Research Article

Higher institution dropouts in South Africa during Covid-19: have we got our priorities right in resolving teaching and learning challenges?

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Abstract:

Apparently, the 'overwhelming' and abrupt changes and transformation that is on-going in teaching and learning at the higher education institutions (HEIs) due to Covid-19. Some learners are coping well, whilst majority are grappling with the teaching and learning challenges as presented by the Covid-19. Other learners (not would not) but cannot cope with the pressure and abrupt changes that take place in HE which result in dropping out of these learners. This article poses the question of whether we have exhausted strategies to curtail the dropping out of learners due to teaching and learning challenges. The article intends to spur discussion on how we can effectively assist the higher education (HE) learners who are struggling or failing to cope with the Covid-19 teaching and learning challenges. The focus is on the challenges caused using technology for teaching and learning. Thus, the sudden imposition of e-learning on curriculum contents designed for face-to-face contact learning due to covind-19 has exposed how unprepared developing nations are towards embracing the predictable future of education. There are indications that the postcovid-19 teaching and learning environment will possibly maintain the current e-learning practices. Have we our priority right in supporting the struggling learners.

Keywords: Teaching and learning, challenges, higher education, dropouts, underperformance, Covid-19, socio-economic lacuna, e-learning, educational access, technology, education and development

Globally, the universities and higher education institutions (HEIs) have immensely been affected by Covid-19 crisis. The pandemic has abruptly forced the shutdown of HEIs and compulsory restructuring of teaching and learning practices to e-learning due to the contagious nature of the pandemic which demands immediate containment (Camilleri, 2021). There are several reasons why many higher education (HE) learners dropped out but this article focuses on HE learners who dropped out or unable to cope with changes associated with the compulsory implementation of e-learning. It has been a concern on how to increase education access and maintain inclusive education in South African HE (Poonam & Rajesh, 2019). Apparently, the government is faced with the responsibility to save lives, Whilst the HEIs have to abruptly adopt e-learning to enforce covid-19 restrictions. The focus has been to maintain the statuesque in terms of preventing excessive infection of corona virus (2019) also known as covid-19 (Camilleri, 2021). Given that the focus is in saving lives, the general hope is that other things would gradually fall into place. This overwhelming and abrupt change in HE teaching and learning has resulted in increasing academic stress for the learners in HEIs (Crawford et al., 2020). In South Africa context, majority of HE learners are indeed struggling especially learners from the historical black universities and HEIs which leads to an increased dropout rate (Camilleri, 2021). This raises the question of how do we help the HE learners who have dropped out or who are at the verge of dropping out due to covid-19 teaching and learning challenges? Have we done all we need to do? Are we going to just hope hopelessly that things would gradually fall into place? How do we bring back those who dropped out or, at least, reduce the dropout rate?

However, the use of ICTs facilities, tools and digital learning technologies has compulsorily become the common approach and vital component to teaching and learning in HE institutions (Cox, 2019; Wehab, 2020). Thus, video-streaming and videoconferencing are two primary technologies used for teaching and learning in both developing and developed countries of the world. These technologies are used to capture video and audio of participants irrespective of their various locations. The lectures can be recorded and made available to the learners even after the lecture (Bos et al., 2016). Prior to Covid-19 crisis in South Africa the challenges of teaching and learning using technology has been compounded by the socio-economic conditions, environment limitations and development challenges. The blended learning also known as 'hybrid learning' was introduced. The blended learning represents a learning model that combines the use of both face-to-face traditional classrooms learning and online methodologies (Poonam & Rajesh, 2019). The aim is to facilitate gradual transformation and transition to e-learning, create a blend of learning experience and to increase the use of technology in teaching and learning at HE level (Wehab, 2020). The HE learners who failed to cope with e-learning were accommodated with the traditional face-to face learning methodology (Singh, 2015). Today, the Covid-19 conditions has precipitated the use of e-learning exclusively by HEIs thereby create more pressure for

both learners and teachers.

