

**Undergraduate Students' Experiences with Blended Learning during the COVID-19
Pandemic at a Rural Based University in South Africa.**

By

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Dissertation

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Declaration

I, Sadiki Andani, declare that this dissertation, ***“Undergraduate Students’ Experiences with Blended Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic at a Rural Based University in South Africa”***. Is my original unique work and has not been submitted for any degree at any other university or institution. The work does not contain any other people writings, unless specifically acknowledged and referenced accordingly.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to Netshidzivhe Rendani, you have been my pillar, strength & companion, Blessed. And to all participants, hopefully through this study, adjustments will be made for Blended Learning in rural-based universities in South Africa.

Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to investigate the undergraduate students' experiences of Blended Learning at one rural based university in Thulamela municipality in the Vhembe district, Limpopo province. The study draws from the transitional distance and social learning theory to investigate how the undergraduate students in the university adjusted from face-to-face learning to online learning. Non-probability sampling was used to select thirty participants. Telephonically semi-structured interviews were used to collect data and the data was thematically analysed following the six stages of thematic data analysis. The data indicate that students were unable to actively take part in online learning, mostly because of low signal strength, poor infrastructural facilities, financial constraints, which characterises students' life in rural-based universities in South Africa. Hence, they devised coping strategies such as consultations with returning students, learning independently, going to places where there is a stable internet connectivity, attending classes in groups, searching for information where they felt that the information provided by the lecturers were unsatisfactory, consulting with fellow classmates and asking lecturers to use other online platforms to deliver lessons. The data also showed that the University also tried to help the students by devising significant orthodox support systems. These includes faculty student online support services and provision of internet data and, financial support to the students. Together, these innovative inputs made it possible for the students to navigate particularly from face-to-face learning to online learning during the pandemic. Insights regarding students' experiences from this study, potentially provides policy direction for both universities in South Africa, as well as the Department of Higher Education and Training on the use of Blended Learning in rural based universities in South Africa.

Keywords: Blended learning, COVID-19, Online learning, Rural based university, Undergraduate students, Transitional distance theory.

List of Acronyms

ANC - African National Congress

BL- Blended Learning

COVID-19- Corona Virus Disease 2019

DHSD- Department of Health & Social Development

ELPs- Electronic Learning Platforms

HIV & AIDS- Human Immunodeficiency Virus & Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

HSS - Human and Social Science

ICT- Information Communication and Technology

NSFAS - National Student Financial Aid Scheme

ODL- Online and Distance Learning

PDF- Portable Document format

SDG - Sustainable Development Goals

TDT- Transitional Distance Theory

USRD- Unemployment Social Relief Distress

UL- University of Limpopo

UK- United Kingdom

UN- United Nations

UNESCO- United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNISA- University of South Africa

WHO- World Health Organization

SRC- Student's Representative Council

SSS- Student Support Services

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTIONS AND STUDY BACKGROUND

This chapter entailed the introduction and the study background, providing the context in which the study was carried out, what is acknowledged, changes, and potential future directions of blended learning in rural-based institutions of learning. The chapter comprises the study background, aims and the study objectives, the study significance, motivation of the study, research methodology, delimitation of the study, operational definitions, and the structure of the dissertation.

The advent of COVID-19 pandemic in 2019 has varied implications for different institutions in South Africa. In the academia particularly, it entailed national lockdown (Amaechi, Rasalokoane and Thobejane, 2021; Bates, 2020). The lockdown inter alia entailed placing local and international travel restrictions, shutting down of universities and prohibiting the gathering of more than hundred people at any given time (United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2020). While these restrictions were intended to curb COVID-19 infections, thereby flattening the curve, its corresponding restrictions nonetheless negatively impacted on the everyday lives of citizens including learning institutions (University of South Africa, 2020). To deal with this situation, universities in South Africa adopted a blended learning system. Through such system, they were able to administer teaching and learning, thus save the academic year.

