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Lifelong Learning among Students in the Context of COVID-19: A Case Study of the SADC Region

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 has disrupted the process of teaching and learning across the globe, posing significant challenges to educational institutions worldwide. Some universities in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region faced difficulties in transitioning to online learning, which adversely affected students' academic progress. The pandemic intensified the existing inequalities in the SADC region, further marginalising students from disadvantaged backgrounds and impeding their access to quality education. However, despite the adverse effects of COVID-19 on traditional contact-based learning, students managed to acquire a new set of skills necessary for navigating the digital age. Moreover, the pandemic presented opportunities for students in the SADC region to develop essential skills for participation in the mainstream economy. This study examines how COVID-19 disrupted students' academic development, and the lessons that students learnt during the pandemic in the SADC countries, with a special focus on South Africa and Zimbabwe. The study concludes by highlighting the interventions adopted by higher education institutions in the SADC region to support students in the context of COVID-19. Methodologically, this study employed secondary data analysis, including policies and existing literature. The findings reveal that students learnt new and innovative ways of studying during the pandemic. This study is underpinned by the self-directed learning theory, which emphasises the importance of self-reliance among students. An important recommendation concerns implementing policies within SADC to promote lifelong learning among students, both during and after COVID-19. In addition, the study proposes that higher education institutions establish tech-innovation hubs on campuses, where students can interact and acquire new skills needed in the digital age.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; higher education; lifelong learning; student support; SADC.

INTRODUCTION

Late in 2019, a coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic emerged in Wuhan City, China (Budiningsih *et al.*, 2020). Due to its seriousness, the World Health Organization declared it a global pandemic requiring urgent attention to protect humanity (World Health Organization, 2021). To contain the rapid spread of the disease, 215 countries had to shut down face-to-face education, according to Alam and Tiwari (2021). The pandemic's disastrous impact on teaching and learning has indeed upended students' academic development across the globe (World Health Organization, 2020). Hodgeman et al. (2021) stated that students from poor countries, who were initially placed in lockdown at home during the pandemic, with no means to learn online, faced significant negative consequences. For students who could learn online, factors like uncertainty, staggering grief, and loss took a toll on their mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. The widespread impact of COVID-19 has created unique educational challenges in the SADC region. Therefore, the higher education sector of the SADC needs to intervene urgently to support students – both during and after the pandemic – and must implement measures to prevent future unforeseen global pandemics.

The outbreak of COVID-19 brought new ways of learning to the higher education sector and shifted the education paradigm to a techno-economic culture where students had to learn how to use online learning platforms (Gurukkal, 2020). However, this culture had a negative effect on students from developing countries such as South Africa since the majority of them come from a poor background with no access to the resources required to learn effectively and efficiently online (Chauke & Chinyakata, 2020). Some institutions of higher education could offer students the necessary support needed to learn from home. These institutions were able to enhance teaching and learning through various learning models, such as television channels and radio platforms during the COVID-19 lockdown (Huber & Helm, 2020). Hence, students and lecturers alike were introduced to a new way of teaching and learning.

Lifelong learning is a prerequisite for Sustainable Development Goal 4. Against this background, students should be able to embrace the culture of lifelong learning (Webb *et al.,* 2017). As Dichaba (2019:74) explained: "Lifelong learning is, therefore, an essential ingredient that ensures that every youth and adult in the world, specifically in South Africa, can access quality education in line with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for Africa". Similarly, the OECD (2021) argued that in the era of COVID-19, lifelong learning becomes a prerequisite for everyone, including students.

COVID-19 has further accelerated the transformation of our economy and the need for certain skills. The pandemic taught both students and elders that it is crucial to invest in lifelong learning in anticipation of future shocks and also acknowledged the power of strengthening partnerships with different stakeholders at community level (Romer, 2022). Lifelong learning in higher education can be enhanced by student support because it contributes immensely to the academic development of students (Shaheen et al., 2020). Student support is defined as the structural support that institutions of higher education offer students to enhance their academic

success (Darren, 2018). McCarthy (2020) pointed out that during the pandemic, global institutions of higher education played a significant role in mitigating the impact of COVID-19 on students by providing them with services to enhance their academic success, health, and wellbeing.

