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EMERGENCY REMOTE TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING COVID-19: A RECIPE FOR DISASTER FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN THE EASTERN CAPE OF SOUTH AFRICA?

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ABSTRACT

Though COVID-19 pandemic is a health crisis, it has affected all facets of society including social work education. Students across all disciplines were experiencing disruption in learning due to the closure of higher education institutions resulting from a nationwide lockdown. To minimise the impact of the pandemic on academic programmes, emergency remote teaching and learning has been embarked upon. The aim of this paper was to explore the experiences of social work students and educators vis-à-vis emergency remote teaching and learning and the implications thereof on social work education. The paper adopts a qualitative approach, collecting data through telephonic interviews. Data analysis was thematic. The findings reveal that students expressed feelings of anguish, frustration and a worthless future. Furthermore, they reported that rural infrastructure presents terrifying moments at home, because of limited accessibility to internet connectivity. Social work educators expressed frustration with online teaching and doubted its success. The paper concludes that COVID-19 has clearly shown the disparity between rural-based universities and formerly white ones and the general inequality rocking South Africa. Hence, to prevent social work education from becoming a disaster, measures should be put in place to mitigate the impact of the coronavirus.

KEY TERMS: COVID-19 pandemic; internet connectivity; emergency remote teaching and learning; data bundles; remote platforms, South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

The coronavirus which causes COVID-19 is a global public health pandemic whose impacts are felt all over the world across all facets of society. The education system has not been spared and in the face of this pandemic with the resulting lockdown, education has had to move online. Shakya, Fasano, Marsh, and Rivas (2020) elucidate that the coronavirus has pushed educators and parents into an education experiment where they are forced to devise new teaching methods that will keep their students engaged. This argument is supported by Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust and Bond (2020) who maintain that COVID-19 has forced colleges and universities to make decisions about how to continue with their programmes while keeping their staff, faculty and students safe from the pandemic. Consequently, various institutions have cancelled the use of labs, face to face teaching and other teaching experiences and have moved their courses online. This move to online teaching has been termed emergency remote teaching (ERT). Many South African institutions of higher learning have also moved online. However, as Mthethwa (2020) notes there are numerous challenges with ERT that are obstructing headway in some institutions. It is estimated that 5.5 million South Africans live in informal settlements where there are almost four persons per household, additionally, only 10.4% of South Africans use the internet at home (Abrams & Szeffler, 2020). It has also been revealed that unemployment is about 29% and three persons depend on one employed person, thereby threatening livelihood amongst households (Tanga & Tanga, 2019). These factors compound the emergency remote teaching and learning.

The South African education system is complex, with historical inequalities dating back to the apartheid regime. A majority of South African students come from underprivileged backgrounds and some are studying in rural universities. The Eastern Cape Province is generally referred to as a rural province and has two universities that are classified as rural based and historically disadvantaged, namely the University of Fort Hare (UFH) and Walter Sisulu University (WSU). Rhodes University (RU) and Nelson Mandela University (NMU) are regarded as urban-based universities. Social work programmes are offered at UFH, WSU and NMU.

This paper explores emergency remote teaching and learning in social work programmes at one of the rural-based universities in the Eastern Cape Province. The specific objectives of the paper are to explore the experiences of students in receiving lectures online, to examine educators' experiences in dispensing lectures through emergency remote platforms and to examine the extent to which social work education can be successful during COVID-19 pandemic. Although this paper is not a comparison between urban-based and rural-based universities, it will highlight the systemic inequalities in the country's universities. Perhaps, this will trigger the authorities of the Department of Higher Education and Training and other stakeholders to fast-track transformation across all rural-based and formerly disadvantaged universities in South Africa. Students and staff of social work departments would also benefit from the findings and the insights that the paper provides. Finally, the paper will contribute to knowledge in the area of COVID-19 pandemic and education within the new normal. The first part of this paper is an overview of the literature review. This is followed by the research methodology and the findings. The discussion of the findings are presented next while the last section is the conclusion and recommendations.

