragmented system that continues to suffer from all sorts of discrimination, including gender, class, and racial discrimination (BAC 2020, Soudien 2020). The ongoing social inequalities that exist in the student body, have put the most vulnerable student in a precarious state during this crisis. The resilience of students' chances to persist and succeed during this crisis has become a matter of choice for many students. Tinto's integration and Bean's attrition models are conditioned by the extent to which students struggle to engage with this major pedagogic shift. The extent to which a student feels socially or academically integrated either enhances or diminishes their chances of success or withdrawal (attrition) from the institution.

Drawing on Astin's theory (1984) [52] which defines involvement as behavioural in meaning, the physical and psychological energy dispensed by students towards their academic experience is important in determining student throughput or output [52]. Therefore, the psychosocial challenges that vulnerable students suffer from during this crisis determine their persistence and success or withdrawal and the attrition rates across universities in Africa [53,54].

6. The Social and Academic Challenges of Students

The COVID-19 pandemic has negatively impacted the social and academic life of South African students. Although there have been concerted efforts by universities nationwide and the Ministry of Higher Education to avert the academic challenges, there has been no easy way out to tackle these challenges, as the university community continues to suffer academic setbacks during these trying times. While these challenges remain complex, conversion to online teaching during this COVID-19 pandemic has further complicated the situation.

7. Slow Progression and Distribution of Online Material

Higher education's rapid shift to online platforms as a consequence of COVID-19 for teaching and learning was a challenging process for many students across HEIs in South Africa. Responding to this shift has presented different challenges and timeframes for delivery in different universities. While institutions such as the University of Cape Town (UCT) and University of Stellenbosch experienced relatively swift progression in the implementation of online learning, other universities such as UKZN and University of Zululand (UNIZULU), and Walter Sisulu University (WSU), among others, were yet to have the 'dust settled' regarding online teaching, up until June 2020 (University in South Africa 2020). Effective participation in online learning requires adequate preparation and access to technological devices such as laptops, desktops, smartphones, and internet connectivity. For many of the universities (such as the example mentioned above) it took quite a long time to deliver the necessary devices students needed for their participation in online teaching and learning. While some institutions had become fully operational in online learning, others, up until June 2020, were still struggling to equip academic staff and students for online learning (see University in South Africa 2020). These skewed responses justify the inequalities that continue to fragment the South African HE landscape, as certain universities tend to be more resourced than others [20]. This fragmentation has been worsened by the COVID-19 disaster (BAC 2020; Soudien 2020).

Following a report by Universities South Africa, compiled between 17 April and 6 May 2020, up to this time most universities reported some students lacking appropriate devices, with many more cut off from internet connectivity [24]. The uneven distribution of resources portrayed structural inequalities that exist among the South Africa Universities, which in turn affect the risk, resilience and integration of the students in the various institutions. However, these challenges were unevenly distributed across universities. Some institutions such as WSU reported the highest percentage, 90 per cent, of students without devices, internet connectivity and data; University of Fort Hare (UFH) by the

time of this report had up to 70 per cent of students without laptops, electricity or internet connectivity; Sefako Makgatho University of Health Sciences had 60 per cent of the student body without devices; Nelson Mandela University had 45 per cent of students without suitable devices; and North-West University had 7 per cent of students without internet connectivity or lack of appropriate devices to access remote learning online (Universities South Africa Report 2020).

Not only have the above-mentioned challenges affected the academic progress of students considered most vulnerable, but they have also impacted their psychosocial wellness. The untimely delivery of material for remote learning, whether electronically or physically, continued to produce increased levels of anxiety, panic, stress, and fear among students, who were greatly concerned about successfully ending the 2020 academic year [19,45]. Universities South Africa (2020) reported that psychosocial issues remained an enduring challenge for most students across many institutions during this crisis. Students' level of stress and fear is induced by the debilitating economic and social conditions under which students operate while they find themselves at home during this time of the COVID-19 crisis. UCT, in its report, for example, mentioned that the issue of vulnerable students went beyond students without devices or internet connectivity to include students living in unconducive environments. The report further highlighted the fact that even some of the better-resourced students by the time of the report had not signed up for online learning, and were therefore as anxious as those considered under-resourced (Universities South Africa 2020).