While blended learning seems to be the best option under these circumstances it however ushered in new challenges, particularly for the undergraduate students in rural based universities. In a comparative study of rural and elite universities for example, the adoption of blended learning according to Lembani, Gunter, Breinesn and Dalu (2020) the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the inequalities that exist from the apartheid era. Obviously, the unending divide and inequalities that exists between students in “traditionally white only universities” and “traditionally black only universities” remains a reality in South Africa. Due to poor funding and limited infrastructural divide, students from rural-based universities struggle to meet up with online learning during the pandemic (Dube, 2020). A similar study by Demuyakor (2020) also demonstrated that most students from rural based universities in South Africa had found blended learning in tertiary institutions during the pandemic as “relatively new” and difficult. The effects of the unprecedented COVID-19 were mostly first-time to many people hence they affected everyone, including the rural-based students in institutions of higher learning.

In South Africa for example we had to implement blended learning in universities, colleges, private and public schools, while hosting classes online helps minimize the spread of the COVID-19 on campus it was, however a challenging mode of learning to implement for most students (Anifowoshe, Aborode, Ayodele, and Iretiayo, 2020). Most universities in rural areas found it difficult to effectively provide the online learning to students who live in areas due to among other things poor WIFI or internet connections, training, and quality gadgets.

The concept “rural based” is in the context of this study used synonymously to “historically black and disadvantaged universities/ tertiary institutions.” These universities were established under the apartheid regime in South Africa, to serve black African students, who at the time were banned from attending segregated white-only universities. The universities were poorly funded compared to the white-only universities/ tertiary institutions. The universities were intended to continue to perpetuate the racially defined, divided social order within the South African society (Kurtz et al., 2023).

Basically, some universities fall under the so-called ‘previously disadvantaged institutions’ in South Africa which they still lack the proper required resources to host online learning (Agormedah, 2020). It is on these background that the current study explores the experiences of undergraduate students’ as they migrate from face to face to blended learning at one rural based university in Thulamela municipality in the Vhembe district, Limpopo province, South Africa. The study investigates how the undergraduate students adapted to the changes, the challenges encountered by the students, and how the students were able to deal with challenges through their own merits and the support received from their institution of higher learning and the government, during the pandemic.

At the core of the literature of the study was the realisation that most rural areas in South Africa are faced with infrastructural and socio-economic conditions emanating from their historical disadvantages (Houlden and Veletsianos, 2020). Also, there is a dearth of systematic literature documenting the implications of migration to this electronic-based model, for undergraduate teaching and learning in South African rural-based universities. Lastly, rural areas have the potential of negatively impacting the ability of the students to access a digital education due to lack of access to stable network connections, adequate devices, and computer literacy skills (Dube, 2020). It can be noted that such issues can impede the success of students actively taking part in BL particularly the online methodology.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

The study investigated the experiences of rural-based undergraduate students in South Africa, as they switched from a mono-teaching and learning approach (face-to-face) to both contact and online learning approach (blended learning) at the dawn of COVID-19 in 2020. It takes off from previous studies which have demonstrated the possibility of unforeseen challenges and changes of switching from traditional face-to-face to blended learning for students in universities around the world during COVID-19 pandemic. Undergraduate students had insufficient prior knowledge and training in online learning, which frustrated the students and made it difficult for them to partake in online sessions (Engzell, Frey and Verhagen, 2020). The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic resulted to some students not receiving the required training to utilise online learning platforms in their universities (Cristobal-Fransi, Montegut-Salla, Ferrer-Rosell & Daries, 2020). Most rural areas lack the required infrastructure for BL, these may include network connectivity and internet connectivity, which made it difficult for students to effectively undertake online courses (Dube, 2020). Such challenges have rarely been seen with students in South Africa, especially those studying at the rural-based universities as they were not obligated to learn online. Success in BL requires Universities and students to take responsibility for course management skills, have knowledge of information technology skills, compatible devices, and a reliable internet connectivity. This study is one way to fill this knowledge gap about rural undergraduate student's experiences with BL. The study will help develop important insight that can be used making new policies for blended learning at universities in South Africa.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

There are two main significances of these study. Firstly, it helps fill the gap in literature regarding blended learning in the era of Covid-19 pandemic. It will potentially towards the expansion of literature on rural-based and under-resourced institutions of higher learning in South Africa. Secondly, this study will provide important insights on how rural based universities and the Department of Higher Education and Training could develop policies around the blended learning during distresses like natural disaster, war, and pandemics. Given the existence of COVID-19 in our society until we beat this predicament, blended learning seems the best alternative platform through which universities could navigate their academic years, without compromising the quality of education they provide to their students. Research about students' experiences blended learning, therefore, cannot be over-emphasised.

