

## DO WE NEED 'TRIGGERS' TO EMBRACE ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION? A REFLECTION PAPER

\*Bruce Lesiba Chidi, \*\*Hlologelo Climant Khoza AND \*\*\*Lesedi Senamele  
Matlala

\*\*University of Pretoria

\*\*\*JET Education Services

climant.khoza@up.ac.za

[lesedi@jet.org.za](mailto:lesedi@jet.org.za)

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### ABSTRACT

Owing to technological advancements, online teaching and learning have been perceived as a promising approach to reform the educational landscape worldwide. However, South Africa seems to be moving slowly in adopting technology and embracing online teaching and learning. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the adoption of online teaching and learning in South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): to argue that these institutions seem to be relying on triggers in embracing online teaching and learning. Using a reflective research method, we describe examples of these triggers. Furthermore, we highlight how the first trigger should have served as a 'wake-up call' for the South African HEIs. We argue that relying on triggers and not learning from them could easily result in 'pseudo-online teaching and learning'. As a result, these HEIs may not truly be competitive with regard to educational reform, posing negative implications for the state of education in HIEs.

**Keywords:** Triggers; online teaching and learning; higher education institutions; fees must fall; COVID-19, technology adoption

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### INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of the fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), technological advancements have permeated South African Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) just as in other industries (Catro-Benavides et al., 2020). HEIs had to start embracing these technological advancements by incorporating technology into teaching and learning or even migrating to blended or online learning as a response to issues of access to education in HEIs (Geith & Vignare, 2008). According to Bagarukayo and Kalema

(2015), there has been a slow pace in embracing technology through blended or online teaching and learning in the South African HEIs. Several factors such as finances, disciplinary content demand, and student socio-economic backgrounds may be attributed to this slow pace (Nungro, 2017). According to King and Boyatt (2014), students' expectations also influence the adoption of blended and/or online teaching and learning. Still, when faced with circumstances, institutions are 'forced' to move to online teaching and learning. These circumstances could be

perceived as triggers. Using a reflective research method, we argue that South African HEIs seem to depend on triggers to integrate technology in teaching and learning. Furthermore, we argue that they fail in perceiving them as ‘wake-up calls’ and use them as opportunities to learn, plan for, and mitigate the impact of future triggers or circumstances. We further argue that the idea of being reactive to triggers – swiftly responding to them – might have resulted in ‘pseudo-online teaching and learning’ and/or a pseudo-embrace of technological advancements.

### CONCEPTUAL PERSPECTIVES

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the adoption of online teaching and learning in South African HEIs and to argue that HEIs in South Africa seem to be relying on triggers in embracing online teaching and learning. Technology adoption in HEIs depends on what can be considered external and internal factors (Nungro, 2017). According to Nungro (2017), internal factors include leadership, technology users, resources availability, and the organisational culture, and external factors include technology trends, information technology products (e.g., the impact and benefit they bring to the HEI), competitiveness, and the government in terms of regulations. Straub (2009) argues that technology adoption depends on an array of aspects and decision-making at different levels of leadership in individual organisations. In this paper, we argue that as much as technology adoption and embracing online teaching and learning could be placed on an individual level, the structures put in place and how HEIs respond to triggers are key factors. We take Nungro’s (2017) view that embracing online teaching and learning is largely influenced by the leadership and the organisational culture and how the government arrogates this adoption as a regulating body.

Furthermore, embracing online teaching and learning is influenced by how well the stakeholders accept the developments in technology. This is in line with Davis’s (1989) model of technology acceptance, which identifies two main variables:

perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use. Perceived usefulness deals with how lecturers find the use of technology to be making their jobs easier. In contrast, perceived ease of use is about the extent to which the use of technology is found to be easy or difficult. In this paper, we concur with Nungro (2017) that the adoption stems from HEIs’ leadership. We extend this assumption to claim that lecturers play a role in the sense that it is their behaviours that could propel this adoption as they experience the triggers. As Abrahams (2010) alluded, perceptions and beliefs of lecturers are highly influential in technology adoption; however, the adoption of technology cannot solely rest on them alone as HEIs’ management and government reform play a central role.