According to James and Thériault (2020), when transitioning from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider the interpersonal aspects of adult learning as a component of lifelong learning. As a case in point, students' age influenced lifelong learning during the pandemic. Adult students had to adapt quickly to upskill themselves digitally while worrying about the risk of losing their jobs (Lasby, 2020). In this regard. By implementing student-centred blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, both lecturers and students were assisted in embracing lifelong learning (Adinda & Mohib, 2020). Mbagwu *et al.* (2020) stated that the COVID-19 pandemic brought new educational dynamics to Africa, as it did to the rest of the world. As a result, students had the opportunity to nurture a positive attitude toward learning and to develop strategies to manage information that would improve their educational outcomes (Dube et al., 2022; 2023). As part of lifelong learning, students in the higher education sector had to learn the new language of COVID-19, including terms such as social distancing, flattening the curve, immunity, vaccinations, and the new COVID-19 variants (Lopes & McKay, 2020).

Limited research exists regarding the lessons learnt by students in the SADC region concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, with a special focus on South Africa and Zimbabwe. However, understanding how students coped with COVID-19 is crucial for enhancing their academic development. The aim of this study is to illuminate how COVID-19 disrupted the academic development of students and the lessons they learnt during the pandemic in the Southern African Development Community countries, with particular attention to South Africa and Zimbabwe. It also underscores the support provided to students by higher education institutions in the two countries during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The objective of this study is to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on students' academic development in Southern African Development Countries, with specific emphasis on South Africa and Zimbabwe, and to identify the lessons learnt by students during this disruptive period. The research questions that guided this study are: "What are the specific ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted students' academic development in Southern African Development Countries, particularly in South Africa and Zimbabwe?" and "What lessons have students in these countries learnt because of the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to their education?".

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study was informed by the self-directed learning theory, as the researcher examined the ways in which COVID-19 disrupted the academic development of students and the lessons learnt

by students in the SADC countries during COVID-19, with a special focus on South Africa and Zimbabwe, as well as the interventions adopted by the higher education sector to support students in the context of COVID-19. The self-directed learning theory was developed around the early 1970s and was pioneered by Malcolm Shepherd Knowles. According to Knowles (1975), the theory emphasises the importance of individuals taking full responsibility for their learning experiences rather than waiting for someone to teach them something. Therefore, the spirit of self-reliance is the most important component of the self-directed learning theory. By applying this theory, lifelong learning is fostered, resulting in enhanced production of knowledge among students. This study was supported by the self-directed learning theory to explain how students utilised self-directed learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and acquired a new set of skills that helped them navigate the academic years of 2019, 2020, and 2021 without significant setbacks. Students at higher education institutions were also able to take initiative in identifying their own learning needs as a result of self-directed learning. Mahlaba (2020) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic provided South African students with the opportunity to reflect on their learning needs while at home. It is crucial for students to become lifelong learners by applying the self-directed learning theory in order to enhance effective learning despite the negative effects of COVID-19 on the academic development of students in the SADC region. During the COVID-19 pandemic, students were able to acquire new technologies that prevented them from falling behind.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher utilised secondary data to gain insights into how COVID-19 disrupted students' academic development and the lessons learnt during the pandemic in the SADC countries, with a specific focus on South Africa and Zimbabwe. The study also emphasised the ways in which higher education institutions in the SADC region supported students amidst the challenges of COVID-19. This study involved a review of existing literature, policies, and programmes to understand the impact of the pandemic on students, their learning experiences, and the support provided by the higher education sector. Various sources such as policy documents, articles, and published materials were scrutinised, specifically targeting information related to the effects of COVID-19 on students, the response of the higher education sector, and lifelong learning during the pandemic. Criteria for inclusion of information encompassed its relevance to student support, academic development, and lessons learnt during COVID-19, while irrelevant material was excluded. The researchers accessed pertinent databases including Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, ResearchGate, and PubMed. In addition, they visited the websites of various universities in the SADC region, such as the University of Johannesburg and the University of Cape Town in South Africa, to gather information on responses to COVID-19. After collecting relevant data, the researcher initiated the analysis process, ensuring that the reviewed information aligned with the objectives of the study. This involved familiarising himself with policy documents, reviewing papers, and subsequently engaging in coding, theme development, and refinement, as well as defining and naming themes. In order to ascertain the validity and reliability of the secondary study, the researcher meticulously ensured the accuracy and relevance of the data employed vis-à-vis the research inquiry. Furthermore, employing a fundamental strategy entailed the rigorous cross-referencing of information, whereby the researcher consulted a multitude of reputable sources, including university websites and published articles germane to the research topic. Less than 60 previous studies on the topic were found in databases and 55 relevant studies were used in this study.