1.4 THE AIM OF THE STUDY

- The aim of this study was to investigate how undergraduate students at a rural based university in South Africa experienced blended learning during the 2020 academic year.

1.5 THE STUDY OBJECTIVES WERE:

- To examine challenges encountered by undergraduate students at the university of Venda as they migrated from face to face to online learning during COVID-19 in 2020.
- To evaluate the online student support services provided to rural-based undergraduate students by their institution of higher learning and government during blended learning challenges.
- To examine the coping strategies devised by rural-based undergraduate students to deal with challenges encountered by the students.

1.6 THE KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS THAT INFORMED THE STUDY:

This study will answer the questions listed below:

- What are the challenges posted by blended learning?
- What online student support services did the rural-based undergraduate students receive from their institution of higher learning and government when they encountered challenges during blended learning?
- How did the students deal with the challenges they encountered due to blended learning?

1.7 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

Below are definitions of the tentative key words used in this study. These are defined in the way they were used in this study.

Lock-down:

It is the limitation of movement (incoming or exit a place of residence) of societies that was announced globally to contain and limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus. To accomplish this people were advised not to move around and encounter other people who may be sick or are transporters of the virus. In short, this means that people must stay at home except it is completely compulsory or an emergency (Nyawo, 2020). In this study the term was used describing immediate shutdown of public facilities including universities which resulted to South African students to shift from face-to-face to BL methods of learning.

COVID-19:

The understanding of the coronavirus disease 2019 is largely built on the WHO's conceptualisation of the virus. It is a severe respiratory illness caused by the SARS-COV 2 virus. Its symptoms are characterized by fever, dry coughing, and the shortness of breath (WHO, 2020). The COVID-19 in this study referred to the pandemic that broke out in 2019, resulting with institutions of higher learning adjusting their mode of teaching and learning from face-to-face to blended learning worldwide.

Pandemic:

It is a widespread occurrence of an infectious disease in a community at a particular time that affects people and kills masses, resulting in pronouncements by governments declaring it a state of emergency (Bora, 2020). For this study 'pandemic' described COVID-19 infection which was declare as a national state of disaster by the South African president Cyril Matamela Ramaphosa from March 2020.

Online Learning:

Aung and Khaing (2015) defined online learning as an instruction method that can be accessed using technological tools that are web-based, web-distributed or web-enabled. Jena (2020) suggested that online learning is a systematic learning approach that uses electrical media, typically over the internet. It was used in this study to capture some parts of the electronic learning methods the rural-based undergraduate students adopted because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The term online learning was used interchangeably with distance learning throughout the study because of their correlation and similarities.

Distance Learning:

It is the education that is undertaken remotely, often including written communication materials together with the audio-visual ones conveyed via the internet through a device for instance cell phone, laptop & computer (Van Schakwyk, 2021). This study adopted the above definition as it is appropriate in describing the method of learning that worldwide tertiary students (including South Africans) adopted because of the COVID-19 pandemic in the academic year 2020.

Blended learning:

Brooks (2020) defined blended learning as the combination of online learning and contact classes administered both remotely and on-site in an alternating manner. The concept was used in this study to describe the combination of online learning and face-to-face learning as adopted by most

South African undergraduate students who in the surface of COVID-19 (academic year 2020) were on first- and second-year level, third year and fourth level of study.

1.8 STRUCTURE OF DISSERTATION/ THESIS CHAPTERS

This study was divided into five chapters. Chapter one was introducing the study. It provided both the theoretical and empirical background that informed the research. The chapter included the problem statement, the study's aim, objectives and research questions, and definitions of key concepts used in the research. Chapter two detailed the theoretical framework and literature review. Through these reviews, the chapter identified the research gaps in research, particularly as they relate to the students' experiences with blended learning. Chapter three provided this study's methodology. It discussed all the basic research components that were used in the research. These includes the research approach, the research design, research paradigm, the population and sampling techniques, the data collection methods, the approach to the data analysis and the basic ethical considerations for the study. Chapter four, the systematic presentation of data was done. There, data was presented as collected using the methods that will be discussed in the preceding chapter. Chapter five will discuss and interpret the data as presented in chapter four. The interpretations will be based on this study's empirical findings. Also, this chapter will conclude this study and provide its recommendations and suggestions for future research.

