



ILERA AFRICA

10TH REGIONAL CONGRESS

3 – 4 APRIL 2024



THEME: THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITISATION ON THE WORLD OF WORK

Topic: Insights into Online Education Implementation in South African Universities

Dr Goldmarks Makamure

Morris Webb Race Relations

University of Kwa Zulu Natal



Background

In recent years, the landscape of higher education has undergone a profound transformation with the rapid expansion of online learning platforms and virtual teaching environments

It is essential to recognize the interconnectedness of pedagogy, technology, and assessment in shaping the educational experiences of students and the professional trajectories of academics

Online instruction necessitates meticulous planning, comprehension of curriculum requirements, assessment strategy formulation, technology evaluation, and the establishment of a robust, integrity-driven assessment framework ensuring validity. Continuous review and evaluation are imperative.



Background

Dlamini & Ndzinisa (2020) suggest that South African universities faced a sudden need to invest significantly in digital technologies due to the Fees Must Fall protests and the Covid-19 pandemic, which created an emergency situation requiring a rapid transition to online learning.

Between 2015 and 2017, South African higher education was disrupted by student protests, the #FeesMustFall# highlighting issues of financial, epistemological, and cultural exclusion (Godsell et al, 2016).

Background

The emergence and rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus prompted unprecedented reactions across various industries (Rubaba & Lincoln 2024), including higher education. Particularly in South Africa, the initial response within the higher education sector involved the enforcement of lockdown measures and mobility restrictions (Iwu et al 2023).

Universities, like other sectors, faced significant disruption from the pandemic. Academics were pressured to complete the academic year via online platforms.

Introduction

This review aims to examine the assessment practices employed in South African universities to evaluate the performance of academics working in online environments.

The study, aims to look into various aspects in assessing academic performance in the context of online teaching within South African universities.

The objectives encompass a comprehensive exploration of existing assessment frameworks, technological infrastructure, pedagogical strategies, faculty support mechanisms, student engagement dynamics, challenges faced by academics, quality assurance measures, and policy implications.

Methodology

E-learning environments can be categorized into three main types: synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid or blended learning (Negash et al., 2008).

Synchronous environments enable real-time interaction, often through collaborative activities like video conferencing and group chat, requiring simultaneous participation of instructors and students.

In contrast, asynchronous environments offer flexibility, allowing learning to take place at different times and locations, with students utilizing tools such as discussion boards, blogs, and email at their own pace.

Hybrid learning utilizes both online and in-person instruction, where online content is independent and substitutes in-person teaching.

Methodological approach

This study used a scoping systematic review as described by Kaliisa & Michelle (2019). In summary, it involved six stages: (1) scoping the review, setting criteria; (2) searching and screening studies; (3) describing and mapping results; (4) appraising quality and relevance; (5) synthesizing findings; and (6) drawing conclusions.

Literature Review

The University of South Africa (UNISA) has successfully navigated technological infrastructure learning challenges, largely due to its extensive experience as a pioneer in distance learning education.

With a staggering enrollment of over 350,000 students registered on their Learning Management System (LMS) (Unisa 2023), UNISA has demonstrated its capacity to effectively deliver education remotely on a massive scale.

In essence, UNISA's longstanding history as a distance learning institution has uniquely positioned it to meet the challenges of virtual education head-on. Through proactive measures, robust infrastructure, and a steadfast commitment to academic excellence, UNISA continues to set the standard for online learning in Africa and beyond.

Literature Review

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) swiftly responded to the lockdown in March/April 2020, establishing a COVID-19 Coordinating Committee and mobilizing its Management Executive Committee Academic (MECA) to transition to remote teaching. Within two weeks, comprehensive support structures were in place, emphasizing inclusivity and collaboration with academics and students in planning (Motala & Menon, 2020).

Literature Review

The University of Kwa Zulu Natal (UKZN), in a similar vein, Nyathikazi (2022) demonstrated that academic staff were prepared to embrace e-learning as a teaching and learning approach.

