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Academic and institutional readiness towards e-Learning to inform policy and practice in an evolving post-school education sector

Abstract

Prior to the occurrence of the global COVID-19 pandemic, some African higher education institutions had already adopted a hybrid-mode for all their programmes, including distance education. Policies and strategies were put in place to improve the practices, skills and competencies of staff and students. However, the closure of education institutions globally due to the pandemic resulted in the rethinking of current education practices and highlighted the inherent inequalities in the system. This baseline qualitative study, underpinned by the Affordance theory, explores the appropriateness of education responses that were utilised and interrogates the readiness of educators for e-Learning during the pandemic. The participants were purposively selected educators (n=11) from distance and contact African institutions. The study sought to contribute to the reconceptualisation of policies and strategies for distance education provision using e-Learning approaches, which have now become a mainstream reality for the post-school education and training (PSET) sector. Data were collected through individual semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis was applied to the rich data. The findings identified the successes and shortcomings of facilitating e-Learning at a distance during the pandemic. Some participants felt ill-prepared for the extent of work required to be well equipped to use this approach. In many cases, it was felt that support strategies could have been better structured. Further analysis highlighted possible restructuring that should occur to meet the needs of educators in the twenty-first century and to survive any future pandemics through greater use of e-Learning. Evidence-based recommendations for policies are discussed.

Keywords: *post-school education & training (PSET); restructuring-Learning; education restructuring; policies; strategies; practices; Affordance Theory.*

1. Introduction

Many institutions adopted a hybrid and blended learning model (Cleveland-Innes & Wilton, 2018) way before the breakout of the COVID-19 pandemic. Lalima and Dangwal (2017: 129) define hybrid and blended learning as "an

innovative concept that embraces the advantages of both traditional teaching in the classroom and ICT supported learning including both offline learning and online learning". Nonetheless, the authors assert that the mode requires "rigorous efforts, right attitude, handsome budget and highly motivated teachers… for its successful implementation" (ibid). Most traditional faculty are new to the online teaching component of the mode and lack formal education in how to successfully teach online (Gülbahar & Adnan, 2020), sometimes as a result of "fears of the unknown…and failure" (Mitchell *et al.,* 2015: 358). In addition, Maphalala and Adigun (2021) decry the deficits of e-Learning policies in many African higher education institutions, and a lack of technical and administrative support for staff for the implementation and use of e-Learning facilities. For its effective implementation, institutions need to put in place policies that speak to the context. There is also the need for relevant training for stakeholders. According to Roberts (2018: 40), "from a more holistic point of view, effective training and development interventions should address staff members' knowledge, skills and attitudes". Overall, from various studies, the author identifies three common features of professional development, which are "(a) it is context and time specific; (b) technology has a significant role in the professional development of staff… that depends on organisational policies and purposes for which technology is being used at any given context; and (c) it is continuous and dynamic" (Roberts, 2018: 41–42).

Although many African institutions had started putting policies and strategies in place regarding the implementation of e-Learning, including diverse training for staff and students, just like other institutions all over the world, nothing had prepared them for the huge impact COVID-19 would have on education provision. Institutions therefore had to react swiftly through diverse interventions to ensure teaching and learning continued. Distance education has become a reality for the post-school education and training (PSET) sector. The purpose of this baseline study was to explore the appropriateness of education responses that were utilised and to interrogate the readiness of educators. This is in order to contribute to the reconceptualisation of policies and strategies of distance education provision. Hence, the research question that guided our study was, "In what ways can the readiness of educators for e-Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic inform our knowledge on e-Learning policies, strategies and practices in an evolving PSET sector?" We adopted the Affordance Theory for the study to help us to probe to what extent the academic participants involved in the study have been able to maximise the technological affordances provided by their institutions. Other aspects that we probed were how the institutions have responded to the need that arose from this and what the impact of the reaction is on academics; and to what extent this experience should help to improve institutions' e-Learning policy, strategies and practices.

