# Challenges confronting students during Covid-19: Insights from social workers at a university of technology

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**ABSTRACT**

University students were regarded as a vulnerable population as they not only had to endure significant levels of mental health problems and financial distress, but also academic challenges in the transition to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. Hence, the tumultuous nature of the pandemic and consequent sheltering as well as other disruptions placed an enormous burden on students. Using qualitative research methodologies, this study sought to explore the challenges faced by students through the lens of social work interns who were placed at a university of technology during the pandemic. Using purposive sampling to recruit the practitioners, the study explored what support measures were necessary to enhance the well-being of students during the pandemic. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. The study found that students encountered an array of psychological problems, together with experiences of stigma and isolation whilst in quarantine, which led the sample to call for the reconstruction of the university space into a more supportive one.

**KEYWORDS**
*Academic challenges, Covid-19, stigma, financial distress, higher education, mental health, student affairs, student experience*

**RÉSUMÉ**

Les étudiants d'université étaient considérés comme une population vulnérable, car ils devaient non seulement faire face à des niveaux élevés de problèmes de santé mentale et de détresse financière, mais aussi relever des défis académiques lors de la transition vers l'apprentissage en ligne pendant la pandémie de Covid-19. Ainsi, la nature tumultueuse de la pandémie, les mesures de confinement et les perturbations qui en ont découlé ont imposé un fardeau énorme aux étudiants. Cette étude, qui s'appuie sur des méthodologies de recherche qualitative, visait à explorer les défis auxquels les étudiants ont été confrontés à travers le regard de stagiaires en travail social affectés à une université de technologie pendant la pandémie. L'étude a utilisé un échantillonnage raisonné pour recruter les praticiens, et a exploré les mesures de soutien nécessaires pour améliorer le bien-être des étudiants pendant la pandémie. Les données ont été collectées via des entretiens semi-structurés et une analyse thématique a été effectuée. L'étude a révélé que les étudiants ont rencontré un ensemble de problèmes psychologiques, ainsi que des expériences de stigmatisation et d'isolement pendant la quarantaine, ce qui a conduit les participants à demander la reconstruction de l'espace universitaire en un espace plus favorable au soutien.

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## Introduction

With the outbreak of Covid-19, university students worldwide endured the full wrath of the pandemic. Reflecting on the impact of the pandemic on university students globally, Zhai and Du (2020) report that they experienced depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and other behavioural difficulties linked to poor sleeping and stress eating, which threatened their academic progress and mental health in a myriad of ways. The pandemic rapidly spurred new ways of life, including the quarantining of entire communities, closure of educational institutions, social isolation, and shelter in place orders which consequently disrupted the lives of many students at higher education institutions. Moreover, in South Africa the pandemic exacerbated human rights violations and coalesced into widespread job losses, unemployment, and starvation (Kunene, 2020; Breakfast, 2020), which disadvantaged students even further. The closure of universities also created additional uncertainties in education and compelled pedagogical innovations that involved technology and simulation based teaching, which included online lectures, video case vignettes, virtual simulators, webcasting, and online chat rooms (Sahi et al., 2020). Students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, who were more likely to encounter network connectivity issues, experienced greater disruption in their teaching and learning (Landa et al., 2021).

The pandemic birthed a multitude of studies related to how Covid-19 transformed the higher education landscape globally (Crawford & Cifuentes-Faura, 2022; Mohamed et al., 2022). Whilst some research has been done, to the researcher's knowledge, there is no study to date that has explored the experiences of social workers in a university context during the Covid-19 pandemic. Much of the current research has focused on the mental health consequences for students (Kaparounaki et al., 2020). Kaparounaki et al. (2020) also investigated the psychological impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on students. An online survey revealed that 70.5%, 53.6 % and 47.8% of Egyptian students had experienced depression, anxiety, and stress, respectively. It further showed that being female; having a relative or acquaintance infected with Covid-19; having a pre-existing chronic disease; and lacking psychological support from family, community, and university increased the risk of depression, anxiety, and stress amongst Egyptian students. The researchers therefore suggested that the mental health of university students should be carefully monitored, and that universities should provide psychology-oriented services adapted to these circumstances to mitigate its emotional impact on the students (Ghazawy et al., 2021).