UKZN responded by initiating the transition to Moodle, using WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, and Zoom video conferencing technology (ZVCT) to facilitate migration, thereby fostering a sense of community identity. (Khoza 2021).

However, (Nyathikazi 2022) revealed challenges related to infrastructure, including issues with network service providers and frequent power outages hindering access to electricity. During the COVID-19-induced lockdown, the university responded by giving the students and staff data packages to enable remote learning and teaching.

Examination of pedagogical approaches employed in online teaching

Mpungose (2023) demonstrated that lecturers regarded the Zoom Virtual Classroom (VCT) as a valuable tool for improving synchronous e-learning in South African Universities.

However, they struggled with Zoom digital fatigue, fostering autonomy, and fostering emotional connection.

Whether through synchronous or asynchronous modalities, blended learning models, or specialized instructional techniques, pedagogical strategies serve as guiding principles in navigating the complexities of the digital learning landscape and empowering educators to deliver impactful online education.

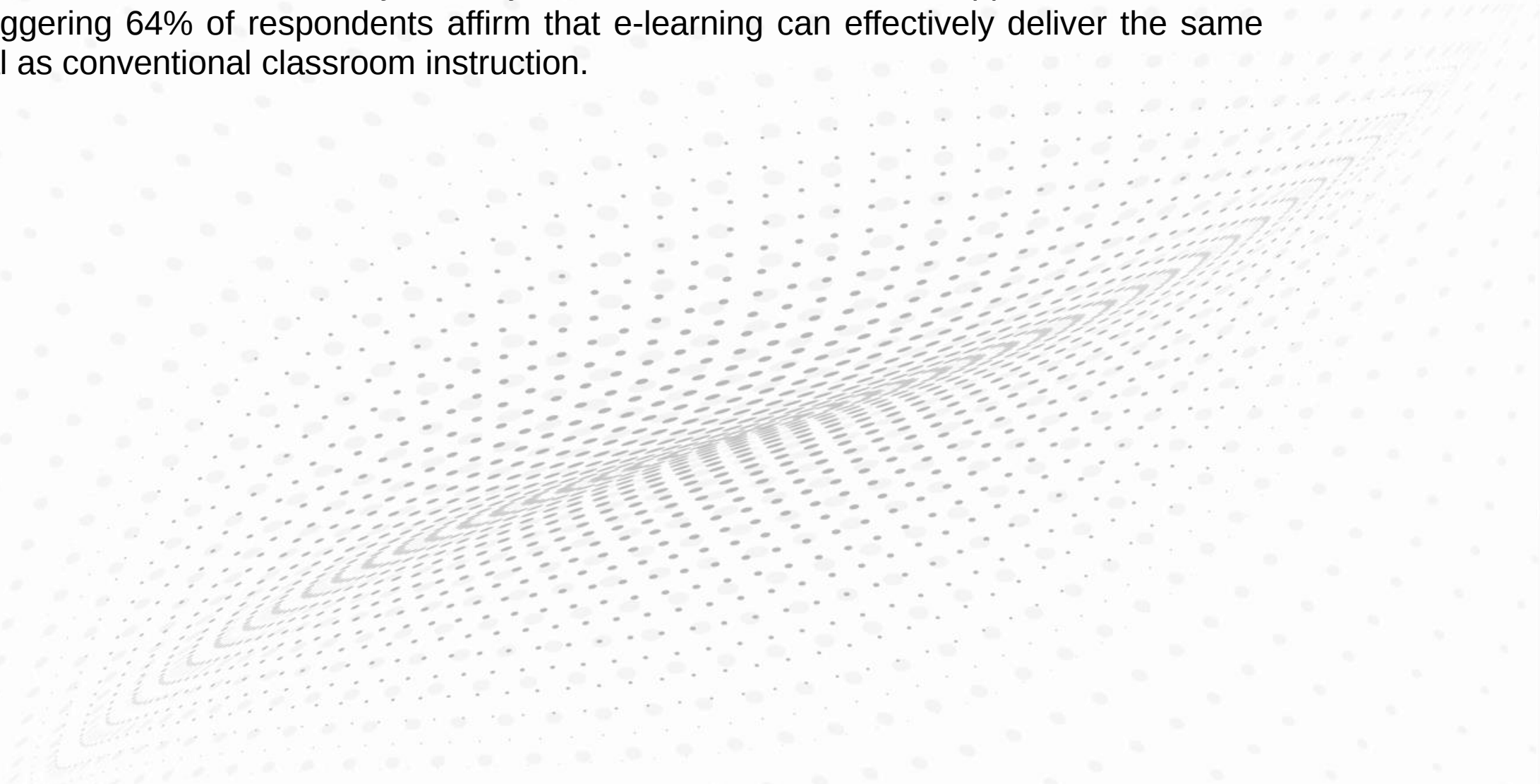
Collaborative experiences

In a study carried out at the University of Kwa Zulu Natal among academics, opinions diverged on the feasibility and effectiveness of group work within the e-learning environment (Nyathikazi, 2022). Forty-seven percent of respondents agreed that e-learning enables students to easily collaborate in groups to share subject matter, while 37% voice disagreed, with the remainder remaining uncertain.

This schism underscores a fundamental disagreement within the academic community regarding the potential of online platforms to foster meaningful collaborative experiences among students.

Examination of pedagogical approaches employed in online teaching

However, when it comes to the delivery of subject content, the consensus appears to be more decisive. A staggering 64% of respondents affirm that e-learning can effectively deliver the same course material as conventional classroom instruction.



Faculty Support and Training

A study in South Africa demonstrated the significance of adequately trained e-tutors underscored by the multifaceted responsibilities they shoulder, encompassing pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical roles (Maré & Mutezo, 2021).

Despite low student participation rates on e-tutor platforms, the study findings suggest that active engagement with e-tutors may positively impact student performance.

Student Engagement and Satisfaction

Student engagement and satisfaction are paramount in fostering a conducive learning environment and promoting positive educational outcomes.

Academics face the challenge of engaging students unfamiliar with online learning.