2. Literature review

The integration of technology into teaching and learning in higher education has been on the increase in recent years with use of hybrid and blended learning as well as flipped classrooms (Bussmann *et al.,* 2017). Higher education institutions invested significant resources in introducing and/or upgrading their information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. They also invested in staff development. The emergence and development of ICT and its application in education systems has given rise to a new wave of evolution in the world's educational systems; this has pushed the current learning systems towards e-learning and made it an important teaching tool (Alhabeeb & Rowley, 2018). The term e-Learning refers to the types of training that use the Internet and Intranet technologies to learn (Akbarilakeh,

Razzaghi & Moghaddam, 2019). According to Rodrigues *et al.* (2019: 95), e-Learning is "an innovative web-based system based on digital technologies and other forms of educational materials whose primary goal is to provide students with a personalized, learner-centred open, enjoyable, and interactive learning environment supporting and enhancing the learning processes". E-learning and online instructional environments utilise interactive network systems to enhance the quality of teaching and learning by managing content provided to learners across various learning activities (Chang & Fang, 2020).

e-Learning and provision of online courses in higher education has been accelerated due to the coronavirus pandemic (Arum & Stevens, 2020). The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated faculty's transition to online teaching, which has enabled higher education institutions to continue functioning (Quintana, 2020). While e-Learning was previously seen as an optional way to deliver lectures, conduct tutorials and provide skills training for interested educators, it became the lifeline for higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is a welcomed development on many levels. Apart from continued functioning of institutions, students' wellbeing in knowing that their studies have not been derailed is also significant. In addition, the pandemic-related measures forced many institutions to accelerate the development as well as the deployment of technologies and the related infrastructure (Ferri, Grifoni & Guzzo, 2020). According to the authors, the pandemic response also involved offering courses to support educators in the adoption of online teaching technologies and strategies to enable the continuation of teaching and learning with reasonable quality.

However, those forced to move classes online due to university closures in response to the coronavirus pandemic had no choice even if unprepared to do so (Hechinger & Lorin, 2020). Even though e-Learning implies connectivity in the global world, at the same time, it implies distance. This physical absence, which is the separation of learners and educators, profoundly affects teaching and learning (Stapleford, 2021; Vitoria, Mislinawati & Nurmasyitah, 2018). With separation, there is psychological and communication space to cross, a space of potential misunderstanding between the inputs of instructor and those of the learner (Moore, 1997). Being forced to remain at home can lead to feelings of isolation, therefore being able to talk with colleagues or classmates is not an aspect to neglect. Studies show that lack of social interaction could have negative "psychological effects including post-traumatic stress symptoms, confusion, and anger" with long-lasting effects (Brooks *et al.,* 2020: 912). Furthermore, home circumstances might not be suitable for working/teaching or studying. Indeed, some people have to deal with situations such as working at the kitchen table or managing the constraint of time for family or children or sharing spaces with multiple family members (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021).

2.1 Role of educators in the implementation of e-Learning

Educators play a key role in the success or failure of e-Learning and they must be well-trained and technically comprehensive in order to apply and integrate technical tools to achieve the success of e-Learning. Coupled with that, Golden (2016) emphasised that faculty transitioning to e-Learning must be able to resolve stress related to using technologies. The educators' role thus becomes a dual one, juggling subject knowledge and expertise with effective functioning in the e-Learning environment. Poor teaching evaluations due to the steep learning curve of transitioning courses to e-Learning formats could also compromise faculty members' identity as seasoned experts (Cutri & Mena, 2020). Sockman and Sharma (2008) described professors' emotional resistance to such pedagogical and implicit power shifts as being a result

of faculty's distaste for feeling like novices again. The role of educators now also includes managing the attitudes of students who want to take advantage of the e-Learning to refrain from full participation in activities and supporting those students who have challenges with adequate access to e-Learning. e-Learning is difficult to implement without the cooperation and support of lecturers, as the degree of interaction between lecturers and students is still predominant in an e-Learning environment (Cutri & Mena, 2020).

2.2 Readiness of educators and its effect on attitudes and wellbeing

The introduction of ICTs in higher education has huge implications for the whole education process ranging from investment in ICT infrastructure to the use of technologies in dealing with key issues of access, equity, management, efficiency, pedagogy and quality of education (Navani & Ansari, 2020). Inan and Lowther (2010) defined e-Learning readiness of teachers as teachers' perceptions of their capabilities and skills required to integrate technology into their classroom instruction and teachers' readiness to integrate technology which is the most important factor that has a direct impact on technology integration. The importance of e-Learning has led to the need in assessing the mental and physical preparation of the users before using the e-Learning environment. Therefore, e-Learning readiness is required in making sure the users are capable of using the e-Learning environment and associated technology in the best way possible. Mitchell *et al.* (2015: 358) asserted that a "source of faculty resistance to online education is related to fears of the unknown, loss, and failure". Redmond asserted that faculty must be willing to "try new ways of thinking and acting" (2015: 107–108), which she concluded requires "intellectual courage" (2015: 128). These findings prompt questions regarding how faculty are supported through such affective responses to the process of transitioning to and developing online teaching. Dyment *et al*. (2013) argued that the first step to increase levels of personal engagement with teaching online is to acknowledge faculty's fears and concerns and encourage those feelings to be expressed in a safe environment. Considerations for rank and status toward tenure and full professor in academia rarely privilege teaching innovations such as pursuing the development of online teaching (Tagg, 2012). Rather, conducting and publishing research holds higher status.