1.9 Summary

This chapter was about the introduction and background of the study. An overview of the experiences of students regarding BL was provided. The chapter also covered significance of the study, the problem statement, the aim and objectives of the study, the research questions of the study and the definition of concepts of the study. It has been found that most rural based students' experiences challenges such as network connectivity issues, Data issues, and more. With the induced challenges institutions of higher learning then devised faculty, financial, emotional, and academic assistance and the students also devised online learning strategies to cope with BL challenges. The student's strategies included consulting with returning students learn independently going to spots where there is a stable internet connection, visiting uninterrupted places for the duration of the online course, attending in groups or with friends searching for info where they felt that the information provided was insufficient, consulting with fellow classmates and asking the lecturer to use other online platforms to deliver lessons.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter consists of the literature review from different books and journals in attempting to indicate how this research is related to prior research conducted by different researchers on the phenomena of blended learning in rural-based institutions of learning.

Blended Learning (BL) is the mixture of online learning and contact classroom learning that has grown in popularity over the years due to its effectiveness as a method of teaching and learning in the digital era worldwide (Brooks, 2020). With a strong online emphasis and the continued learning off university campuses, BL offers a viable strategy in saving the academic year under the current COVID-19 crisis. While BL presents a viable strategy from the teaching perspective, the learning aspect requires equal consideration.

This literature review is based on three themes: rural-based undergraduate student's challenges of BL, Student Support Services provided by the institutions of higher learning and government to students and the learning strategies that rural-based undergraduate students devised when they experienced challenges during BL. The students' experiences with the BL are influenced by more than the teaching aspect. That is, there are the socio-economic and infrastructural factors that should be considered as universities move towards the implementation of BL (Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2020).

2.2 PRE-COVID TEACHING & LEARNING AT UNDERGRADUATE LEVEL IN SOUTH AFRICA.

The main educational methodology employed in South Africa was face-to-face classroom teaching for almost all basic schools, institutions, and some tertiary facilities such as the colleges of education and universities (Abdullah, Mohd-Isa, and Samsudin, 2019). Although online learning gained acceptance globally, countries like South Africa were not that intensive to it considering the infrastructural, socio-political, and socio-economic factors that hinders the affectivity of this methodology (Demuyakor, 2020). One would say that the "traditional" way of teaching and learning in South Africa was commonly fashioned on the physical methodology particularly in rural-based institutions of higher learning. Online learning has been usually opted for by students

who are working or postgraduates or those who prefer to study through distance online education but not on full-time basis (Abdullah et al., 2019).

Rural areas are remote places found in the countryside, in forests and mountains (Dube, 2020). Typically, rural people lack access to socio-economic amenities, such as quality education, good health services, transport, marketing facilities, and even electricity (Nkoane, 2020). According to the World Bank (2018) a large percentage of the South African population may be classified as rural. Governments has been experiencing hurdles when it comes to supplying quality education services in rural areas which makes these communities to seem off-guard for a digital education (International Association of Universities, 2020).

2.1 DISPARITIES BETWEEN RURAL-BASED INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING AND URBAN BASED INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING IN SOUTH AFRICA.

Makura (2020) postulated that in South Africa during BL implementation, apart from gender inequalities rural-based undergraduate students also revealed other forms of disparities that emanated from the apartheid regime. The ill-fated image was that these students were not privileged as the urban-based students geographically. The divisions and inequalities between White people and Africans in South Africa occasioned less developed infrastructure in most rural based universities (Crawford, et al., 2020).

The country's apartheid government of racial domination and discrimination perpetuated a wide range of educational inequalities which continue to affect the Black communities, including current undergraduates, postgraduates, and post doctorate students in remote rural areas (Van Schakwyk, 2021). South Africa gained independence from British rule in 1994 and, today, most people still live in rural areas.