8. Student Socioeconomic Status

While institutions are proactively engaged to meet students' psychosocial needs, the reality on the ground is far from being achieved, as socioeconomic status, compounded with structural and infrastructural impediments, has continued to affect students across institutions. It is believed that access to online resources is imperative, since this disaster might linger longer in South Africa, due to the uncertainties of the pandemic and the inequitable distribution of infrastructure. In South Africa, student's ability to persist (especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic) in their academic endeavours is conditioned by several factors which include psychological, cultural, economic, sociological, and organisational issues (BAC 2020; Soudien 2020, Lewin and Mayowo 2014). These daunting factors illustrate the fact that student persistence is contingent on the complex interaction of processes over time. Moreover, the pandemic has brought to the fore some of the realities faced by students which were hitherto ignored by the university community. At the time of this crisis, scholars have become more critical, as symbolic concern is now given to structural issues such as 'limited internet access, poor internet speed, and the high cost of the internet' (Keržič et al., 2021: 5) 'as well as the realities of difficult living conditions, such as overcrowded homes, or homes that lacked basic amenities such as electricity or running water' [19] associated with students' vulnerabilities and disadvantages are highlighted.

Feelings of anger, fear, anxiety, and frustration that students are going through during this COVID-19 disaster, are not only linked to the academic and technical challenges associated with the remote-learning mode, but are also linked to certain domestic responsibilities they have to take on while studying from home. In other words, most households and communities are not safe havens for a fulfilling learning experience. Many South African townships and rural communities are plagued with systemic and domestic violence, with heightened spates during the COVID-19 national lockdown. Gender-based violence (GBV) is among the different types of violence experienced in rural households and communities (Muchena 2021) [55]. Since the national lockdown, South Africa has been plunged into escalating rates of femicide. There have been cases of women killings reported from different parts of the country almost every week. With intensified GBV operating in these communities, it has become difficult and frustrating for female students to position themselves properly for effective learning. Moreover, gender roles remain a dominant discourse within South African households, and impact female students' life.

Most often, it is women and girl children who are inclined to fulfil the roles of caregiving and other domestic responsibilities within the household. In this time of the COVID-19 crisis, more female students may have to negotiate caregiving/domestic work and remote learning, which may compromise their resilience and persistence to get through the 2020 academic year.

During this crisis, the university environment relatively has provided a relatively more protective space for safe learning than the home environments of certain students. In addition, during this period, it has been discovered that urban areas and on-campus residences provide more security and safety than the rural communities where most of the students reside. The Black Academic Caucus (BAC) cites structural violence that manifests in multiple forms, including GBV and gang violence in certain informal localities such as the Cape Flats, where there are rampant incidents of violence (BAC 2020). Gang violence and GBV contribute to a situation that creates a form of chaos that would make it unlikely for students studying under such conditions, even when they have access to technology, to be able to work. Having access to technology might even put them at high risk.

9. Persistence and Lack of Peer Support

In line with Tinto's model of student integration and Bean's model of student attrition, the discourse of persistence explains how student success is linked to societal and individual factors that influence or constrain persistence and success among students (Tinto 1993; Astin 1984) [52]. Persistence in this regard is a function of dynamic relationships between a student and others within the institution they are attending, and the home-community environment. This perspective explains the critical role that interpersonal relationships play in mitigating student success. Kuh (2000) claims that a student's success in tertiary education depends on their ability to negotiate foreign environments (Foreign environments in may be explained in light of the strangeness that the new university environment may offer to a student transitioning from another educational environment. The strangeness maybe represented by pedagogical/curricular, institutional policies, or infrastructural challenges.) through their effective interaction with strangers. In the South African context, this is the reality for the majority of black students from poor backgrounds, who are constantly negotiating foreign environments of exclusion engineered by their socioeconomic status and institutional culture. Institutional culture in South African universities manifests in ways that limit interaction between staff and students. The COVID-19 pandemic has further widened this gap, especially because the auditory-dominant learning mode has been replaced by the visual-dominant learning mode (Rogers 2000). If student-staff interaction could pose a challenge to students' persistence and success during the auditory learning mode, it became even more problematic in the event of the COVID-19 crisis, where there has been zero operation of physical interaction.