Research has found that transitioning courses to online also takes large amounts of time, which is most often time away from research and writing (Bussmann *et al.,* 2017). These structural characteristics of academia could affect faculty teaching online and represent a form of professional vulnerability. Faculty could potentially be caught in a double bind between their responsibilities for citizenship and scholarship and their online teaching efforts.

3.   Theoretical framework

The authors adopted James Gibson's (1979) Affordance Theory, in which the scholar invented the term, "affordance" to explicate the relationship between an animal (including human beings) and an object. According to the theorist, the affordances of the environment are what it offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or bad. These affordances have to be measured relative to the animal (Gibson, 1979: 127). Therefore, affordance generally refers to the range of functions and constraints that an object provides for, and places upon, structurally situated subjects (Davis & Chouinard, 2017). Hammond (2010) indicates these are not opposites but are rather complementary. Although the theory first emanated from the field of ecological psychology, it is currently being used for scholarly analysis across diverse fields in relation to tools and people, while debates continue about its core issues (Davis & Chouinard, 2017; Sarkis, 2021).

Commenting on the value of the theory to the use of ICT in the education field, Hammond (2010) asserts it provides special perceptiveness into the relationship between the device and the user with prospects for action. This is because "objects compel use, and people are conditioned at the level of perception by the form, substance, or texture of the objects. This means, objects have intrinsic, pre-cognitive meanings; they speak a language of their own, shaped by what they can do for us" (Matei, 2020: 3). Nonetheless, there are factors that could assist or hinder the user. These, according to Bankole and Venter (2017: 11), include, "…ease of use, access/availability/free, effective, convenient, attractiveness and innovativeness…" Others are policies, procedures, culture, rules and regulations (Alshawmar, 2021). In other words, affordances rest on the acuity, deftness, and social conditions of the user and institutional legitimacy (Davis & Chouinard, 2017) and the latter because affordances are always part of a world that is "propertied by other people" (Schmidt, 2007: 137).

Donald Norman, a cognitive psychologist, added to the debate by defining affordances as "the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used" (1988: 9). It is one thing for a user to perceive an affordance, however, it would be another thing for them to actualise it. According to Wang, Wang and Tang (2018), more researchers are now focusing on actualisation because previous studies from ecological psychology assumed that users can easily actualise an affordance, which is not so. Strong *et al.* define actualisation as "the actions taken by actors as they take advantage of one or more affordances through their use of technology to achieve immediate concrete outcomes in support of organizational goals" (2014: 70). Commenting on this important aspect, Wang *et al.* (2018: 68) conclude that actualisation is an "individual journey" that "depends on actors' goals and intentions", while affordances "are potentials for action – existing independent of people's perception or actualization…", and are "relational" thus, including both the properties of enabling and constraining. Finally, we have not approached the affordance theory from the design perspective of technology, which is one aspect of the theory. Rather our attention was on the multiple factors that could assist or hinder the user, with their implications for policy and practice as users undergo their individual journey within an institution that propertied affordances.

4. Methods

The purpose of the study was to explore the appropriateness of education responses and interrogate the role and readiness of educators for e-Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim was to contribute to the reconceptualisation of policies and strategies for e-Learning, which has now become a reality for the post-school education and training (PSET) sector. A qualitative research approach and exploratory case study design (Yin, 2018) were employed in the study to allow for depth in the discussions with the participants. The main research question that guided the study was "*In what ways can readiness of educators for e-Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic inform our knowledge on e-Learning policies, strategies and practices in an evolving post-school education and training sector?*"

The participants were educators from the African higher education sector. There were 11 participants (male – n=5 and female – n=6) from five different institutions. Of the 11 participants, 6 have been teaching in higher education for over 10 years while 2 had under three years of experience in the sector. All the participants have doctoral degrees.

Ethics approval was obtained from the authors' institution before contact was made with prospective participants. The nature and extent of the study was explained to the participants. They understood that participation was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained from the participants who also consented to the interviews being recorded.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted virtually. Inductive thematic analysis (Neuendorf, 2018) was applied to the data, and this generated five themes. The derived themes were educators' e-Learning training, capability and experience prior to COVID-19; institutional response to lockdown and management of e-Learning; the role of e-Learning and educators' experience of institutions' response during COVID-19; the impact of e-Learning during lockdown on wellbeing and implications for e-Learning policies, strategies and practices.

