

Private Higher Education College Students' Experiences of Remote Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown implemented in March 2020 prompted South African higher education institutions to shift from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning. The sudden transition presented challenges for students in higher education institutions such as universities, but there is limited research examining the perceptions of students in private higher education colleges. Henceforth, this study explores the experiences of students of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in private higher education colleges located in Johannesburg, South Africa. Employing a qualitative approach, the study conducted semi-structured interviews with sixteen students from private higher education colleges. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse data. The findings indicate that private higher education college students encountered difficulties in navigating remote learning during the national lockdown due to the intersection of factors, including unstable internet connections and network issues, lack of dedicated study spaces, and insufficient communication and support from lecturers. This article contributes to the body of knowledge on the remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown by shedding light on private college students' experiences.

Keywords: COVID-19, lockdown, remote learning, students, private higher education colleges, Johannesburg.

Introduction

The rapid spread of COVID-19 around the world prompted the World Health Organisation (WHO) to declare COVID-19 a global pandemic (WHO 2020). In South Africa, the first case of COVID-19 was reported on 5 March 2020 in Durban (Kiewit et al. 2020; Stiegler and Bouchard 2020). Subsequently, the South African government announced a national lockdown in an attempt to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Some of the lockdown interventions adopted included social distancing, and a stay-at-home and work-from-home policy (Bayane 2020; Svongoro and Mudzi 2023; Muloiwa-Klenam et al. 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown disrupted many sectors including the education sector whereby schools, universities and private colleges had to halt physical operation (Muloiwa-Klenam et al. 2023). The physical closure of higher education institutions, for example, prompted the transition from face-to-face classes to remote teaching and learning. Remote learning, known as online learning, involves accessing learning materials and resources through the internet, enabling students to continue their studies remotely (Arkorful and Abaidoo 2014; Svongoro and Mudzi 2023).

While remote teaching and learning was a necessity for the continuation of the academic year, it was accompanied by challenges for students (Cranfield et al. 2021; Svongoro and Mudzi, 2023). Research focusing on public universities highlights that adapting to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for students, as some did not have the necessary resources such as laptops and data for online learning (Mhlanga and Moloi 2020; Svongoro and Mudzi 2023). Pokhrel and Chhetri add that students from poor or low-income families reported high absenteeism in online classes compared to those from middle and upper-class families (2021). Nevertheless, there is limited research examining the experiences of private higher education college students of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown. It is unclear whether private college students had similar challenges to university students with regard to remote learning. It is against this background that we explore private college students' experiences of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

This paper is guided by the primary research question: What are the students' experiences of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in private higher education colleges?

Literature review

The COVID-19 pandemic caused a disruption in South Africa's higher education sector (Leung and Sharma 2020; Bayane 2020; Svongoro and Mudzi 2023). This sector includes institutions of higher learning that are registered and recognised by the minister of higher education under section 69(d) and offer qualifications and programmes in accordance with the National Qualification Framework Act of 2008 (Act 67 of 2008) and the South African Qualification Authority Act of 1995 (DHET 2022). Institutions of higher learning consist of universities, which provide a range of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, engage in research, and participate in community engagement (DHET 2022). In contrast, private higher education colleges offer higher education with a more limited scope and range of operations, meeting the criteria for recognition as higher education colleges as prescribed by the minister of higher education under section 69(d) and chapter 7 of the Higher Education Act (DHET 2022). Universities and private higher education colleges differ in size, offerings, and access to funding; for instance, public universities are funded by government, whereas private higher education colleges are financed by private businesses or individuals (DHET 2022; SchoolGistSA 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to explore the experiences of students at private higher education colleges of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, as most research is primarily focused on university students (Leung and Sharma 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021; Muloiwa-Klenam et al. 2023).

According to Muloiwa-Klenam et al., the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted the declaration of a national state of disaster in South Africa, disrupted face-to-face classes resulting in the adoption of remote teaching and learning in higher education institutions (2023). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in most institutions of higher learning, students engaged in blended learning characterised by face-to-face classes and access of study material using learning management

systems such as Blackboard (Chisadza et al. 2021). The shift to remote teaching and learning therefore meant that students had to access study material, complete assessments and attend lectures online. Marongwe and Garidzirai (2021) and Muloiwa-Klenam et al. (2023), explain that remote teaching and learning was conducted through platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Blackboard. Remote teaching and learning included synchronous learning, which occurred in real time with live interaction or classes between the lecturers and students. Meanwhile, asynchronous learning involved non-interactive online platforms, such as recorded lessons that students could access at their convenience (DeMarchi 2023).