DISCUSSION OF SECONDARY DATA

Overview of COVID-19 pandemic causing disruption in the academic development of students in the higher education sector in the SADC region

According to Kotecha (2012), the higher education sector in the SADC region plays an important role in building human capital and promoting sustainable and equitable economic growth, hence enabling Africans to fully participate in the mainstream economy. Despite the progress made in educating citizens, however, the COVID-19 pandemic brought dire inequities that academics and students struggled to handle. To overcome these challenges, Africans need to collaborate and devise solutions to improve the higher education sector in the SADC region (Petesch, 2020). Some universities in the SADC were unprepared and lacked the resources to implement online learning, resulting in students staying at home and waiting for universities to provide instruction. This, in turn, affected students' academic development, leading to the loss of the academic year (Crawford et al., 2020).

A case study of South Africa

The higher education sector in South Africa is confronted with an uncertain future, including student protests as a result of the #FeesMustFall movement. Thus, the COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating effect on this sector in South Africa and further intensified inequality. This affected students' academic development (Wangenge & Kupe, 2020). According to Shay (2020), the higher education sector in South Africa is vulnerable in the context of the pandemic. This vulnerability caused some universities to become progressive by introducing online learning, while other universities failed to implement online education. The inequality is deepened by the fact that the students who were not able to study online were left behind. This, in turn, affected their academic development, since some of them were shy to engage with lecturers online compared to contact lecturers. According to Gumede and Badriparsad (2022), some students lacked the digital skills to use the online platform, while their domestic responsibilities at home also harmed their academic development. With the spread of COVID-19, the higher education sector in South Africa was at a standstill before the introduction of online learning (Van Schalkwyk, 2021).

Case study of Zimbabwe

The academic development of Zimbabwean students was severely disrupted by the nationwide lockdown resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Mukute et al. (2020),

postgraduate students who were deeply engaged in their research had to halt their work, particularly those involved in participatory action research, as travel restrictions made it impossible for them to move. Zinyemba et al. (2021) stated that Zimbabwean students residing in rural areas faced greater challenges in accessing online lessons compared to their urban counterparts due to inadequate infrastructure and basic resources that are essential for online learning. This disparity exacerbates inequality within Zimbabwe's higher education sector. According to the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (2020), only one out of five households in Matabeleland North and Matabeleland South had access to electricity, rendering online learning inaccessible to many students. This lack of access significantly affected Zimbabwean students' ability to participate in online lessons during the pandemic (Nyika & Motalenyane, 2023). Moreover, Hove and Dube (2021) observed that economic and skills challenges in Zimbabwe further hampered students' academic development. The government had insufficient financial resources to effectively implement online learning, and both lecturers and students lacked the digital skills necessary for its successful execution.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on lifelong learning in the SADC region

According to the Southern African Development Community (SADC) (2020), African and global institutions respectively, such as the African Development Bank and the World Bank, are committed to promoting lifelong learning among citizens in the SADC region to accelerate personal, cultural, social, and economic transformation. Considering this commitment, the SADC (2020) further indicated that the higher education sector plays a vital role in promoting lifelong learning. According to the United Nations (2015), lifelong learning can drive sustainable development goals in the SADC region. In addition, self-directed learning empowered by lifelong learning in higher education in South Africa is crucial for students' academic development, as Tadesse and Mulunye (2020) explained. However, this will require internet connectivity and digital facilities. The change in the educational context in African countries, such as South Africa, has accelerated the use of online learning. Students must adapt quickly and evaluate their learning approach independently – these requirements are essential for becoming lifelong or self-directed learners (Olivier, 2021). Students in the higher education sector in Africa require important skills – such as teamwork and self-directed learning – for global success, and lifelong learning can play a crucial role in acquiring these skills (Du Toit-Brits et al., 2021).