5. Results

The results are presented in this section and a discussion follows in the next section. The participants were given codes P1, P2, P3 and so forth until P11 while the institutions were coded A, B, C, D and E as shown in Table 1.

Table 1:   Participants' information

Participant	Gender	Highest qualification	Institution code	Experience in years
P1	F	PhD	A	16
P2	M	PhD	B	6
P3	M	PhD	C	16
P4	M	PhD	D	1½
P5	F	PhD	C	9
P6	M	PhD	A	8
P7	F	PhD	B	19
P8	F	PhD	C	3
P9	F	PhD	A	17
P10	F	PhD	E	10
P11	M	PhD	B	15

The results of the study highlight the five themes that were derived from the study captured on Table 2. Each of these themes is presented below:

Table 2:   Emerged themes from the data

Themes	Description
Theme 1	Educators' E-Learning training, capability and experience prior to COVID-19
Theme 2	Institutional response to lockdown and management of e-Learning
Theme 3	The role of e-Learning and educators' experience of institutions' response during COVID-19
Theme 4	Impact of e-Learning during lockdown on educators' wellbeing
Theme 5	Implications for e-Learning policies, strategies and practices

Theme 1– Educators' E-Learning training, capability and experience prior to COVID-19

All the participants (P1 to P11) indicated that they attended in-house training organised by their various institutions. Some of this training was deemed part of their jobs, particularly for those who were actively engaged in blended or hybrid learning. In support of this, participant 1 had this to say:

> I work in the open distance unit, so we have received long before COVID, we learn to work on white boards, we learn to work on the e-fundi system. So, that's basically what we have, there's always white board training, e-fundi trainings, so when COVID came there was nothing new for me because we have been working online for the past 16 years (P1).

Four of the participants (P2, P4, P7 and P11), indicated that since they belonged to institutions that were predominantly distance education mode, they were trained regularly in the use of online platforms and that some of the training was certified. In these instances, assessment was also conducted on the learning management systems used.

> We have been exposed to so many trainings. Like we have Moodle, using Moodle to teach online, using teams to teach. Those are some the short courses that we have had here at (my institution) in impacting students and even in engaging them in research practices whereby we conduct M and D research training for masters and doctoral students and even for honours students as well (P11).

However, two of the participants indicated that they had no formal training, but their knowledge was self-developed through personal experience.

Theme 2 – Institutional response to lockdown and management of e-Learning

The participants were from five different institutions and each institution had their own response to the lockdown situation and move to the e-Learning mode. There were however overlaps in terms of some institutions having similar policies and management styles for e-Learning. There were institutions that provided step-by-step policies and guidelines for staff to follow while others addressed staff concerns on an ad hoc basis at the beginning of the lockdown. All five institutions provided additional training and support for staff, for example:

> We had education innovation specialist that we can call on if you are having any challenge with the program (P5).

There were regular communications and information dissemination platforms that were used by the institutions' executives. However, institutional readiness varied. There were institutions that had to put learning management systems in place in response to the demand of the total dependence on e-Learning during the lockdown.

> ….we didn't have a proper system in place by the time that COVID hit us…(P4)

> Well, in the beginning of the pandemic we were not ready. I think most institutions that had learning management systems in place were more ready (P4).

The challenges of the lockdown for both students and staff soon became apparent and one of the institutions (C) took the decision to provide devices such as laptops for the students

and free internet access (zero-rating) when on the learning management system. The free access was negotiated with service providers. A few institutions (A, B and D) further initiated the provision of data for students and subsidising the data for staff.

Within all five institutions, updated training programmes were developed to meet the perceived needs of lecturers during the lockdown. Lecturers were further supported with training on online content creation, development of interactive content and video and creatively adapting PowerPoint presentations. The use of YouTube videos and online discussion boards were also encouraged and supported. For instance:

> … and for people who didn't know how to make the voice overs and voice recordings there was a guide, it was step-by-step it was typed out instructions (P1).

> We received quite a number of support [strategies] in relation to working from home, related to how to communicate to students or with students in this difficult time. …they have been sending information on how to use technology (P3).

There was an increase in the numbers of instructional designers and information technologist made available to support staff and students in institutions A and C. As reflected in the excerpt below, institutions that had these services prior to the lockdown, enhanced the services considerably, while those that did not, had to accelerate the setting up of such services.