In another study in Bangladesh with 15,543 university students, 44.59% were found to present with severe anxiety, 48.41% with moderate anxiety, and 3.82% with mild anxiety (Dhar et al., 2020). Amongst the pandemic-related stressors, students were concerned about economic influences during and after Covid-19, as well as academic delays and the lack of social support during the pandemic, which were all positively

correlated with the level of anxiety. These researchers therefore argued for proper support and monitoring of students presenting with mental distress (Dhar et al., 2020).

Other studies examined the impact of Covid-19 on education. Kedraka et al. (2020) noted that the pandemic presented an opportunity for universities to improve the use of digital tools for an enhanced learning experience. They argued that this should be supported through investment in digital infrastructure for improving distance learning in higher education. Hands-on or practice-based learning constitutes the foundational objective of postgraduate teaching and training. Skilled and competent postgraduate medical students are critical to a country's health needs, particularly within the context of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst the pandemic has offered new learning modes like teleconsultation, videoconferencing, virtual simulations, and digital podcasts, the extent to which actual knowledge transfer and skill gain can be achieved through these mediums is unknown (Patil et al., 2021).

## Theoretical framework

This study used Lee et al.'s (2009, p. 43) integrative body-mind-spirit model as its guiding theoretical framework. This model is premised on the notion that the physical, psychological, and spiritual facets of a person are interlinked. Hence, within each person, the "domains of behaviour, thought, feeling, sensation, value morality, meaning, intuition, spirituality, body and functioning are all interrelated in a connected web and are not regarded, as separate domains of the human experience". As such, each person is viewed as a complex, holistic, and multidimensional being, where the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of a person are indivisibly interrelated with each other. In addition to recognising the interdependence, mutuality, complementarity and interrelatedness of contrasting forces and phenomena, it "promotes a holistic perspective in understanding human experience and change" (Lee et al., 2009, p. 43).

One of the most important principles underpinning this model is that it "assumes that fundamental to health, mental health, and the well-being of individuals" is the dynamic balance of and interrelationship between mind, body, and spirit (Lee et al., 2009, p. 44). The proponents of this model describe the *physical body* as physical strength, body functioning, and as physiological responses, and they describe the *mind* as mood, emotional well-being, problem-solving ability, will power, etc. *Spirituality* is described as meaning making, values, and a relationship with a higher being and a connectedness with others.

All these aspects are important to students as they focus not only on their physical wellness during the pandemic but also how students cope emotionally with the various stressors brought about by the pandemic. Moreover, it focuses on their relationships with family and friends and how these affected their well-being and ability to cope during the pandemic. Spirituality within the context of this study focused on the students' ability to tap into their spiritual resources and strengths to cope. This model was therefore appropriate to study the bio-psycho-social issues confronting students during the pandemic. It also sensitised the researcher into awareness of the multidimensional issues confronting students during this time, over and above their academic difficulties.

## Methodology

### Research design

This study utilised a qualitative exploratory research design, along with a reflexive thematic analysis approach. The study sought to obtain rich descriptive information from the social work interns with regards to how the Covid-19 pandemic impacted students' experiences.

### Research setting

The study was conducted at a university of technology in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa.

### Sample and sampling

Participants were selected using non-probability, purposeful sampling methods. The participants were recruited from a pool of 15 social work interns specifically placed at the university of technology to provide support to students during the pandemic. Eleven participants took part in the study.

### Data collection

A qualitative approach using in-depth interviews allowed the researcher to extract information about the experiences of social work interns participating in the study. Data were collected using semi-structured in-depth interviews, but only after permission from the Durban University of Technology's Institutional Research Ethics Committee was received. After receiving written informed consent from the participants, online interviews were conducted in October 2021 to adhere to Covid-19 restrictions. An interview guide consisting of a set of predetermined questions was used to facilitate the semi-structured interviews with the participants (Greeff, 2011).

### Data analysis

A reflexive thematic analysis as outlined by Braun et al. (2020) was used to guide the analysis of the data. Following the transcription of the data, the participants' statements were inductively coded. Member checking was undertaken to safeguard accuracy. This consisted of short sentences and initial discursive themes, which ensured that the identified themes and patterns are strongly linked to the data itself. The themes were derived through a process of reading and rereading as well as reflecting on relevant literature on the topic. This process allowed the researcher to make sense of collective meanings and experiences and link the identified themes and patterns with the data itself (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

### Trustworthiness

To establish rigour and achieve trustworthiness, the principles of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were utilised for data verification. Verbatim quotes were included to support the validity of the data. Member checking was conducted following the transcription of the data, giving the participants the opportunity to confirm the accuracy of the results. An independent researcher verified the quality and completeness of the transcripts. Transferability was

enhanced by providing a detailed description of the study's procedures. Finally, an audit trail was kept to facilitate the data analysis process.