While remote teaching and learning was crucial in terms of saving lives and continuation of academics, but it was challenging for students (Matarirano et al. 2021; Wise and Bergner 2020; Krige 2020; Chisadza et al. 2021). Matli and Phurutsi (2023, pp. 973-974) explain that during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, students had to move back home and others, especially those residing in rural areas, did not have access to resources such as the internet and computers at home, unlike when at campus. The lack of access to necessary resources for remote learning therefore resulted in poor attendance of online classes (Leung and Sharma 2020; Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021; Moonasamy-Reddy and Mulliah 2022). Even for those who managed to attend, the poor network connection made it difficult for them to communicate with their lecturers during online classes (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021; Svongoro and Mudzi 2023).

Additionally, students lacked adequate study space since they often share rooms and communal areas with family members (Anciano et al. 2020). The lack of a dedicated study space adversely affected their academic performance, as they struggled to find a quiet environment to focus on their studies (Anciano et al. 2020; Muloiwa-Klenam et al. 2023). Moreover, the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns imposed additional responsibilities on students at home, such as caring for family members and managing household chores. Consequently, students faced considerable difficulties in balancing their academic obligations with their familial duties, as they had to prioritise their family responsibilities over their academic

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pursuits, resulting in a decline in their academic performance (Shin and Hickey 2020; Pillay et al. 2021; Muloiwa-Klenam et al. 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic also had a significant impact on the mental health of students. With the sudden shift to remote learning, students began experiencing various challenges, leading to increased levels of anxiety, stress, and feelings of being overwhelmed (Govender et al. 2021). One of the primary difficulties has been the need to adapt to various online platforms for remote learning, often with limited prior knowledge, which has added further stress to their already full plates (Leung and Sharma 2020; Govender et al. 2021; Muloiwa-Klenam et al. 2023). The transition to remote learning also resulted in decreased motivation to learn, as students had limited contact with their lecturers and peers (Moloiwa-Klenam et al. 2023). Additionally, simple questions that could have been easily resolved during in-person classes or breaks now required phone calls or text messages, leading to miscommunications and further frustration (Goyayi 2021).

Literature indicates that students from institutions of higher learning, such as universities, had a negative experience of remote learning due to issues such as lack of necessary resources

and the inability to balance school and family responsibilities. Nonetheless, there is a dearth of scholarly work on the experiences of private higher education college students of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. This study aims to empirically contribute to the body of knowledge by examining and identifying the similarities and differences between the remote learning experiences of private college students and university students. Additionally, we use intersectionality as a theoretical framework to explore how the intersection of multiple identities and issues shaped the remote learning experiences of private college students during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown.

Theoretical framework

Intersectionality, a theoretical framework introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw in the late 1980s, was utilised to understand private higher education college students' experiences of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Crenshaw coined intersectionality to address the shortcomings of feminist and anti-racist movements, which often overlooked the experiences of marginalised individuals (Crenshaw 1991). Intersectionality therefore argues that individuals' experiences are shaped by the fact that they are marginalised and are an intersection of multiple identities such as class, geographical location and others (Crenshaw 1991; Marstriper 2021; Bayane 2019). Intersectionality, a widely adopted theoretical framework, helps comprehend individuals' experiences (Crenshaw 1991).

In this study, intersectionality is used to analyse the experiences of private higher education college students with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. We argue that students' challenging experiences are shaped by the intersection of multiple issues, such as the lack of necessary resources (e.g., stable internet connection or data), the absence of a dedicated study space at home, and limited interaction or communication with lecturers. These factors collectively contributed to the difficulties faced by private college students during remote learning. Additionally, intersectionality helps us understand that geographical location also influenced students' experiences. For instance, some students who lived in rural areas reported

that their internet connection was unstable, which interfered with attending online classes during the pandemic. Therefore, intersectionality was a suitable theoretical framework for examining the experiences of private college students with remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown (Crenshaw 1991).

Methodology

This study used qualitative research to examine students' experiences and challenges with remote learning during COVID-19. This approach involved building connections with participants and allowed for deep insights into their experiences. It helped gather more information by encouraging participants to talk in-depth about the topic, capturing the complexities of their experiences, and providing a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by students during remote learning (Sarantakos 2005). The study was conducted in the City of Johannesburg, focusing on regions A and C, as these regions had a high concentration of colleges transitioning to remote learning during COVID-19 (Yes Media 2021; DHET 2022). One college was selected from Sunninghill in Region A and one from Randburg in Region C.