OVERVIEW OF LITERATURE REVIEW

The rapid spread of COVID-19 has pushed institutions of higher learning to implement accelerated remote intermediations as well as adaptive delivering modes and learning methods and practices (Segar, 2020). However, in explaining ERT, Hodges et al. (2020) assert that carefully designed online learning and teaching is vastly different from online teaching that arises in response to a disaster or crisis, therefore institutions of higher learning planning to adopt this medium of instruction need to be cognisant of the differences when evaluating and implementing ERT. In explaining the difference between online teaching and emergency remote teaching, Hodges et al. (2020) further state that it is widely agreed that successful online teaching is not just about supporting students instructionally or being a learning community, it also deals with social support as well as co-curricular engagement. Thus for online learning to be successful, there is a need for institutions to invest in a total ecosystem of learner needs and support and this takes time to identify and put into place. To this end, Black Caucus at UCT (2020) cite the challenges of implementing ERT and note that giving parents and students the impression that learning can critically take place online is deceptive given the short space of time and deadlines that academics were given to prepare for this important transition.

Shakya et al. (2020) share that emergency remote teaching has forced institutions of higher learning to navigate new methods of teaching while keeping students engaged at the same time confronting the challenges that come with technology. Meyer (2020) on ERT notes that despite the fact that it was seen as an innovative way of learning and teaching, it has been labelled as 'impractical and elitist.' Some of the challenges identified in line with the method of teaching are a lack of training in e-skills for educators, a lack of suitable teaching support and a need for preparation. Corrado (2020) clarifies that for ERT to effectively take place, there is a need to take into consideration issues of preparedness, personal choice and competence. However, because this is emergency

learning, there was limited time for training or for staff and students to communicate their standpoints and this has resulted in many students struggling with the transition.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This paper adopts a qualitative research design, which focuses on emergency remote teaching and learning under COVID-19 pandemic. The rationale for a qualitative approach was to enhance a proper description and elucidation of the experiences of both students and educators in ways that expand understanding. Twelve (12) educators and 20 social work students were purposefully sampled. The sample was made up of six female educators and six male educators and ten female and ten male students. An open-ended structured interview guide was developed in order to explore the experiences of the participants. Telephone interviews were conducted with all the participants given the fact that there was a nationwide lockdown which prevented one-on-one interviews. The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants. These were transcribed before active engagement and sustained reflection on the participants' shared experiences. The transcriptions were thoroughly interrogated by reading of the text in order to inductively and systematically identify categories and themes. Emerging significant components and recurrent themes or narratives were described. The synthesised descriptions of the themes were substantiated by direct quotations from the participants' responses. In order to establish trustworthiness and integrity of data, we used a sample that consisted of a diversity of participants, which led to a diversity of viewpoints and provided direct quotations from the verbatim transcriptions. The use of the authors' different interpretations at different appropriate times ensured the balance between reflexivity and subjectivity. The participants were assured of anonymity, privacy and confidentiality. Participation was completely voluntary.

FINDINGS

There were two categories of participants, made up of social work students and social work educators. Regarding the educators, the majority (seven) had master's degree qualifications while the rest were PhD degree holders (five). Also, the majority of the educators were at the rank of lecturer (eight), followed by two senior lecturers while the rest were professor or associate professor. Twenty social work students took part in the study and the gender was deliberately made to be equal (10 each). For each level of study, there was an equal number of students, five each. The key findings of the study according to the objectives of the study are presented according to themes and subthemes as follows:

Receiving lectures via online

- *Expression of anguish, frustration and 'worthless future awaits us'*
- *No gadgets, no data, no support nor training on the 'so-called' online platforms*
- *Rural infrastructure presents terrifying moments at home*

Dispensing lectures through emergency remote or online platforms

- *'What a frustrating experience'*
- *Few students accessing lectures on Blackboard*