## Results

### Theme 1: Effects of the pandemic on students

A significant issue that emerged in the data was the academic difficulties experienced by the students. The participants reported that students had difficulty transitioning to online learning. This was confirmed as follows:

> Students are coming to me because their grades dropped because now they are studying at home, they feel like studying at residence is better than studying at home. There is so much that they have to do at their homes, and they saw a drop in their grades because of the online system that was introduced at the university. (SW1)

> Especially with online studying, there was this one student who said her results were bad. (SW6)

As evidenced in the data, students experienced challenges studying at home. This was mostly due to unconducive environments or the lack of connectivity, which affected the online learning process, and consequently, they saw a drop in their grades. The literature also mirrors the disruption created by the introduction of digital learning methodologies, where the transition from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning created a new and challenging experience for students and academics (Subedi et al., 2020). Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021) also highlighted multiple issues that emerged, such as the weakness of online teaching infrastructure, information gaps, and unconducive home and learning environments. Consequently, as the current study found, students had to grapple with the stress of poor academic performance due to a new way of learning.

Another participant opined that the students from more disadvantaged communities struggled with the lack of resources at home, particularly access to laptops.

> Some of them were complaining that they don't have laptops as they used the school['s] resources to get their work done. (SW8)

Those who tested positive for Covid-19 while on campus endured other struggles related to having to isolate on campus. The social workers said:

> Students were stressed that they can't continue with their academic work due to them being isolated, because they can't go out, they can't have visitors, they can't have access to anyone, they just don't have access to anything. (SW6)

> She was concerned with finishing the isolation process and then getting back to school and just continuing with her academic work. (SW8)

Other universities have also reported that they had to become involved in strategies such as the control of Covid-19-related infection through effective contact tracing, quarantining and, where needed, hospitalization procedures (Lopman et al., 2021).

Research undertaken by Patsali et al. (2020) with university students in Greece found a horizontal increase in scores, namely: 42.5 % for anxiety, 74.3 % for depression, and 63.3% for suicidal thoughts. They added that whilst the acute effects are clear, the long-term consequences are unknown and require attention. These authors concluded that such studies provide a strong message that vulnerable populations, which includes students, are in need of specific interventions targeting mental health issues.

In another study conducted by Konstantopoulou and Raikou (2020), university students reported increased symptoms of depression, with their mental health being affected more significantly in situations requiring quarantining. Concluding that it was critical, these authors asserted that the university therefore provide adequate psychological resources to help strengthen and support the students who are struggling. Furthermore, Chen and Lucock (2022) mentioned that of the 1,173 students surveyed in the north of England, more than 50% experienced clinical cut-off levels in terms of anxiety and depression. Based on their findings, they called for long-term monitoring and mental health support for university students.

Other students were found to be experiencing financial distress. In this regard, the social workers commented:

> *There are many disadvantaged students; their parents or guardians have been retrenched due to Covid. So it basically impacts on the finances of the students. (SW3)*

> *Some parents have been retrenched due to Covid; I saw retrenchment, and financial distress, and loss of family members. (SW7)*

> *In terms of how they and the university responded, the social workers said:*

> *We catered for those students that come from disadvantaged homes and provided food vouchers to those students. (SW2)*

> *The main problems she had was food; she had nothing, so I had to refer her to Pakimpilo for food vouchers. So the psychologist who provided help … and we did some follow up to see if she is okay. (SW4)*

> *They want to receive help as soon as possible. So I would think that the programme that would help them quickly is a programme that has like food solids … like food parcels, not necessarily vouchers, something they can go home with. (SW6)*

Research done by Lederer et al. (2021) also confirmed that university students faced increasing housing and financial insecurity and distress. Additional challenges included a lack of social connectedness and sense of belonging, along with uncertainties about their future which threatened their academic performance and well-being. They argued that Covid-19 exacerbated inequalities for disadvantaged students and therefore recommended that universities prioritise student support services to assist these students.

Galanza et al. (2021), in their study of Filipino university students, found that whilst the fear of Covid-19 had affected the students' mental health, their financial distress was

more strongly correlated with their negative mental health. As such, they recommended that mental health services address the financial difficulties experienced by students and their families. Jin (2020) supported this, saying that students with financial difficulties are prone to isolation and depression, and that low-income underrepresented students endure greater stressors at home due to scarcities in terms of basic needs such as food. She added that many have additional household responsibilities which include childcare and financial support. The plight of these students deeply reflects the South African scenario. Consequently, universities have begun collaborating with faith-based organisations (FBOs) to provide virtual group psycho-educational services (Jin, 2020).