In more resourced tertiary institutions, on the other hand, the migration to BL has largely gone smoothly (2020; Mtshweni, 2022; Paulette & Cartwright, 2022). This is mainly because E-learning was already in use before the pandemic in these institutions, hence, students were already knowledgeable and competent in exploiting these platforms. Also, students in such institutions had access to reliable internet connectivity and ICT devices; such resources made the migration and use of E-learning very easy. Even when affluent institutions also struggled with other unexpected challenges, the latter were able to justify the migration with arguments that such systems are not new to the students (Paulette & Cartwright, 2022).

In few contexts were the discrepancies in how students adapted to BL divided along resources, as they were in South Africa. The ability to easily adapt and use E-LPs was reflective of the experiences of students in historically white-only institutions - from more elite socio-economic backgrounds (Mtshweni, 2022). Given that in these institutions a mixture of online and the traditional face-to-face teaching had existed, and regularly used for the administration of lecture modules before the COVID-19 (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020), the migration went quite well. In addition, such institutions had adequate funding and ICT resources necessary for implementing online learning (De Klerk, 2020).

Challenges encountered by students in such institutions were, however, mostly psychological issues (Mokoena & Hattingh 2023; Paulette & Cartwright, 2022). Students in such institutions, as Lukenga's (2023) study showed, experienced increased difficulties in dealing with psychological issues, such as trauma, loss, irritation, and disappointment. These arose mainly due to resentment at the loss of independence at the inception of South African national lock-down and subsequent rapid changes in their learning environment and academic demands. On-line learning, for example, meant moving back to their parents' houses from the students' accommodations on the campuses and inability to engage in extra-mural activities; students resented losing the temporary freedom and independence they have when they live on campuses (Zwane, 2023). These generated feelings of irritation which made it difficult for some of them to cope with learning during the pandemic.

2.3 COVID TEACHING & LEARNING FOR GLOBAL UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Tshifhumulo (2020) affirmed that the emergence of COVID-19 came as a blow to human life and to cope a lot of adjustments were needed. In higher education institutions of learning these adjustments included considering shifting some of the classes from face-to-face to virtual classes as a way of limiting people's movements. African countries like Nigeria, Ghana and Zimbabwe advised people to start working from home and similarly universities and other learning institutions suddenly suspended some face-to-face lessons to prevent the Covid-19 transmission and switched some modules to Online and contact classes administering both remotely and on-site in an alternating manner (BL) (Montacute, 2020).

IAU (2020) argued that the method of BL served as a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to the COVID-19 crisis. One clear observation is that this was hastily, without proper arrangements (Bates, 2020). Anifowoshe, Aborode, Ayodele, Iretiayo and David (2020) emphasised that the adoption of BL exposed the digital divide within the Sub-Sahara

African countries between those developed countries that have adequate ICT infrastructure than the developing countries; between higher education institutions within the same country, with some of them being far better equipped and experienced than others; and between students within the same institution, the rich who live in urban areas and the poor in rural areas who can barely afford to access the internet.

Furthermore, (Anifowoshe et al., 2020) discovered that there are large differences in the availability of adequate devices and the advances of computer skills between students from the developing and developed countries and that even on the most advanced continents like Europe students do not have equal opportunities to study online efficiently due to different living conditions, domestic duties, and other factors (United Nations, 2020).

Ghanaian undergraduate students appeared to be the least satisfied with the forms of their online lecture due to the unequally developed ICT infrastructure in remote rural areas where many higher education institutions were unable to deliver lectures online and concurrently many students had limited access to the Internet (Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson and Hanson, 2020). Indeed, the empirical literature confirm that deprived undergraduate students from rural areas (particularly from Africa) find it harder to cope with the online issues because they hinder their participation and active engagement in learning (Aung and Khaing, 2015).

2.4 THEME 1: BLENDED LEARNING CHALLENGES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CONTEXT

Previous researchers alluded that most students in Southern African rural areas experienced lack of access to resources and infrastructural challenges such as poor network connectivity's, incompatible phones, load shedding and low computer literacy skills because of where they come from and where they study resulting in their experiences in BL not being favourable as compared to urban-based and students from developed countries like Europe (Meena, 2020).