Extent to which social work education can be successful during COVID-19 pandemic

- *If only students and staff are trained and provided with the remote learning gadgets and data bundles, social work would be successful to an extent*
- *Way forward awaited from South African Council for Social Service Professions and Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions.*

Theme 1: Receiving lectures via online or emergency remote platforms

Three subthemes emerged from the telephone interviews that were conducted with the social work students. The first subtheme was expression of anguish, frustration and 'worthless future awaits us'. The second was, no gadgets, no data, no support nor training on the 'so-called' online platforms and the last one was rural infrastructure presents terrifying moments at home.

Subtheme 1: *Expression of anguish, frustration and 'worthless future awaits us'*

An overwhelming majority of the students (18) expressed anguish and frustration and maintained that a worthless future awaits them. They indicated their inability to access lectures online, especially the Blackboard which is the

official platform used by the rural-based and previously disadvantaged university that was selected for this study. According to the participants, the fact that other students have already commenced their studies without them meant they were left behind and disadvantaged. One of the fourth year students lamented:

I am terribly frustrated with the current so-called emergency remote teaching and learning introduced by our university, knowing our precarious conditions and circumstances. We are not from white universities nor our parents rich. We are supposed to be completing our fieldwork placement as well as conducting our empirical research and collecting data from people from the communities around. All of these have been stopped by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am personally confused and I see myself and my peers in a ditch. I am not accessing any lectures on blackboard.

A first year student also reported:

I don't know what the future holds as since March [2020] we have not had lectures but I hear other universities are currently delivering lectures through online. I also hear our university has also started but I don't have access to the Blackboard that you are asking. I hope that we shall have our usual face-to-face contact teaching and learning. This coronavirus is giving us sleepless nights, especially with my future which seems to be bleak for now. So, a worthless future awaits us.

A few students stated that they have been accessing Blackboard where lectures are uploaded. They also maintained that some educators have been getting in touch and sending their lectures through emails and WhatsApp.

Subtheme 2: No gadgets, no data, no support nor training on the 'so-called' online platforms

All the social work students who participated in this study revealed that they have not received the gadgets and the data bundles promised by the university as was instructed by the Minister of Higher Education and Training. They also indicated that they have not been trained on Blackboard and feared that it might be very difficult and impossible to use since the vast majority of them are novice. Asked about WhatsApp and emails, some of them questioned whether lecture notes as well as practicals can be conducted using these modes. A second year student reported that:

I wonder what the Minister of Higher Education and Training was talking about when he said 'no one' will be left behind in many of his speeches. May be he was referring to students from Wits, Cape Town, Pretoria and other white universities. We here have not been provided with laptops and data bundles that were promised. Even if these things were provided, we don't know how to use Blackboard because we have not been trained.

Subtheme 3: Rural infrastructure presents terrifying moments at home

Accessing internet as well as Blackboard from their homes was reported by many of the students as a nightmare and terrifying experience. They maintained that they had poor or no infrastructure such as electricity and network connectivity; hence, they could not be in a position to even check their mails, make calls and chat using WhatsApp. The student participants maintained that for them to be able to participate in the online lectures they must come back to the campus to be able to access internet. A third year student shared:

I am staying in a remote community after King Williams Town and there is no internet connectivity. Even if my parents can afford a laptop and data bundles, these will be useless. We were suffering back at home because we could not communicate nor get information about what is going on. To check your mails and chat with friends, you have to go to town [King Williams Town].

Theme 2: Dispensing lectures through emergency remote or online platforms

All the educators expressed their frustration with the ERT method. Furthermore, they reported that few students are accessing lectures on Blackboard. These two subthemes are presented in the paragraphs that follow.