Queiros & de Villiers (2016) emphasized the critical elements: establishing a strong social presence through timely feedback and interaction, addressing technological proficiency, and utilizing appropriate tools like websites and video clips. These connections are vital for enhancing student engagement in online education.

Challenges and Barriers to Online Learning

Research indicates that online teaching and learning may be less effective for academic success compared to traditional face-to-face instruction. Some students, who may not be tech-savvy or lack suitable devices, find this method challenging (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2022).

A study conducted at the University of Pretoria revealed that lecturers' performance can be influenced by factors such as students' access to reliable Wi-Fi compared to mobile data usage.

Additionally, students experiencing difficulties with transitioning to online learning and those preferring self-study over assisted methods showed lower academic performance (Chisadza et al., 2021).

Existing policies governing online education in South Africa

Despite post-apartheid commitments to equity and redress, South African education remains unequal, as evidenced by disparities highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Sayed, et al 2020).

The authors note that governance and funding policies, such as the South African Schools Act (SASA) and National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NNSSF), aimed for equity but face challenges in implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the literature reviewed underscores the significant progress made in implementing online education in South Africa, particularly in response to challenges such as the #FeesMustFall movement and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Universities have demonstrated resilience and adaptability by investing in digital technologies, providing faculty training, and establishing support structures to facilitate the transition to online learning.

However, several gaps and challenges remain. Technological infrastructure, accessibility, and reliability of online platforms continue to pose barriers to equitable education.

Conclusion

Demographic considerations, such as gender and socioeconomic status, underscore the importance of inclusivity and diversity in online learning environments.

Pedagogical strategies must be tailored to the unique context of South Africa, with an emphasis on faculty training and support to enhance teaching effectiveness.

Benchmarking South African education standards with global benchmarks can help identify areas for improvement and align educational practices with international best practices.

Clear policies and governance structures are needed to regulate and support the implementation of online education, addressing issues related to equity, access, and quality assurance.

Conclusion

Overall, the journey towards effective online education in South Africa is ongoing, with opportunities for innovation, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