Staff-student interaction plays a critical role in shaping students' experiences and academic outcomes. Staff-student interaction contributes to the social and academic integration of students. When students feel socially integrated, their academic life is enhanced, and this increases their chances of success. Conversely, when they are not academically integrated, their social life is compromised, and this may result in them dropping out of university. This has been the reality for most students from rural black communities, as online pedagogy hardly afforded them space to interact with peers and lecturers. Even with the creation of multiple and basic virtual interactional platforms such as WhatsApp and Zoom, most students still felt alienated and excluded from a university community—an aspect that raised sophisticated forms of anxiety and uncertainties among many students who feared not completing their degrees in record time. Being physically alienated, coupled with structural constraints such as the volatile internet connectivity already mentioned, further deepened the feelings of exclusion and alienation which many were already suffering from, in a highly fragmented racial and classed society [33] (Rieker 2022; BAC 2020; Soudien 2020).

Furthermore, studies have highlighted the role played by peer interaction in promoting persistence and enhancing students' success (Kuh, 2000; Kuh et al., 2006). Non-peer interaction among students during this COVID-19 crisis has affected students who were once members of peer networks that assisted them in effectively functioning in their institutional environments. Chickering and Gamson (1987) [56] claimed that peer cooperation, among other things, promotes learning and the likelihood of students persisting and graduate from tertiary institutions. In fact, for example, it is believed that the nature of first-year students' experiences in the classroom with peers, and with faculty are influential predictors of desired educational outcomes [56].

Another key issue to consider about students' learning is the institutional environment that is perceived by students to be inclusive and affirming, and where expectations for performance are clearly communicated and practically set at high levels [35,57]. Peer cooperation and inclusive institutional environments influence student engagement and promote a strong learning culture among students. According to [35] 'learning is strongly influenced by the degree to which an individual is invested in the learning process'. Also important is how an institution deploys its resources, organises its curriculum, and supports other learning opportunities that induce students' participation in activities that lead to experiences and desired outcomes such as persistence, satisfaction, learning and graduation, [58], determining the level of students' engagement with their academic pursuit.

Peer interaction in the classroom is an important part of learning that influences lifelong learning habits among students. The traditional face-to-face classroom environment provides an opportunity for social and emotional strategies that encourage reflection and self-awareness that an individual student can achieve by belonging to a group. Social interactions also create an enabling environment for students to practice social and academic skills both individually and in a group. The shift to remote online teaching has imposed limitations on the physical interactions of students with both peers and the institutional environments from which learning took place before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whoever a student chooses to spend time with is important for what they do at school and how they feel about their experiences. Ref. [57] observes that a large part of the impact of college is determined by the extent and content of one's interactions with major agents of socialisation on campus, namely faculty members and student peers'.

In line with Pascarella's observation, Ref. [59] claims that peers are 'the single most potent source of influence because they significantly affect every aspect of development including, cognitive, psychological, and behavioural [35]. These observations reflect a true picture of the experiences that most students in South Africa's HEIs are going through during this COVID-19 disaster. The replacement of physical classrooms with virtual classrooms has diminished the role that students' physical interactions with peers and institutional environments play in their learning endeavours. The shift to the virtual classroom has in some sense impacted negatively on students, whose sense of peer interactions remained a potent force in their progress with learning. In fact, 'peer interactions are particularly important concerning social integration because students are more likely to stay in school when they feel comfortable and connected to other students with similar interests and aspirations' [35]. Institutions with a higher level of social integration among students tend to have higher levels of educational aspirations as well [35].