Subtheme 1: 'What a frustrating experience'

Every lecturer that was interviewed expressed frustration with the remote teaching and learning method. Additionally, a majority of them revealed that they were not very conversant with Blackboard. They maintained that despite attending training sessions in June [2020], Blackboard is giving them nightmares because of its multiple use. The participants also revealed that assessing students on Blackboard is a very serious challenge because they are not experts on this platform as noted below:

Blackboard is still a problem for some of us because I have uploaded lectures as instructed by the university but there are many other things that one needs to know about it before being an effective and efficient teacher vis-à-vis his/her students. We don't even know how we shall assess and grade students on this platform. When I think of this, it gives me sleepless nights. What a frustrating experience!

I am not really pleased with this emergency remote teaching and learning because we have not been adequately trained to use the platform. It is a frightening experience not only to us as educators but to our students as well. How do our final year students collect data for their research projects, which were supposed to have been completed by now [July 2020]? Internship for final year students hangs in the balance. There are many unanswered questions.

Subtheme 2: Few students accessing lectures on Blackboard

Another subtheme that emerged from the discussions with educators was that very few students were accessing lecture notes since they began uploading them in April 2020. Some of the reasons for this were linked to the challenges faced by most students and these include poor internet connectivity and a lack of access to laptops and data bundles among others. One participant reported:

We have uploaded all materials on the Blackboard but every week when I check, I see only very few students accessing them. What must we do to help the situation? I am worried that the vast majority of students are left behind despite the slogan that 'no student will be left behind'. The first 33 percent of students have come onto the campus as instructed by the Department of Higher Education and Training but the mode of lecture delivery remains remote and it is worrying, especially given the fact that these students have not been trained on Blackboard. If we are struggling, what more of these students, many of whom are from poor socio-economic backgrounds?

Theme 3: Extent to which social work education can be successful during COVID-19 pandemic

The first theme that emerged was that social work education can be successful if only students and staff are trained and provided with the remote learning gadgets and data bundles. The other theme was that they (educators) were waiting for the way forward from their professional council as well as association. These subthemes are presented below.

Subtheme 1: If only students and staff are trained and provided with the remote learning gadgets and data bundles, social work would be successful to an extent

Most of the responses from the educators and students were negative. However, they shared that if all students and staff were to be properly trained on the use of Blackboard as well as provided with remote learning gadgets and data bundles, things could be better. One student said:

We need laptops and data bundles that were promised. If this is provided to all of us, we can also talk of training us on how to use and interact on Blackboard. This might help a bit though I am still worried how we shall complete our internship as well as collect data for our research projects which are all requirements. We need to know whether these will be waived or wait until coronavirus disappears before we embark on them. This would mean that we can only continue with them in 2021 and I want to work and help my family that is poor.

An educator shared:

For social work education to be successful, the university must train students on how to use and access Blackboard as well as all the staff members. We have been trained but the training is very inadequate because we can't interact with students nor can we assess and grade them using the platform. We still find these very challenging.

Subtheme 2: *Way forward awaited from the South African Council for Social Service Professions and Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions*

Some educators shared that for social work education to be successful during this COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary for the South African Council for Social Service Professions and the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions to provide some guidance on the way forward for social work education in South Africa. This was particularly with respect to final year students who were expected to complete their fieldwork training for six months. The students were also expected to collect data from community members for their research projects. The participants suggested that this collaboration could be initiated by the council.

DISCUSSION

COVID-19 has highlighted the inequalities in South African universities. It was found that although some previously white universities are already far ahead with emergency remote teaching and learning, rural-based universities such as the one where this study was conducted are still behind. Many of the students interviewed are from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited access to basic services and findings reveal that COVID-19 has exacerbated their situation. These students come from poor socioeconomic backgrounds (Tangwe, Tanga, & Tanyi, 2015), rural areas or places with limited or no access to student support services, which the findings have portrayed. These authors highlight the fact that many students from poor socio-economic backgrounds are faced with distinctive problems that need interventions. According to Statistics South Africa (2019), the country is recognised as one of the utmost unequal countries in the world and the Eastern Cape is the most unequal province in the country. It is therefore important to acknowledge the impact of lockdown on these disadvantaged groups of students. In light of the above, Corrado (2020) explains that COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the inequalities plaguing societies especially black students.