Thus, learners in South Africa may not have similar study experiences at university to other students around the world (Bates, 2020). Experiences of blended learning in African institutions of higher learning may differ from individual to individual. However, there are key issues that are similar, that is, infrastructural and socio-economic issues remain for many rural-based students. The underprivileged students may possess similar online experiences due to the disadvantages in their place of residence and education (Dube, 2020).

Mhlanga and Moloji (2020) noted that there have been noticeable developments in digital learning in South Africa. However, historical factors continue to have an impact on the student's experiences in BL particularly most rural-based students (Nkoane, 2020). Ziyu (2020) suggested that the challenges around technological literacy render such developments to be more disruptive than productive because of the context in which they occur.

(Dube 2020) quoting (Fransi et al., 2020) states that most rural areas also lack the social and economic capabilities needed to sustain their technological improvements. That is, in most rural institutions with a predominantly working-class student body and a poor educational background and limited access to resources, technological advancements such as online remote learning are not only disruptive and challenging to uptake but are also difficult to sustain due to resource constraints.

Owusu-Fordjour et al., (2020) discovered that most rural students experience technological challenges, logistical issues and under preparedness making BL to be frustrating for them than face-to-face learning. The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented phenomenon that made it difficult for both students and institutions to plan adequately for blended learning.

The migration of some modules to online learning from contact classes meant that students needed to have ready-on-hand technological hardware such as laptops and tablets, access to stable network coverage and data, and have fair online learning skills. Mhlanga and Moloji (2020) stated that compared to students in developed countries, poor students in developing countries seldom have these on hand; thus, materially lack the resources and skills needed to succeed with online learning.

For example, (Mhlanga and Moloji's 2020) findings are reflective of what transpired in most rural-based institutions in South Africa at the academic year 2020. That is, online learning was mooted during the first week of April 2020 in response to the national lockdown regulations. In addition to the delayed issues, students were supposed to be prepared for blended learning through training; however, this was not the case as COVID-19 was unprecedented (UNISA 2021). In addition, for most students the first year of tertiary education is also the first time they encounter online learning in any form, thus their online learning literacy levels are very low (Munienge, Isong Muhandji, and Masehele, 2020). Like many students in similar position globally, most rural-based undergraduate students needed online training to proceed with the 2020 academic year (UNISA, 2021). Not only do these constraints limit the learning of students, but they also negatively impact on the students' attitudes and experiences of online learning.

Dube (2020) asserted that despite online distance learning seemingly being one of the best ways of learning during the COVID-19 period, the innovation is hampered by the unavailability of connectivity in some rural areas in South Africa. Online learning can be the best option for the students' continued learning, but it is a challenge in rural areas.

Reju (2016) pointed out that Nigerian students who made the best use of online learning are those who are already competent and knowledgeable about using technology to support their learning through online sources, who have sufficient access to good and connected devices, and who are supported by their family and peers. For rural-based students to enjoy blended learning, the challenges, and disruptions they face should be addressed.

Research has shown that most rural-based students experiences lack of access to resources and infrastructural challenges such as poor network connectivity's, load shedding and low computer literacy skills because of where they come from and where they study resulting in their experiences in BL not being favourable as compared to urban-based and students from developed countries like Europe (Onifowoshe et al., 2020).

Similarly, in his study on students from the rural parts of Ghana studying in China, (Demuyakor, 2020) found that those students lacked the necessary background knowledge required for online learning at tertiary level, and they experienced further frustrations due to the cost implications of online learning.

One would say that measures put in place by universities to deal with the COVID 19 pandemic have been mainly to migrate from traditional approaches to teaching and learning towards the digital learning. This move, however, does not impact students in the same way around the world. This is so when one considers that there are serious socio-economic, infrastructural and, attitudinal and skills competency factors that impact on digital learning uptake and student experiences.

2.5 THEME 2: STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES BY INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING AND GOVERNMENT TO RURAL-BASED STUDENTS DURING BL

One of the study's objectives was investigating the online student support services that were provided by rural-based institutions to students when they experienced challenges during BL. A previous study indicated that Student support services served as a solution when blended education posed challenges to rural-based students (Mbatha, 2016).