10. Recommendations

It is clear from this paper that university students from underprivileged backgrounds were further discriminated against by the online pedagogies that were abruptly introduced during COVID-19. As a result, they were further marginalised because of their geographical context, which had nothing to do with their academic endeavours. This perpetual form of what could be seen as another hidden curriculum by institutions of higher learning that indirectly spearheaded messages of discrimination could be interpreted differently, for three reasons. Firstly, practices by institutions of higher learning could be re-introducing discriminatory systems of the past regime. Focusing on the privileged at the expense of

the underprivileged sends a strong message of discrimination to everyone, that some are more important than others. Secondly, students in rural areas may regard themselves as lesser beings as compared to their peers. These strong negative emotions about themselves could affect their mental health, as they blame everyone and everything around them for the predicament they face in their studies. Lastly, the transition to online learning could be seen as a threat rather than a progressive mode to explore. A smooth transition results in better results, as it addresses all the technical and technological challenges that the user may need clarity on.

From the above, it is evident that no mode of teaching should supersede the other. Although online teaching and learning presented some strong elements of education in higher education institutions, it should not be considered a superior mode as compared to face-to-face. The general South African infrastructure is not yet ready for an effective and efficient online teaching and learning mode in HEIs. Until the infrastructural, fiscal, political, economic, and emotional divide between the privileged and the underprivileged is addressed, face-to-face teaching and learning will continue to be the most preferred mode for students in rural areas. As a result, institutions of higher learning should employ teaching methods that combine face-to-face with online learning on an equitable basis to benefit diverse students and enhance students' access, participation, and success. Remnants of COVID-19 experiences should therefore be used to renew and develop teaching and learning at institutions of higher learning.

Disaster risk management is not a new phenomenon in South Africa's HE sectors. Lessons learnt from past crises such as #feesmustfall movement in 2015/2016 [12] that sparked heated debates and student protest across universities, coupled with the recent most devastating COVID-19 disaster of 2020, have driven South African universities to the edge and to rethink their contemporary pedagogic practices (Plessis et al., 2022). While returning to traditional contact learning, various universities across the country have put in place contingent measures to sustain and save an academic year from collapsing in the face of a disaster. Hybrid or blended learning has been one major change that universities have adopted, even as they return to contact learning. At UKZN for example, policy has made room for up to 30% with a further 50% increase (as the situation may demand) for the continuation of online teaching and learning. Where there are gaps, UKZN has made provision for further and continuous training for staff and students to sufficiently familiarise themselves with the use of teaching and learning online platforms. This is a plausible decision that should become a sustained character of the South African university striving to mitigate against the effects of future disaster on higher education systems in the country.

11. Concluding Remarks

This article has discursively presented the psychosocial challenges that confront South African universities and the student body. The article began by stating the decision taken by the South African government for a nationwide lockdown, which led to the shutdown of the country's higher education community and schools. It proceeded to examine the state of the country's HEIs, to demonstrate how systemic and structural factors continue to affect HEIs in post-apartheid and democratic South Africa. This background information showed the extent to which background factors continue to affect the student body within the South African university community. These systemic and structural factors account for the inequalities that exist in South Africa's HE sectors, which have been even worsened by the current COVID-19 pandemic. The unplanned pedagogic shift to online teaching and learning has further exacerbated the academic and social challenges that many South African students are faced with in HEIs.

The article employed the psychosocial and social-integration theoretical frameworks to understand personal and social conditions that affect students' learning and their ability to succeed during a disaster. Both the psychosocial model and the students' integration model show that the social circumstances under which students live influence or constrain

their ability to succeed. Consistent with the literature on students' resilience, persistence, attrition, and success, these two models explored the socioeconomic and academic problems affecting students' performance, and consequently their ability to succeed, in the context of the COVID-19 disaster. The psychosocial theory deals with social adjustment or interpersonal relationships and demonstrates an individual response to social change. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, this article has shown how levels of fear, panic, anxiety, anger, and frustration have impacted students' psychological wellness and compromised their academic performance and outcomes for the 2020 academic year. The social-integration theory explains a student's ability to persist and succeed when that individual is academically and socially integrated with an institution. Conversely, not being socially and academically integrated reduces the chances of students' resilience and persistence to pursue their goals of completion.

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