This paper was hinged on the theory of social exclusion. The findings show that these students seem to have been excluded from a variety of settings including education, material and other social rights. Consequently, as the theory holds, these students are facing social exclusion because they have been denied access to opportunities that can help alleviate their deprivation as aptly pointed out by the University of Ottawa (2015). The findings also corroborate what Jehoel-Gijsbers and Vrooman (2007) explain as an intersection of inadequate access to social rights, low levels of participation and little or no standard integration as well as material deficiency. Tatum (2020) was right when he asserts that the move to online learning has exposed the disparities in education that are tied to race and wealth. As the pandemic continues to spread in South Africa, educators and students are forced to transition to online learning which has aggravated the gap between those who have access and who don't have access to digital devices (Shakya et al, 2020).

The findings of this paper are in consonance with those of Mthethwa (2020), who shares the view that institutions of higher learning resumed online lessons despite the fact that most of the students are facing a number of challenges that include a lack of enabling learning environments. Corrado (2020) explains how lockdown has further disadvantaged students from marginalised communities. Most of them come from backgrounds where they live in overcrowded homes with a number of generation occupants, a number of them have family responsibilities that hinder their study at home while others have little or no support from family members. Furthermore, the findings are similar to those of the Black Caucus at UCT (2020) that reported that black students lack studying places, sufficient access to electricity and food as well as access to online technologies. All of these tie to the social exclusion theory as these students are socially excluded from actively participating in education that is a key to their livelihood. In previously disadvantaged universities the demands of remote learning have underscored inadequate financial resourcing, a lack of infrastructure as well as the academic staff's insufficient exposure to multimodal teaching and learning (Segar, 2020). These are some of the predicaments of social work educators and students at the university where this study was conducted. Li and Lalani (2020) contend that there are various challenges that need to be overcome and COVID-19 has completely upset an education system that is already losing its relevance.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Eastern Cape Province embodies most of the marginalised South African communities. One of the consequences of COVID-19 is that it has magnified and exposed inequalities that are deeply entrenched in South Africa. In addressing the issue of remote teaching and learning, the Department of Higher Education and

Training failed to consider the semi-functional or rural-based universities that were previously disadvantaged given their limited resources and insufficient infrastructure. The Minister's constant reminder to everyone that 'no student will be left behind' is a far-fetched dream for some students like the participants who were part of this study. COVID-19 not only underscored the inequalities entrenched in South Africa's society, it further marginalised students from disadvantaged communities. Also, the country is faced with some 'real social justice issues' regarding disadvantaged students. The problem of social work students (final year) is compounded by their inability to complete block fieldwork placement as well as to complete their research projects. Therefore, it can be concluded that the present emergency remote teaching and learning might be a recipe for disaster for social work education within this university in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa, if measures are not put in place to mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19.

It is therefore recommended that all social work students and educators should be properly trained on the university emergency remote platform (Blackboard). Secondly, the procurement of laptops and data bundles should be fast-tracked and provided to all students to ensure that they begin trials on using the Blackboard. Thirdly, social work educators could provide data to final year students to complete their research projects and/or advise on the use of secondary materials or documentary analysis as a data collection method since face-to-face interviews are impossible during COVID-19 lockdown. Final year students could undertake their field work by completing some hours at a field agency and some hours off-site (assignments) in collaboration with the agency and their department of social work. They could work with low risk client populations like caring for children out of school. Flexible arrangements are recommended depending on whether a student is low, medium or high risk. All arrangements should be done with the agency's safety protocols in mind. Finally, the professional council and the association should step forward with general guidelines for all departments of social work in South Africa so that all are on the same page. This is an essential collaboration with these key stakeholders that are needed at this time of the pandemic and lockdown.

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