Kibaru (2018) indicated that the faculty student support services played a vital role by ensuring the success of the courses, developed student learning and skills of new technology, infrastructural set-ups, instructional design, and ethics for online course design. This means that during BL faculties are faced with a huge responsibility of providing students with the required resources and support that would enable them to effectively take part in BL.

Mays & Aluko (2019) stressed out that the online administrative services are very vital to students because there is not much physical contact where the students can get more clarity, they emphasised that rural-based students needed more assistance in admissions, registration, and financial guidance. Although these services are categorised under online student support the inclusion of such administrative and academic support deduces the presence of qualified staff with continuously updated expertise in supporting online students.

Other studies discovered that when student support services are planned accordingly, students are in a better position to cope and adapt with the challenges they encounter during an online course, thus, if the support services are compromised students learning experiences, psychological and social ties to the institution are negatively affected (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). This denotes that, students require all the support that they can get from the institutions of learning during BL so that it can be effective for them.

According to Kelly-Hall (2010) during an online course students support services has the potential of improving students' learning skills, help them in self-growth and development, enables student learning autonomy and integration into the online platform, and train students for the everyday lived realities in the society. In an online learning environment students learn how to facilitate learning software's which improves their computer literacy skills and grants them more control in their learning in the comfort of their own homes.

During the literature review, there were studies that focused on student support services however, other studies focused on lack of information relating to instructional services that should be provided institutions of higher learning to guarantee an excellence online teaching provision to students (Nsamba 2016, Smith 2005, Kibaru 2018, Kelly-Hall 2010 and Ciobanu 2013). Identifying and maintaining rural-based online student support services enabled the institutions to cater a good learning experience to their students (Kibaru, 2020).

Other researchers found out that deciding on a well-planned online student support services enabled improvements and a path for sustainability during the times of natural disasters, waves, and pandemics (Shikulo and Lekhetho, 2020). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic some of Lesotho's rural-based institutions of learning received different support services from their government, this included explicit teaching approaches, financial assistance, educational and psychological counselling (Lekhetho, 2021).

Lekhetho (2021) also alluded that many South African students were privileged to receive the R350 unemployment grant during such tough times because not all countries had the funds to provide such financial assistance (for example Lesotho).

There was a rise of online tutorials and online revisions offered by instructors and tutors. As noted by UNISA (2021) during the COVID-19 period South African students received free online data packages which enabled students to undergo online lessons. Rey-Moreno and Pather (2020) suggested that tutorial sessions can work with individual students or student groups and help them feel less isolated. Tutors/e-tutors can best be used and should ensure continuous professional development of those in such roles. The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic has given a rise to e-tutors who conduct tutorials and revisions which is at the best interest of the students. This goes without saying that in South Africa institutions of higher learning together with the government went all out to save the 2020 academic year and the provision of online student support services for them to yield positive outcomes under the new changes.

One advantage of BL is that students get to learn in the comforts of their own homes, research also noted that online student support services enabled rural-based students to enhance their learning experiences because it offers them more learning exposure (Mays & Aluko, 2019).

Most rural-based institutions of higher learning realised that online student support services alleviate the effects of lack of interactions in physical lessons, shy students can find it easily to comment or consult in an online platform than when they are in a face-to-face environment (Brown, 2017). The prerequisite for BL approaches as a teaching and learning during the COVID-19 period has brought forth the dire need of institutions to invest and focus more on the development of better infrastructures, resources, online course design and student support services (Richardson, 2020).

According to Mahlomaholo (2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a surge in progressive investments of student supports services in all South African public institutions of higher learning for example free online monthly data packages, and free tablets to all National Financial Aid-scheme (NFSAS) bursary and loan holders (first-time entering undergraduate students). Free data packages were intended to enable students to actively take part in all their online academic related activities.

Rey-Moreno and Pather (2020) stressed that all students were supposed to be given free tablets regardless of whether they are funded by NFSAS, they further pointed out that not all students had compatible devices for them to undertake online modules arguing that some rural-based students are prone to face challenges because they lack compatible cell phones, tablets, computers, and laptops that are required in BL.