> So, I think each department in the faculty across the university has a specific person or people that they could call on to help them manage whatever the problem was. The response was very helpful (P5).

Theme 3 – The role of e-Learning and educators' experience of institutions' response during COVID-19

The role of e-Learning identified by the participants included innovative lecturing applications, and opportunities to record lectures and maintain student supervision. In addition, the participants indicated that it provided avenues for extra tutorials and the management of administrative tasks and extended student support

> During the pandemic we communicate on how to use online platform to deliver lectures, to do marking, to respond to enquiry and how to help with whatever complexity they (students/lecturers) might encounter. For managing modules and managing people teaching them, so it's more of giving support to them … (P3)

In terms of readiness, all the participants reported that prior experience with e-Learning was an added advantage. Those who were not already conversant with this struggled and had to catch up with the demands, as indicated by participant 2.

> Psychologically, for some times, like a month or two I was unable to do something because I was unsure of this specific approach, to employ and also in performing my task as an academic at (institution B). Initially, it was difficult for me, but later on, I just have to get used to some of these things, use some of these devices and mediums of communicating for meetings and students (P2).

The institutions that operated in a hybrid mode prior to the lockdown had lecturers who were somewhat conversant with the use of technology in the teaching and learning and could build on that. The excerpts reflect participants' diverse levels of readiness:

> it took us awhile; it took us about a year to be in a good space where we can say: okay but we are now ready (P4)

> I would rate it good because I am comfortable using technology and I am not scared to try out new application to contribute to useful learning for my students. I was quite comfortable using our learning management systems because I did the advanced training. So I wouldn't say I wasn't knowledgeable or prepared since I did the advanced training (P6)

Nine participants indicated that they had received support from their institutions and appreciated the efforts of their various institutions. However, they stated some of the responses created a sense of urgency that often led to increased stress and anxiety on the part of staff. The participants who had received regular training indicated that they were inundated with information regarding necessary steps to take and protocols to follow and this heightened their sense of vulnerability when compounded by new knowledge that had to be acquired or enhanced. In addition, the dependence on network availability and application functioning created a sense of urgency and uncertainty with constant anticipation of what could go wrong.

> In the attempt to make sure that everybody is covered and all the boxes are ticked, we were… bombarded with a lot of information at the same time. … it became really overwhelming because you are trying to keep up. … it could lead to panic attacks for some people... it made it worse for me last year because it made me really anxious. It became counter-productive... (P5)

Participants from four of the institutions (A, B, C and D) reported that communications and guidelines came from different support departments and information overlapped further creating a sense of a constant need to catch up and never fully being in control of the situation at any time. In some instances, the participants reported that there were no properly coordinated systems in place.

> The response was there but better coordination could have made it easier for me to take advantage of everything (P5).

> There was a disconnection between the university management and the staff, we found it difficult to have communication between the staff and the university management (P2).

One of the critical issues raised by many participants was that the communications received were often general and not module specific. This means that lecturers then had to still adapt the information to their individual modules. According to the participants, information that is more module specific would have been more useful, as stressed by participant 3:

> Often times it is general for me, issues are not to a particular module, every module is different, content, assessment processes. So, if information or what you call response is module/department specific, perhaps then it could have been more effective… (P3)

Understanding the various methods of online assessment was a source of concern for participants that were not used to this type of assessment. It was a learning curve for which the participants believe appropriate and dedicated training should have been provided. A lot of additional self-development activities was embarked on, and this was time consuming and often frustrating. The excerpt below confirms one participant's frustration after an assessment approach did not work:

> …what we did then, we reverted to google forms. So, our students completed assignments and examinations on google forms and then only after that, the institution developed a system (P4)

In addition, participants reported that they needed to upgrade their home internet facilities to accommodate the e-Learning during lockdown. This had to be done at personal costs with increase in data use. However, participants 3, 5 and 8 reported that their institution provided additional support for data for those who required it.

Theme 4 – Impact of e-Learning during lockdown on educators' wellbeing

The use of e-Learning during the lockdown had an impact on the wellbeing of the participants. Participants reported feeling frustrated and often overwhelmed by too many meetings they had to attend virtually. According to participant 1,

> I was a bit frustrated right at the start. There were so many meetings and forms ... there was a lot of forms and stuff and you had to report (P1).