### Blended and online teaching and learning

The introduction of online teaching and learning in South African HEIs is traced back to the early 1990s:

e-learning was used as a tool for accessing information and the interaction between lecturers and students (Mlitwa & Van Belle, 2011). When South Africa became a democratic country in 1994, policies were enacted to accelerate online learning to promote equal access to education (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2014). From the mid-1990s, universities began to incorporate online learning using learning management systems (LMS) to run distance education

courses for off-campus students. HEIs such as the University of Pretoria, University of South Africa, and University of Cape Town were amongst the first institutions to use the LMS to disseminate notes and post announcements (Bakarukayo & Kalema, 2015). Although many students appreciated the use of the LMS, its use seldom went beyond just posting notes and information for students. In other words, there was little use of LMS to have real-time engagement with students, promote a sense of community, and improve learning (Brady et al., 2010). This has derailed advancements by HEIs in terms of online learning, which, according to King and Boyatt (2014), could have accelerated access to higher education.

Haythornthwaite et al. (2007) attribute the change to online learning to the changing landscape of information and communication technologies (ICTs), innovative teaching approaches, and innovation from the learning body. Nguyen (2015) explains online learning as a form of distance learning introduced in response to the physical absence from campus. This was made possible in the late 1980s and 1990s due to the development of the personal computer and affordability of both the personal computer and internet access (Hubackova, 2015). However, online learning is (or should be) more than using a computer or gadget to access the content. It is about intense interactions (whether synchronous or asynchronous), providing students with a positive learning experience that, in the end, would have prepared students within a particular profession or line of work.

Online learning differs from blended learning in that it primarily refers to learning methods that students may employ. Conversely, blended learning refers to incorporating online learning for teaching and learning to be extended beyond the physical location (mainly campus location) to areas where students

May learn under their own control (Watson & Murin, 2014).

## THE TRIGGERS

The main objective of this paper is to discuss how embracing online teaching and learning in South African HEIs relies on triggers. In other words, is it obligatory or discretionary? Below, we discuss the two pertinent triggers, and argue that they, in some way or another, have propelled the incorporation of online teaching and learning.

### *Trigger 1: Student protests (#FeesMustFall)*

Although LMS have been used by universities for different purposes, they were not used constructively to engage students online through real-time synchronous sessions (Cilliers et al., 2017; Mashau & Nyawo, 2021). This was consistent until the emergence of student protests during 2015–2017 (Czerniewicz et al., 2019). Cilliers et al. (2017) found that lecturers seldom used the LMS tools to teach. In other words, there was no link between their pedagogy and how they made use of the LMS. The eruption of these student protests propelled institutions to swiftly shift to online and/or blended learning. According to Czerniewicz et al. (2019), this was a positive move towards advanced and transformative teaching and learning that responds to the ever-changing world. The move to online learning during the protests was rather a strategy to ‘complete the academic year’. To emphasise the real reason for HEIs to move to online or blended learning, Czerniewicz et al. (2019, p.2) note that ‘while simultaneously considering and using measures that would allow teaching to continue or at least for the curriculum to be completed’.

The truth is, South African students have long been known for their activism in resolving issues that are affecting them.

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However, it seems as if a few, if not none, of the HEIs had imagined a possible protest of the magnitude of *Fees Must Fall* and its potential to pose a threat to how content is delivered and the likelihood of becoming an impediment to the access to education. Indeed, this was a trigger in the higher education landscape because Jansen (2017) argues that ‘no university had ever experienced this level of student protest in terms of scale, scope, intensity, and in the course of time, violence’. Although the *Fees Must Fall* protest was more of a political trigger to bring change, it affected the education landscape and had implications for how teaching and learning is and can be viewed. Soon after the protests had waned, HEIs resumed the traditional teaching practices instead of adopting blended learning and/or online learning where circumstances allowed.