The study included 16 private college students, with an equal split of 8 males and 8 females, ranging between the ages of 18 and 35 years old. Participants were selected using a convenience technique where students were approached by students from private higher education colleges. Snowball sampling technique was also used as some of the interviewed participants referred researchers to their friends who were students, and they were then approached to be part of the study (Babbie 2021). To be eligible to participate in this study, participants had to attend the same college as the interviewed participants in either Region A or Region C, be between the ages of 18 and 35 years old, and had to have participated in remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gain insight into experiences of remote learning during the pandemic (Bless et al. 2013). All interviews were conducted virtually on Microsoft Teams, lasting 40-60 minutes, and recorded for transcription. Participants agreed to English as the interview language. The interview guide included open-ended questions (DeJonckheere and Vaughn 2019).

The data was analysed using thematic content analysis to identify themes and subthemes (Alhojailan 2012). This study adhered to the data analysis procedures as described by Rosenthal (2016, pp. 513-514), which involved transcribing, integrating, coding, thematising, and writing. Initially, interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams and transcribed within the same platform. The transcripts were carefully checked and corrected by comparing them with the recorded interviews. A detailed review of the transcripts was done to understand the information collected. The data was coded by identifying common concepts and colour-coding them. Common themes were then identified and colour-coded based on research aims and objectives. Each theme and subtheme were interpreted in the final step of the analysis process.

Researchers must anticipate and address ethical dilemmas that may arise during a study. To ensure ethical standards are met, University A's College Research Ethics Committee granted ethical clearance for this study. A person's right to make their own decisions, such as whether to take part in a study, is included in the concept of autonomy. There must be no forms of pressure or coercion used to encourage participation. Through the distribution of an information sheet and informed consent, the researcher in this study made sure that participants were fully informed about the study (Bless et al. 2014). The participant gave the researcher their verbal and written consent, allowing the researcher to sign the consent form on their behalf. Participants could withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences. The use of pseudonyms to identify participants further ensured their anonymity. The study's purpose and the secure storage of the data to preserve confidentiality were also explained to the participants.

Findings: Remote Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging due to intersectional issues (i.e., poor internet connection, lack of study space and limited communication from lecturers).

Upon the declaration of a national state of disaster and implementation of a national lockdown by the South African government, higher education institutions transitioned from face-to-face instruc-

tion to remote teaching and learning. This shift required students to adapt to learning remotely from home, but it came with challenges. Using intersectionality as a theoretical lens, this study identified multiple and interconnected issues to have contributed to challenges experienced by private college students regarding remote learning. These challenges included poor internet connectivity and network problems, a lack of suitable study environments, and limited communication between students and lecturers. Students in this study struggled with remote learning, unreliable internet connections and network issues, which affected their ability to attend classes and complete assessments. Moses, a private college student, said the following about remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic:

I really struggled with the internet connection when attending classes remotely. One big issue was all the load shedding happening throughout the day, which made it hard to stay connected for classes. When the power went out while I was taking a test, it was a nightmare because I had to scramble to buy more data, which I could not really afford. If you ran out of data, you get disconnected and have even more problems. It was just a mess (Moses 2023).

Moses describes remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic challenging due to multiple issues, firstly pinpointing internet connectivity as the primary obstacle that hindered his participation in online classes. He further elaborates on how power outages, known as loadshedding, negatively affected his internet connection and network, causing him to be occasionally disconnected from online classes and missing important lecture content. The instability of his internet connection also posed problems during tests and examinations, as he would experience random disconnections. Despite attempting to purchase data to mitigate these issues, he found remote learning to be a challenging task. Similar issues were reported by other students in this study, for instance, Nishaan said:

There were times when I did not have stable internet or data to connect to classes because I could not afford data and at other times my internet was very slow. When

the internet was slow, I had to wait for the internet to come back up and then go back to my lecture and say listen, I did not hear you. Please can you repeat yourself? (Nishaan 2023).