In addition, there appeared to be increased workload and new things to learn and master daily. Eight participants reported mental and emotional fatigue while the other 3 indicated that they were already used to the e-Learning platform and had no negative impact on wellbeing. The excerpts below confirmed this information:

> …hearing that they have changed the marking tool really stressed me up a lot. The possibility of things changing again was not good for my stress levels. I worry sometime whether the classes that I have uploaded on our learning management system… was it sufficient for the students so that they will be able to do what it ask from them. It makes me feel sometimes very unsure whether what I have done was okay. …. With e-learning it makes me wonder whether the students will pass and that makes me stressed… (P9).

> I have always been used to hard work and long hours in the office to do my work... but I think that I have never worked as hard as I do at the moment. I am not the only one, I think this is a trend in our institution. Colleagues that I am talking to are experiencing the same. ... there are always meetings... so.in that sense, it is difficult to decide to make time available for resting, relaxing (P7).

Wellness programmes were initiated due to the toll the lockdown was taking on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of staff and students. In some instances, weekly programmes were provided and communicated via email to staff and via the learning management system to students. All participants reported that the home environment was often not conducive for focused work for lecturers and students. All the participants stated that there were a lot of distractions from family members, pets and crowded environments. Another important idea reported by the participants was that they missed interacting with their colleagues. Excerpts from participants 2 and 3 confirmed this.

> You're tired of using computer, you want to, we're social beings, so in a particular way it affected me for some time (P3)

> …the children are at home… while my son was reading I was busy telling him that 'mummy has to do this now'… (P9).

Participants reported often missing the opportunity to simply knock on a door and ask for advice when unsure about what to do. Those uncomfortable with the use of technology found it more difficult to cope and took longer to adapt to the new method.

> But the main thing there is that lecturers didn't know how to teach online, so most lecturers at most contact universities were used to face-to-face teaching. There were really only a few lecturers that were really ready to teach online…(P4).

The fact that lecturers had to be flexible was an additional learning curve as not all situations could be anticipated. Additionally, the situation became more overwhelming as it dawned on participants that the lockdown was becoming prolonged and uncertainties prevailed. Participant 7 had this to say regarding this.

> We had thought for a few months and then it will be all over. As much as we thought that we were prepared, I don't think that I was ready or prepared for anything. It was just like I said, crises management… meetings on Teams, on Zoom, on Google meets like we are doing at the moment it is one thing that really saved many of us. We were not really ready for this kind of communication …no not ready... to cope (P7).

Theme 5 – Implications for e-Learning policies, strategies and practices

The participants concur that student and lecturer morale was affected. They agreed that emotional support for health and wellbeing was necessary and that institutional policies should mandate wellness activities. According to the participants, institutions should incorporate compulsory breaks for their academic staff. One of them had this to say:

> Be more flexible regarding lecturers' inability to take time off from work. Not only giving lecturers one week between semester, but be more flexible and supportive concerning the wellbeing of staff (P9).

In addition, dialogue should be encouraged where lecturers are able to share their experiences and contribute to the development and revision of the policies that affect them.

> Policy needs to provide more innovative and effective teaching and learning methods to be implemented, but also to cater for continuous support of lecturers regarding the use of these effective teaching and learning methods. …cater and to be open for the reality of what is really the situation in teaching and learning, not forcing staff to implement 'things' that does not fit within the real situation of staff and students (P9).

> …needs to be adapted because education has changed so much and of course, if policy changes, it will affect practice. So, the way of doing things are changing all the time and will keep on changing. It is definitely necessary that policies are adapted. I think that we have already started with our policy with regards to teaching and learning. Specifically, assessments. I think in my context when I think about it, assessments have really changed dramatically (P7).

There was also a call to involve government in the provision of additional funding for the further development of e-Learning infrastructure and structured training of lecturers in higher institutions. The excerpts below confirm these suggestions:

> Higher Education needs to look at the lack of reliable access to digital infrastructure, adequate bandwidth, the internet and ICT for future use in the teaching and learning landscape…so as to be able to provide more assistance and continuous support… (P5)

There is still a big lack in guidance for online education, the policy and the guidelines do not address the online aspect of distance education…. we all know that policies and guidelines regulate and guide the way we do things. …at the moment, is that, unfortunately we need to consult policies, practices, guidelines that institutions from other countries developed and then we have to check how we can adapt it to really fit into our environment (P4).

6. Discussion of the findings

The research question that guided this study was "In what ways can the readiness of educators for e-Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic inform our knowledge on e-Learning policies, strategies and practices in an evolving PSET sector?" The discussion in this section will revolve around the extent to which participants in the study were prepared by their institution prior to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown to maximise the available affordances at their institutions, the institutions' response during the COVID-19 pandemic, the impact of the response on the participants, and the extent to which the findings can help to inform our knowledge on and improve institutions' e-Learning policies, strategies and practices. As indicated earlier, according to the Affordance Theory adopted for this study, factors that could assist or hinder the user of ICT include ease of use, convenience, policies, procedures, culture, rules and regulations (Bankole & Venter, 2017; Alshawmar, 2021). Authors assert these factors are invariably influenced by for instance, the social conditions and the deftness of the user.