According to Hamidi and Chavoshi (2018), factors such as finances, content coverage, and the development of academics derail the implementation and enhancement of blended/online learning. We argue that the student protests could have been a wake-up call and a learning opportunity for HEIs. The protests took place two years apart, and yet HEIs still relied on the obligatory shift strategies in the second occurrence. This was a missed opportunity for HEIs to be proactive in foreseeing the best possible way to alleviate the impact of disrupted learning when faced with a similar predicament. This would have made the transition to online learning and teaching a smooth shift during the COVID-19 pandemic. The experiences in the second trigger (discussed below) seem to suggest that HEIs did not learn.

#### *Trigger 2: The COVID-19 pandemic*

Similar to the pre-*Fees Must Fall* period, in the pre-COVID-19 period, the country’s HEIs had embarked on using LMS. However, studies suggest that the LMS were used predominantly for administrative purposes, not as a

pedagogical tool to actively engage with students (Celliers et al., 2017; Mashau & Nyawo, 2021). Owing to the health threats of COVID-19, the country was forced into a lockdown (just like in other countries that experienced the pandemic first). This led to the suspension of all lectures in HEIs. What was viable during that time was a transition to online teaching and learning. One would have expected a smooth transition since we had experienced a similar incident in the form of student protests. However, it seemed to be a problematic and daunting process not only for lecturers but also for HEIs’ leadership (Mpungose, 2020).

HEIs lost weeks of teaching and learning to train staff on online platforms and teaching models and transition existing curricula to online. The question that arises here is:

could the HEIs not learn from the first trigger? The blind eye turned in the first trigger had cost implications on HEIs, the cost that was not confined to finances but also affected the quality of teaching and learning.

Owing to this rapid and unprecedented shift, can we authentically declare that HEIs are truly engaged in online teaching and learning? It seems to be a pseudo-, ‘half-cooked’ online teaching and learning embracement for two reasons:

first, academics had to be trained within a short period. Training of lecturers/academics for professional purposes is not a once-off activity, especially if technology is involved (Jamieson, 2004; McQuiggan, 2012). It is a continuous and prolonged process to allow the acquisition and implementation of skills and competencies.

Secondly, an emphasis was put on saving the academic year, and this meant doing what works at that particular time. As a result, lecturers resorted to pedagogies such as uploading narrated

Do we need ‘triggers’ to embrace online teaching and learning. PowerPoint slides and giving students activities to do independently (Rapanta et al., 2020). This is not different

from how the LMS was used before and during the first trigger.

One may confidently assume that lecturers are likely to revert to traditional teaching once the COVID-19 pandemic is over. Thus, we would need another trigger to explore the option of a somewhat blended/online learning approach. This is because lecturers may need to understand different aspects of designing and delivering online modules to effectively transition from face-to-face learning to interactive online learning. In essence, lecturers should not only attempt to learn the technologies linked with remote learning, but also understand the essential change and modify their pedagogical methods of teaching to meet the educational needs of online students (Mashau & Nyawo, 2021). The actual challenge is to ‘develop fluency with teaching and learning with technology, not just with technology itself’ (Jacobsen et al., 2002, p. 44).

## CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the two identified triggers that (or should have) elicited South African education institutions to embrace online teaching and learning. We have argued that these triggers result in what could be termed pseudo-online teaching and learning because the idea was to save the academic year. South African HEIs had ample time to implement policies on migrating to online learning. Waiting for triggers to enact reform may exacerbate inequalities in access to education, which will perpetuate issues of skills development and the overall development of the country. These triggers should (or should have served) as catalysts to rethink the future of the education system in HEIs. Although Sener (2010) argues that online learning will ultimately attain full scale, we argue that the progress is too slow and dependent on triggers. Our

argument in this paper is in line with Mashau and Nyawo (2021, p.138)), who argued that ‘the shift to online learning might be difficult to manage if the

institution is responding to a once-off event or crisis such as a pandemic or a students’ protest’. As such, HEIs in South Africa need to rethink how online teaching and learning is embraced and propelled.

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