Moses and Nishaan's experiences shed light on the challenges private college students faced with remote learning. Nishaan also encountered difficulties due to unreliable network connectivity, resulting in slow internet speeds that hindered her ability to effectively communicate with lecturers. This communication lag led to instances where she struggled to hear her lecturers clearly, often needing information to be repeated. Nishaan sometimes could not afford to use her data for online classes, highlighting the financial barrier posed by the high costs of data and maintaining a stable internet connection. Adding to the multiple issues contributing to the negative experience of remote learning, participants in the study emphasised that geographical location was also an issue. For instance, some students were residing in rural areas where poor internet and network connectivity is a problem. Sizwe, a private college student living in a rural area, said:

Remote learning was extremely difficult for me because I stay in rural areas and there is a network problem. I did not attend classes and participate the same way as it was with face-to-face classes. This really affected me as a student and my academic performance also declined (Sizwe 2023).

Unlike Moses and Nishaan, Sizwe pointed out that remote learning was a challenge for students residing in rural areas due to severe network issues compared to those in urban areas. He recalled the benefits of face-to-face classes and explained how attending and participating in online classes was difficult due to poor internet connections. Consequently, inadequate internet access and lack of data resulted in students' low attendance and participation in online classes, ultimately affecting their academic performance.

In this study, private higher education college students also identified a lack of suitable study space and environment as a significant issue. A conducive study environment is crucial for academic success, enabling students to focus and maximise productivity by minimising distractions.

However, participants revealed that studying remotely at home posed difficulties due to the presence of others, leading to distractions. This is what Kamohelo said:

The home environment was not a well-constructed learning environment. The challenge that I experienced was that I could not study and do my schoolwork because I stay with my family, meaning that sometimes I was distracted by my parents and siblings in the house (Kamohelo 2023).

Kamohelo explains that the lack of a well-constructed learning environment at home posed significant challenges for him, hindering his ability to study effectively. Without a dedicated study space, Kamohelo found himself frequently distracted by family members, making it hard for him to focus on his studies and be productive. The contrast between Kamohelo's home environment and the college environment underscores the significance of having a suitable study environment. While private colleges attempted to provide students with the necessary resources and support to facilitate remote learning, the same cannot always be said for home environments. The distractions from family members hindered private college students from focusing on their academics. These sentiments were echoed by most participants in the study, who cited how distractions from parents and siblings adversely affected their academic performance.

Another factor contributing to the multiple issues identified by students during the COVID-19 pandemic was the limited communication and support received from lecturers in remote learning settings. In traditional face-to-face learning, students were accustomed to consistent and seamless interaction with their lecturers within the physical classroom. However, with the shift to remote learning, participants in this study expressed dissatisfaction with the reduced level of communication and support from lecturers. Seneliso, for example, shared her personal experience of interacting with lecturers during the pandemic. She stated:

You hardly had the opportunity to interact with lecturers. This is because lecturers had their own lives. The only time you will be able to get proper communication with lecturers

would be during the online lectures and this was very limited interaction with your lecturers. After that, you would just have to figure out things and learn on your own (Seneliso 2023).

Seneliso reflects on her interaction with lecturers during the period of remote learning as severely limited, which posed a significant obstacle for her. The lack of extensive communication and interaction with her lecturers proved to be challenging, especially since she was used to having unrestricted access to consult with them before the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, she had to dedicate additional time to grasp the module content on her own. Therefore, remote learning due to COVID-19 proved to be challenging for students in private colleges, as they received minimal support and communication from their lecturers. One could argue that support and communication from lecturers were crucial during remote learning as they would assist students, but students did not receive such support. Similarly, Matheko complained of minimal communication received from lecturers during remote learning. He said:

What was most challenging for me with regards to remote learning, was the little support and communication I received from my lecturers. Lecturers during this time were only available during online classes and it was difficult to ask a lot of questions because we are many as students needing the support. This really affected me because I was still used to having access to lectures but noticed that things have changed with online learning (Matheko 2023).

Matheko echoes Seneliso's sentiment regarding the minimal support and communication received from lecturers during remote learning. He describes how the shift to remote learning posed significant challenges for him due to the lack of access to lecturers compared to before the pandemic, which had a noticeable impact on his learning experience. This highlights that remote learning was particularly challenging for students in private colleges, as many expressed dissatisfaction with the limited support they received. These difficulties can be attributed to the fact that lecturers were also adjusting to remote teaching methods.