The findings from our study show that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants and institutions were at different levels of readiness and preparedness for e-Learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. While the majority have attended in-house training organised by their various institutions, a few have had to learn for themselves. The implications of this are that first, institutions, prior to the pandemic had made some level of affordances available to their staff; and second, academics had also utilised some of the affordances provided by their institutions. These moved the available affordances beyond mere perception for the participants. According to Mateil (2020: 5), "perceived" is a mere synonym for any modifier that would turn "affordances" from "something-that-is-demanded-by-use" into "something-that-I-infer-this-thing-can-do." Therefore, based on the theory of affordance, the question that should be uppermost should be the extent to which the participants utilise the presented affordances. As asserted earlier, current research in the field of the theory has shifted from mere assumption that users with technology will use them to actualisation (Wang *et al.,* 2018). Findings from this study showed that the level of ease of use differed among participants depending on their previous experience. For instance, while prior experience with online teaching helped those that were already exposed to it indicating those that were comfortable with technology, others were not ready at the beginning, while others were unsure of what to do; therefore, each participant went through their own individual journey. Commenting on this important aspect, Wang *et al.* (2018: 68) conclude that actualisation is an "individual journey" that "depends on actors' goals and intentions", while affordances "are potentials for action – existing independent of people's perception or actualization, and are 'relational' thus, including both the properties of enabling and constraining".

Availability of affordances is the first step in the Affordance Theory. The unexpected lockdown during the pandemic forced all institutions to hurriedly address the challenges posed. As confirmed by the participants, data was made available (although in some instances, not adequately); laptops were provided, and additional administrative/IT support personnel,

guides and training were put in place. In addition, some learning management systems (LMS) were improved upon while regular communication was maintained.

In order to further support academics, institutions have put in place diverse training opportunities for using their LMSs, some of which are certified, while others are informal. Roberts (2018) earlier highlighted the value of effective training and development interventions for academics to boost their use of affordances provided by their institutions. Nonetheless, research during the pandemic showed a lack of training, inadequate bandwidth, and little or no preparation regarding hurriedly prepared e-Learning (Hechinger & Lorin, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020). Other studies (Babbar & Gupta, 2021; Basilaia & Kvavadze, 2020; Khan, 2020) confirm that most of the emergency plans put in place by many institutions cannot cope with the magnitude of the impact of the pandemic on education, while most institutional LMSs were inadequate for fully online classes.

Most of the participants in our study confirmed a lack of readiness by academics in contact institutions, who might not have been previously exposed to e-Learning. One participant was from a tertiary college that has been described as being at the lower end of e-readiness. In such instances, Babbar and Gupta (2021) assert inadequate acquaintance with online teaching is a major challenge.

Additionally, participants in our study lamented the improper or inadequate systems put in place by their institutions, communication difficulties, inadequate data and incurring personal expenses for data. Others identified haphazard or generic support not specific to their module, too much information or improper timing, a lack of formal or in-depth training and a lack of exposure to different online assessment types. Left with no choice, academics were forced to teach online even if they did not feel properly prepared to do so with dire consequences for their practice (Hechinger & Lorin, 2020). Our findings also corroborate those of Bankole and Venter (2017) and Davis and Chouinard (2017), that there are several factors that could assist or hinder the user. As earlier asserted, our findings raise questions about the extent and the quality of preparation, and support provided to academics to address their concerns prior to and at a time such as this (Dyment *et al.,* 2013).

All of the above had a negative impact on academics' wellbeing. This included heavy workloads, working long hours, frustration with too many meetings dealing with uncertainty, mental tiredness, distractions from working from home and isolation because they missed other colleagues and their office space. Only two participants reported no negative impact on their wellbeing due to their vast experience in this area. Our findings corroborate earlier ones from other parts of the world on the negative impact of isolation, which include trauma, fatigue and other physical ailments due to long screen time (Moore, 1997; Brooks *et al.,* 2020; Babbar & Gupta, 2021) and unconducive home environments for working for academics as a result of lack of boundaries (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021). Ironically, Babbar and Gupta (2021) argue that although there were concerns worldwide about the physical health challenges caused by the pandemic, very few concerns were about its mental effect on people's well-being.