Case study of South Africa

In 2021 Donga, Roman, Adebiyi, Omukunyi, and Chinyakata conducted a study in South Africa that showed that a 30-year-old Ph.D. candidate in higher education had learnt the importance of good hygiene practices during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students became more aware of the importance of maintaining a clean environment, which has reduced the risk of contracting COVID-19, importantly, to protect their loved ones. Donga et al. (2021) further contended that pandemic allowed female students to do self-introspection. Thus, by staying at home and studying online due to the nationwide lockdown, students had the opportunity to self-reflect and discover their life purpose. The COVID-19 pandemic has further taught students to become

independent and to learn to do things on their own while appreciating life. As such, the pandemic has allowed South African university students to examine their learning needs while being at home (Mahlaba, 2020). These circumstances gave them the chance to reflect on their learning goals and what it would take for them to improve their chances of performing well in their studies with limited support from their lecturers. This self-reflection played a vital role in promoting self-taught learning habits among students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Final-year students at a South African university have developed a new set of skills in dealing with the challenges that COVID-19 has posed to their academic development. The newly developed skills include self-determination and self-preservation. These traits have given students the urge to take responsibility for their learning on their own (Singaram, Naidoo, & Singh, 2022). Singaram et al. (2022) further claimed that students were able to develop a collaborative learning network during the COVID-19 pandemic through the use of social media and by reaching out to other students for learning purposes. Even though some students claimed that their lecturers had never prepared them for online learning, this experience taught them significant lessons that had a positive impact on their learning ability (Maphalala *et al.,* 2021). The pandemic also enhanced their self-direction, accountability, and motivation. Thus, students became flexible and learnt to do things on their own with less guidance from academics. In addition, COVID-19 taught South African students to care for vulnerable groups. Moreover, students at the University of Johannesburg in South Africa, Gauteng, initiated a project to support homeless people by providing personal protective equipment such as face masks, sanitisers, female sanitary towels, as well as food parcels to the poor (UJ News, 2020).

Deveci (2022) posits that the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has propelled lifelong learning into the spotlight, prompting significant discourse within educational circles. This paradigm shift has been particularly pronounced within higher education, where students have demonstrated a decline in their use of adaptable learning strategies and their goal-setting behaviours, notably among female students. Consequently, the practice of goal setting has witnessed a downturn, attributed partly to students' preference for face-to-face interactions in planning their educational trajectories, a freedom curtailed by the transition to online learning which was necessitated by the COVID-19 crisis. Despite encountering technical challenges inherent in online learning modalities during the pandemic, certain cohorts of students have embraced this shift from traditional to online learning environments (Yanti, 2021). In the context of a developing nation such as South Africa, recent research conducted by Ntsobi et al. (2022) underscores the students' proactive response to the challenges posed by the pandemic. Notably, students have seized upon the opportunities afforded by online learning platforms during the COVID-19 era and have leveraged collaborative technologies to enhance their educational experiences. According to Galloway (2020) and Williamson and Hogan (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa has been perceived as a significant opportunity for reforming the deficient framework of higher education regarding lifelong learning (). A previous study corroborating the findings of this study (concerning the impact of lifelong learning on students amidst the COVID-19 pandemic) is the study conducted by Mahlaba (2020). Mahlaba's study unveiled that during the pandemic, students enrolled in higher education institutions in South Africa assumed ownership of their learning endeavours, engaging in the evaluation of their learning requirements and the establishment of academic objectives conducive to their success. Conversely, findings by Mokoena (2022) indicated a divergent trend among higher education students in South Africa during the pandemic, where a discernible negative disposition towards self-directed learning or the concept of lifelong learning emerged.

Case study of Zimbabwe:

According to Zinyemba *et al.* (2021), Zimbabwean students learnt how to use social media platforms such as WhatsApp for educational purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite their belief in traditional face-to-face learning as the optimal method, they continued to use social media for educational purposes. Consequently, the COVID-19 pandemic facilitated the acquisition of skills among Zimbabwean students in leveraging smartphones for educational purposes. Moreover, platforms like Facebook and WhatsApp served not only as sources of entertainment but also as tools for academic advancement. This underscores the transformative potential of new technologies during and after COVID-19 (Moyo, 2020). To effectively engage in online learning platforms, a combination of access to technological resources such as laptops and proficiency in digital skills is essential. Prior to the pandemic, many Zimbabwean students lacked these resources. However, the onset of the pandemic compelled students in Zimbabwe to acquire proficiency in using technological resources like laptops for educational purposes (Wahab, 2020).