The findings therefore problematise remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and link it to the intersection of issues including the unreliable internet connections, no dedicated study space at home, residing in rural areas, and limited support received from lecturers. Students expressed that their internet connectivity was unstable, which hindered their ability to fully participate in online classes and occasionally caused them to miss important lectures. We therefore argue that this issue was exacerbated by private colleges' abrupt transition from in-person to remote learning, without providing adequate support such as data provision, forcing students to shoulder the financial burden themselves. Additionally, the absence of a suitable study environment also contributed to the challenges of remote learning. Students reported that they struggled to concentrate on their academics due to distractions at home. Lastly, students noted that they received minimal communication and support from their lecturers, which made remote learning even more challenging for them, as they were accustomed to the support provided during face-to-face classes and meetings.

Discussion

This study empirically contributes to the body of literature on the challenges specifically faced by private higher education college students with remote learning during the pandemic. While there are structural differences between private higher education colleges and universities, the findings of this paper build on the experiences of university students about remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021; Moonasamy-Reddy and Mullah 2022; Svongoro and Mudzi 2023; Muloiwa-Klenam et al. 2023). Research conducted among university students cited remote learning as challenging due to a lack of necessary resources, such as stable internet connections and adequate study spaces at home (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021; Svongoro and Mudzi 2023). This study similarly investigated and problematised remote learning during the pandemic among private college students and identified several intersected factors contributing to their negative experiences with remote learning. Svongoro and Mudzi (2023, p. 211) highlighted that institutions of higher learning abruptly switched

from face-to-face to remote learning without preparing students and lecturers. Likewise, private college students in this study found remote learning challenging. Many students reported that unreliable internet connections and network issues hindered their ability to fully participate in online classes, often causing them to miss lectures due to unexpected disconnections (Svongoro and Mudzi 2023). This issue was particularly pronounced for students living in rural areas, where access to stable networks was even more problematic (Matli and Phurustsi 2023). The financial burden of affording data packages also prevented some students from attending and engaging in classes regularly. These findings align with existing literature, which highlights the challenges faced by higher education students in remote learning environments due to inadequate access to resources (Shin and Hickey 2020; Chisadza et al. 2021; Moonasamy-Reddy and Mulliah 2022; Svongoro and Mudzi 2023; Muloiwa-Klenam et al. 2023).

As the nationwide lockdown led to the closure of higher education campuses, students had to return home (Chisadza et al. 2021; Svongoro and Mudzi 2023). Consequently, private college students faced significant challenges with remote learning due to the lack of a dedicated study space at home. Living with parents and siblings meant constant distractions, making it difficult for students to focus on academic work and attend online classes. The home environment presented numerous distractions, such as socialising with siblings and attending to household chores, thereby hindering successful engagement in remote learning. It can be argued that private college students struggled to maintain the same level of dedication and concentration at home as they would in traditional face-to-face settings (Shin and Hickey 2020).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent national lockdowns, students were accustomed to readily accessing support from their lecturers whenever needed (Svongoro and Mudzi 2023). However, the shift to remote learning during the pandemic brought forth challenges for students in terms of accessing the expected support and communication from their instructors. This study highlights the difficulties private college students encountered in reaching out to lecturers and

obtaining assistance during online classes. The limited support and communication from lecturers made remote learning particularly challenging for students, necessitating them to dedicate more time to understanding course materials independently. Consequently, remote learning posed significant hurdles for students in private colleges, exacerbated by the intersection of factors such as unreliable internet connections, inadequate study environments, students residing in rural areas, and limited communication and support during remote learning sessions. The findings underscore that remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging, as private college students similarly grappled to adapt to remote learning methods (Moonasamy-Reddy and Mulliah 2022; Mohamedbhai 2020) due to the intersection of issues such as unstable internet connections, lack of data, students residing in rural areas, lack of study space, difficulty concentrating at home, and limited support received from lecturers.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent national lockdown led to the closure of schools and higher education institutions, including private colleges. These institutions were required to transition from traditional face-to-face teaching to remote learning. While existing research has highlighted challenges faced by students in other higher education settings during remote learning, this paper focuses specifically on the experiences of students attending private higher education colleges during the pandemic. The study revealed that private college students encountered significant difficulties with remote learning due to intersected factors or issues. These included unreliable internet connections and network issues, difficulties concentrating at home due to a lack of dedicated study spaces, and minimal support or communication from lecturers during remote sessions. This paper contributes to the body of literature regarding students' experiences of remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although institutions resumed with physical operation, the findings underscore the critical importance of higher education institutions in ensuring that students receive adequate support and access to necessary resources to foster their academic success.

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