Schmidt (2007: 137) indicated that affordances are always part of a world that is "propertied by other people", therefore, as custodians of technologies adopted for their mode of study, institutions are expected to put in place policies to guide their practices. In their study, Maphalala and Adigun (2021) indicated few African institutions have e-Learning policies in place for the implementation and use of e-Learning facilities. In our study, all the participants, except for one, confirmed their institutions have policies in place to guide teaching and

learning. It also suggests that prior to COVID-19, the institutions already had some varying degree of e-Learning policy and practice in place.

As indicated earlier, Alshawmar (2021: 3598) asserts policies, procedures, culture, rules and regulations are some of the factors that affect the extent to which users utilise the affordances. These have a varied impact on their awareness, experiences and attitudes towards e-Learning (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021). Findings from our study support these claims, which signify a gap between policy and practice.

Although there are high expectations regarding return to normalcy to all facets of life after the COVID-19 pandemic, part of what may defy this is revised approaches to teaching and learning. Despite previous complaints about the inadequacies of e-Learning, institutions worldwide have no choice but to embrace it. As asserted earlier by scholars (McDonald, 2020), the current situation might be the reagent for action to start confronting our challenges.

7.   Implications of findings and recommendations

This section considers the implications of our findings for institutional e-Learning policies, strategies and practices. First, our findings exposed the divergence in institutional and individual preparedness and readiness for e-Learning prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which would necessitate a major review of higher education's policies, strategies and practices. Because policies should direct practices and strategies, we think institutions that already have e-Learning policies in place need buy-in from their staff members. Greater awareness is required regarding these policies and the implications for teaching and learning practices. For instance, in our findings, one staff member was not really sure if her institution has an e-Learning policy. One wonders what guides the practices of academics at the institution, which will also have a negative impact on student learning. Another way of improving on policies would be their continual evaluation to ensure they meet with current trends and the needs. Although not devoid of challenges, better-prepared institutions coped better with the crisis.

Second, findings from our study showed that the training provided by institutions may not necessarily equate to staff readiness for e-Learning. Thus, institutions would need to move beyond "nice-to-have" platforms to ensuring staff's ability to use them. In this instance, we suggest a "pull and push" approach that encourages all staff to start working online by adopting, for instance, a blended approach for a specified percentage of a module.

Third, in relation to this is the need to recognise the diverse "individual journey" of each academic and to provide tailor-made support for each level. As asserted earlier, literature shows fear of the unknown and failure is a major reason for faculty resistance to e-Learning (Mitchell *et al.,* 2015).

Fourth, although the pandemic was unexpected, plans need to be in place to structure communication regarding, for instance, the source, the timing and the specificity. Findings from our study show that uncoordinated communication and information-overload adversely affected the mental health of the participants.

Fifth, staff would need to be provided with carefully structured bite-sized training (e.g., on assessment and diverse pedagogies), which will help to provide some form of policy guidance. It will also help prevent stakeholders from becoming overwhelmed. Furthermore, understanding academics' readiness towards e-Learning will help institutions to better understand the challenges posed by it (Lakshimi *et al.,* 2020).

In relation to this is the pedagogy of care (Moorhouse & Tiet, 2021), part of the COVID-19 experience in the PSET sector is the need for moral and emotional support for staff. Institutions should be interested in the wellbeing of their staff. According to Noddings (2003, cited in Walker-Gleave, 2019: 93), "care and caring have deep roots in education since they form the basis of all pedagogies". Nonetheless, Walker-Gleave (2019: 93) asserts this pedagogy of hope needs further research regarding academics' perceptions and students' experience in relation to their learning, and its cost implication.

Lastly, as suggested by one of the participants, government would need to invest more to support struggling institutions in e-Learning infrastructure, including other technical requirements considering the huge costs involved (Babbar & Gupta, 2021).

8. Conclusion

One of the areas severely affected by the global COVID-19 pandemic was education, which had to transition to an online mode. Many institutions and educators were not ready for this rapid transition to e-Learning. Findings from this study showed that staff members at African institutions were at diverse levels of preparation and readiness when the pandemic struck. Nonetheless, irrespective of each participant's level of preparedness and readiness, findings from our study showed that academics are willing to take the "intellectual courage" (Redmond, 2015: 128) to adopt e-Learning, especially given that the mode has come to stay. However, their concerns must be addressed by institutions and broader partnerships, which will invariably influence policies, strategies and practices at the various institutions. Future research will widen the study to increase the number of participants by adding the voices of policy makers and involving more academics from diverse institutions.

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