**Theme 2: Stigmatisation of students who were Covid-19 positive**
Participants also indicated that many students who had tested positive for Covid-19 were being stigmatised. In this regard, they said:

> There is a lot of stigma … there isn't anyone to help her and people are scared to go to her room. (SW6)

> So once the student tested positive for Covid-19, some of the other students became aware of this, and then they started ostracising her. (SW8)

> Students told me that they feel isolated; they were marginalized. Other students stayed away, and they feared their reactions. (SW9)

One participant pointed out that even if a student became unwell for reasons unrelated to the coronavirus and required hospitalization, some students assumed that they had Covid-19:

> The university would organise an ambulance, and they were fetched by the ambulance when sick; others just thought they have coronavirus … it was exaggerated … even if they weren't positive, they have to endure a lot of discrimination. (SW1)

As reflected in the above excerpt, the students experienced discrimination even if they did not test positive. As shown below, another participant expressed that those who had no food were also stigmatised.

> They were afraid of being stigmatised. I could see that students were afraid to even say that 'I am hungry'. There is this programme, this was helping students who were found to have no food, but they were afraid to say, 'I don't have anything', because [the] other students would laugh at you and call you poor. Can you imagine Covid-19 … They were afraid to disclose. (SW4)

It was also evident that those who had loved ones who were infected by Covid-19 were also discriminated against. One participant said:

> Students stay together in residences … maybe if they find out if the students were infected with Covid, and maybe a family member may have passed away from Covid … so I think maybe it happens … that they feel like the students might be positive, or maybe if a family

> *member had passed away due to Covid, then they are also at risk of being infected from Covid due to interacting with the students or being around the students. (SW10)*

Bhattacharya et al. (2020, p. 383) echoed the emergence of significant stigma, "othering", prejudice, and blame of those infected or those whose loved ones have been infected. There is a growing body of evidence suggesting that stigma associated with Covid-19 is a major source of mental distress, such as stress, anxiety, and depression, with serious implications for well-being (Peprah & Gyasi, 2020; Bao et al., 2020). Peprah and Gyasi (2020, p. 1) affirmed that those discharged from quarantine and self-isolation experience stigmatisation and the associated drastic negative impacts on their mental health, whilst Gyasi (2020) described the occurrence of community rejection and self-isolation.

Individuals who were infected and have recovered are often socially avoided and discriminated against when they return home, leading to a decrease in support. In fact, as Poudel and Subedi (2020, p. 751) said, stigma can negatively affect clients searching for medical care at a time when they are at their most vulnerable.

### Theme 3: Reconstructing the university space

#### Sub-theme 3.1: Caring for those quarantined

In terms of sub-theme 3.1, the participants expressed the following:

> *I don't think a student should quarantine at the residence, and no one does a follow up to find out if the studen[t] is okay. (SW4)*

> *The university can check up on them ... we are employed as social workers to check up on those people, but others should go see them. They felt lonely, like they were thrown away. You know, I don't know if I'm putting in the right words, but they felt like they were abandoned, like they were just put there, like nobody really cares. That's how they felt. (SW1)*

#### Sub-theme 3.2: Controlling the spread of the virus

Other participants suggested ways to manage the spread of the virus, giving rise to sub-theme 3.2. They said:

> *I also don't think that it's a great idea if those infected are meeting other students; it's exposing other students to infection. If a student who is suspected to have Covid-19 is quarantined in a nearby space as others, you know students, they don't adhere to any rules. (SW11)*

> *The blended learning should continue; students attending university should therefore also continue with online learning. (SW3)*

> *Start by putting sanitisers where students are … sometimes there are no sanitisers in most places in other classrooms, like even residence there were no sanitisers. (SW4)*

The participants also expressed concern regarding quarantine procedures, suggesting that not all students are compliant. One participant said it was important that quarantine facilities be at a distance from social or housing areas as students are often tempted to continue their social interactions. Another proposed that online learning should continue, as there is the possibility that there may be future waves. There was also the suggestion to use sanitisers to ensure hygiene control at all times. These strategies require behavioural change such as social distancing, hygiene, and the wearing of masks during periods where there are peaks in incidences of infection, all of which have proven to reduce the transmission of viral infections (Assab & Temime, 2016).