Support from the higher education sector to students in the SADC region during the COVID-19 pandemic

In support of the government's call for a nationwide lockdown, the higher education sector in South Africa took responsibility for supporting students in the context of COVID-19 by sending them information through e-mails and making use of the universities' websites. The information included, but was not limited to, encouraging students to practise healthy behaviours such as social distancing, sanitising, mask-wearing, and avoiding public gatherings (Republic of South Africa, 2020). Institutions of higher education in South Africa played an important role during the COVID-19 pandemic in enhancing academic excellence by supporting students through advanced communication technologies such as Blackboard, Moodle, YouTube, and virtual reality (Mpungose, 2020).

Case study of South Africa

According to Sonn et al. (2021), the higher education sector in South Africa adopted HEIs' contingency plans, which intended to ensure that no student was left behind during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the HEIs' contingency plan objectives includes a recess period starting earlier than planned to decrease the possible infection among students. Some universities offered their students mental health support, while others provided student support mechanisms during the pandemic. However, students with disabilities were not given the

necessary support. Sithabile (2022) explains that there is a need for the development of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which is a framework that supports inclusive teaching and learning in higher education in South Africa. Previous studies by Hedding *et al.* (2020) and USAF (Universities South Africa) (2020) indicate that some universities in South Africa supported students during COVID-19 by providing them with devices (laptops) as well as data to ensure that they could participate in online learning. Additionally, some universities offered mental health support to students during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa (Banerjee, 2020). To reduce the cost of data to students, some universities in South Africa established partnerships with Vodacom to launch special bundles for students. This reduced the financial burden on students and enabled them to participate in online learning (Joosub, 2020). Furthermore, the Department of Student Affairs (2020) at the University of Cape Town provided care and support to UCT students with COVID-19-related symptoms.

Case study of Zimbabwe

As one of the poorest countries in the SADC region, Zimbabwe faced challenges in implementing effective online learning. Students in rural areas had no access to the internet. To overcome this issue, the Zimbabwean government and the higher education sector reached an agreement with the Zimbabwe Broadcasting Corporation (ZBC) during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of this agreement was to ensure that lessons could be delivered through radio stations (Gono, 2020). UNICEF (2020) also assisted Zimbabwean students who resided in areas with no radio signal by providing educational materials. According to Konyana and Motalenyane (2022), some lecturers at institutions of higher education used videos to deliver lessons, which were welcomed by students from urban areas who had access to connectivity. However, students from rural areas struggled to access these video lessons.

Policy implications

The higher education sector in the SADC region, with a special focus on Zimbabwe and South Africa, is in need of a policy that will tap into the strengths of students in order to enhance their academic development in the face of future pandemics. Student development units in higher education should establish a tech-innovation hub on campuses, where students can interact with one another and acquire a new set of skills needed in the digital age. The higher education sector, in partnership with various stakeholders in youth development, needs to reconsider community engagement to facilitate effective and inclusive lifelong learning among students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. The governments in the SADC region should collaborate with the private sector to ensure that the higher education sector begins implementing an effective strategy for distance learning and e-learning, thus ensuring that the teaching and learning process is not disrupted in the event of a future pandemic. Digital literacy, as a component of lifelong learning in the SADC, should be significantly enhanced, particularly among students enrolled in humanities and social sciences, to ensure that they are not left behind in the digital era.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study focused on highlighting the effect that the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic had on academic development in the SADC region, particularly in Zimbabwe and South Africa, as well as the lessons that students learnt during the pandemic. It also placed emphasis on the support provided to students by institutions of higher education. The self-directed learning theory was used in this study to underscore the importance of students taking full responsibility for their learning goals during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Research on students and lifelong learning during COVID-19 in the Southern African Development Community is still evolving. This significant area of study requires scholarly attention to propose policies and frameworks in the higher education sector that can encourage students to embrace the culture of lifelong learning. The techno-economic culture that is slowly replacing traditional teaching and learning methods in the higher education sector, courtesy of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, is here to stay. Therefore, role players in the higher education sector in the SADC region will have to rethink and reimagine the future of higher education. To achieve this, institutions of higher education need to capacitate staff and provide training for students to develop a new set of skills that will enable them to effectively engage in e-learning. Given the secondary nature of the present study, there is a need for a qualitative inquiry aimed at exploring the students' experiences pertaining to lifelong learning against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), particularly in the contexts of South Africa and Zimbabwe.

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