Meanwhile, the university remains one of the oldest institutions globally and its complex nature slows down decision-making (Singh, 2015). The HEIs in developing nations, including South African institutions, have been known for their face-to-face traditional teaching and learning approach (Cox, 2019). Although the use of technologies or blended learning has become the common approach and vital component to teaching and learning in South Africa, but the process has been slow. According to Singh (2015), the move towards creating a blend of learning experience has been slow given the development challenges facing South Africa as a country. The challenges include (but not limited to) high cost of data, lack of network coverage, limited access to information and technology, lack of experts and poverty (Wehab, 2020). The challenges of face-to-face learning methodologies increased the pressure to simplify teaching and learning using technology (Shadieeda et all., 2007; Moodley & Singh, 2015). Whilst, the compulsory Covid-19 regulations such as social distancing has forced the HEIs to move or change abruptly to imbibe the electronic form of learning (Crawford et al., 2020). Thus, the sudden change to e-learning consequently creates more learning difficulties for the HE learners. The current change in teaching and learning seems to set the future for the HE in the postcovid-19 era (Wehab, 2020). According to Camilleri (2021), technology tends to often take the first blame when comes to the challenges facing HE teaching and learning. The question remains: why education? Why always teaching and learning? Does Uber, Shomax, and Amazon exist in a different cultural vacuum? What implication(s) has these challenges for the subsequent government policies and development choices?

Firstly, the government in conjunction with the respective stakeholders has been responsive to the challenges mentioned above but more still need to be done as the country struggles and learns from the Covid-19 crisis. Although the government has made attempt to provide free broadband internet connectivity for the HE learners, yet the issue of network coverage is still a concern. The free internet must be provided, with necessary precautions, up to high school level. The HE learners may need allowances to procure necessary gadgets such as laptop, possibly special tablets designed for learning purposes. Hence, relatively low level of public funding is making higher education translates into higher fees thereby shutting out the poor and previously disadvantaged learners (Crawford et al., 2020). For instance, some families cannot afford the necessary technological gadgets for teaching and learning especially with the current socio-economic realities associated with Covid-19 circumstances.

Secondly, even though there are significant opportunities to learn from the challenges of the compulsory introduction of e-learning especially during this unprecedented time, but first thing must happen first. There is an increasing need for a program designed to prepare the learners against the backdrop of e-learning (or technological) challenges (Moodley & Singh, 2015). In order to prepare HE learners for an effective use of technology for teaching and learning, the use of technology may need to be introduced from the basic education level. There have been diverse response strategies from the HEIs to enhance e-learning such as ICT capacity support, tutorials, support groups, cohorts and so on, but these strategies may fail if the learner is not ready (Wehab, 2020). According to Moodley and Singh (2015), the South African universities and HEIs must align the ICT capacity support programmes with the modules that have a high failure rate to help learners cope (Crawford et al., 2020).

Thirdly, the curriculum needs to be revised to facilitate e-learning instead of imposing e-learning on curriculum made for face-to-face traditional contact learning. Although South African HEIs can significantly learn from the pedagogical development of other universities or HEIs from first world countries but these pedagogies must be applied in accordance with South African contexts. The researchers need to focus on how to use of technology to improve HE teaching and learning. In order to bolster subsequent intervention programmes, strategies or policies, the researchers must strive to gain insight into the proximate cause(s) of increasing HE dropout rate and underperformance.

Truly, the government has numerous responsibilities competing for the available limited resources but currently increasing access to information and the reduction of its cost requires an urgent policy attention (Camilleri, 2021). The Covid-19 situation has practically made everything data intensive, yet South Africa remains amongst the world countries with the highest cost of communication, thus information (Crawford, et al., 2020: Majola, 2021). Globally, Brazil remains the most data-expensive country followed by South Africa. (Majola, 2021). Data costs an average of $2.67 (or R38.93) for one gigabyte in South Africa. The study reveals that the lowest cost of data is $0.12, while the most expensive was $34.95 (Majola, 2021). Hence, even for an effective Covid-19 prevention strategies and campaign to happen, access to information remains vitally important.

Apparently, it is critically important that the present government should provide its own communication network targeting the rural and township areas with the aim to increase access to information, internet connectivity and reduction of the communication cost in order to uplift the disadvantaged communities. The corollary question is whether we should continue to live in denial or with the euphoria that South Africa is prepared to embrace the future of education in the postcovid-19 era (Wehab, 2020). In the South African context, the transformative measures towards reducing HE dropout rate need to be framed around new discoveries and recognition of new empowerment possibilities and/or new capability options. The South African policymakers, skills providers and relevant stakeholders must deliberate on the best approach to uplift the quality of education *vis-a-vis* the alleviation of the development challenges in South Africa. The dividend of democracy and development be geared towards equity and inclusion.

Meanwhile, the government expenditure (or fiscals) in most developing nations (not just South Africa) is in distress. Apart from that the HEIs are apprehensive regarding how the individual institutions would be funded especially if the institutions adopt e-learning and the changes that come with the Covid-19 crisis. This raises the question on whether the government funding would increase if the HEIs adopt e-learning as the case may be. How would the HEIs go about getting all the stakeholders involved in making this policy and education development changes mandated by Covid-19 higher education recovery outcome and rescue strategies?

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