Furthermore, university librarians reported that the digital divide, lack of digital literacy skills, and slow internet speeds were the major barriers and reasons for the poor use of the library's online resources and web portals (Rafiq et al., 2021).

**Theme 4: Support groups for students**
The participants also suggested the importance of ongoing support groups to help students who had lost loved ones during the pandemic. This was particularly important due to the high death toll and the often rapid infection-to-death timeline for some of the infected in the early days of the pandemic, during which loved ones could not support their infected family members through or make peace with the deterioration of their health due to measures to prevent infection. In this regard, the participants responded:

> *The more you get to talk about your grief, the more it becomes easy, sharing your stories, realising that other people have experienced the same thing that you had experienced does make [it] more bearable, and I think having a group because most people lost their mothers, their fathers, their aunties, and having a group were discussing grief, discussing how Covid-19 has affected them, I think that it will be most helpful. (SW4)*

> *I would say just teach students on how to support other people who have lost a family member … I think psychosocial well-being of people is the most important thing. (SW8)*

> *I think a support group for those who want to talk, because I think they haven't healed, being infected with coronavirus and being a survivor of coronavirus, I think it's something huge. I think we can implement support groups of people who have lost a loved one(s) and those students who have survived. (SW1)*

> *Counselling, when dealing with such an illness or virus, having someone to talk to, could be beneficial, and having people around the person who knows about the situation of the person – of being infected –, understanding, and not judging or stigmatising them or ostracising them. It really could help. (SW4)*

Other participants mentioned the need for educational groups as follows:

> *Put similar cases together, of those students who are infected with Covid, and then for the social workers to do follow ups on the students who were infected, so students can get more support, or find out maybe if there were any issues that they faced and then social workers can attend to those issues or challenges, so they can better support students who were infected. (SW3)*

> *I think there should be educational groups … we should tell them there shouldn't be any form of stigma towards those students. We should teach the other students how to treat infected students. (SW5)*

As indicated above, one important facet of these groups should be to reduce the stigmatisation of those infected and to provide them with greater support.

### Theme 5: A university-wide programme to assist students

There were several suggestions that emerged from the data with regards to strategies that the university could implement to assist students. The first one related to webinars to deal with Covid-19-related anxiety and other student-related mental health difficulties.

> *We have seen a lot of webinars or programmes that talk about how can you get Covid-19, but it's not on, based on, your mental health at that time … you don't know what to do if you [are] having anxiety. (SW7)*

Another participant proposed that research be undertaken to ascertain what challenges students faced and what potential programmes the university could implement to assist them both at the university and at home.

> *Research where we go to different departments, find out what issues they have and what programmes can be developed based on what we found out from those departments …. Basically, how to deal with Covid, not only at the university but also at home, [at] residences, and maybe activities they can develop at residences to help them deal with Covid-19-related problems. (SW9)*

In addition to these suggestions, writers such as Pownall et al. (2022) proposed that universities assist students to reacclimate to academic work following a period of extended educational disruption, as well as support those who are still suffering the mental health effects of the pandemic, whilst remaining sensitive to the inequalities of educational provision that disadvantaged students have endured. These are important considerations in reconstructing the university space.

Another participant drew attention to the need for a toll-free line:

> *I think if we could have a toll-free line where people can call. Who are in need of social services like they did on gender-based violence. I think that could help. If people could have a number that is free that they can call to communicate with social work[ers] so that they can get the services. (SW4)*

Jin (2020) also supported the need for establishing psychological counselling and promoting good living habits to enhance the mental health of university students. Liu et al. (2020), on the other hand, argued for universities to have walk-in/drop-in virtual care options, as well as accessible virtual group therapy. These are important considerations as a way forward as the mental health burden of the pandemic may have lingering effects.

## Conclusion

This study highlighted the plight of students at a university of technology during the Covid-19 pandemic, focusing on some of the strategies that mental health professionals considered important in reconstructing the university space amidst the pandemic. Education, student support networks, the prevention of stigma and discrimination, and the provision of ongoing psychological support emerged as critical factors in ensuring that students coped with the educational and mental health challenges brought about by the pandemic. Given that several new variants of the virus have emerged, universities must be better prepared to deal with the myriad of challenges that may unfold.

### Ethics statement

The study received full approval from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC 176/20) in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the Durban University of Technology.

### Potential conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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