UNISA (2021) alluded that during the COVID-19 pandemic times, they had to renovate their mode of content delivery and adopted various methods of communication tools such as Twitter, satellite broadcasting, Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Facebook. “Such changes brought about developments and efficiency when students consult, meet, and discuss with other students, seek online emotional and psychological services, and all online academic related facilities such as library which enhances learning, and online group discussions with their classmates through Microsoft Teams” (UNISA, 2021). When there are various Apps that students can use it also simplify communications and interactions, these tools also give students comfort and relief when seeking for personal assistance (for instance counselling sessions) because in the comfort of their own homes they are able to disclose any information as they feel free.

According to Dube (2020) when the student support service is weak, BL students are unhappy, unsatisfied, disorganized and are likely to fail. It, therefore, became essential for countries world-wide to ensure that more funds are directed to assist students to cope when they face challenges during BL (WHO, 2020). Demuyakor (2020) stressed that there are various student support services that has been offered to South African students particularly most rural-based students who expressed concerns of unpreparedness and lack of motivation towards online learning.

Although there are network issues that are beyond the rural-based students’ control, most institutions had to devise ways to proceed with the 2020 academic year. Online student orientation to the institution that introduces online students to procedures and technologies at the institution increases their familiarity with online education at the institution, and possibly decreasing the initial questions that faculty might face from new students.

Online student orientation to online learning helps students understand the importance of time management and self-regulation to online learning success. An introduction of first-time entering students' program was conducted in South Africa by all tertiary institutions of higher learning in the beginning of BL, assistance was also given to the students after probing or showing signs of discontent or confusion with the newly used software's like Moodle, Zoom and Microsoft teams (UNISA, 2021).

Mahlomaholo (2020) argued that this type of orientation and guidance given at the time of COVID-19 did not make the students to become aware of the system, he also stressed that there was not enough time to train the first-time entering students holistically to an extent where they would be able to cope during BL. Dube (2020) suggested that it is of utmost vitality to consider that lack of support services for BL students like academic and technical assistance is one of the issues that set the students back. Academic, emotional, and online support are all types of support needs that can enable students to learn effectively and yield positive outcomes. Van der Westhuizen and Golightly (2019) also alluded that the main concern of BL is technical issues that requires one to possess a compatible device and knowledge to use the software's used.

This implies that students from rural-based institution of higher learning were at a disadvantage and had to experience challenges during BL because they are used to the traditional (face-to-face) methods of teaching and learning which does not require training and the use of software to partake some of their modules online. The World Bank (2020) detailed alarming discoveries that thirty three percent of the South African population is constituted by rural areas. This is worrisome because in most rural-based institutions most students are from rural areas (UNISA, 2021).

(Muniege et al., 2020) asserted that considering South Africa's past government, most previously disadvantaged groups were comfortable with physical education. One would say it is promising that there are noticeable support services offered to students during the times of BL although most of the scholars who researched on SSS during BL focused on developing countries and urban areas (Cristobal-Fransi et al., 2020).

2.6 THEME 3: STRATEGIES THAT UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS DEvised DURING BL

COVID-19 has compelled students world-wide to adapt to the new method of teaching and learning (Blended Learning). There is a broad literature restating some of the students' strategies when they experienced challenges that were posed by the implementation of BL.

This literature shows the importance of students' learning strategies that previous researchers indicated which the students came up to cope with the challenges that they encountered particularly in the online issues. Some research validates that there is no evidence of student's readiness to blended learning because most students did not receive online training from their institution of learning (Sabah, 2019). According to previous research the implementation of BL has given the rise to numerous challenges, some of which are difficult to alleviate (Almaiah, Al-Khasawneh and Althunibat, 2020). To overcome these challenges there is need for alteration approach to teaching and learning resulting to students given more responsibility and independence for their studies.

Kgomotlokoa (2020) posits that COVID-19 has brought the importance of self-regulatory skills to students and it is one skill that has always helped students to succeed in their academic progress and performance. Other scholars also maintained that COVID-19 pandemic made it possible for the students to take full ownership from diagnosing of their learning needs and performing self-regulated goals and methods of learning to achieve specific learning goals and progress (Almaiah et al., 2020).

Most research on South African universities indicated that students have shown that rural-based students were not ready for self-regulatory skills because of the unprecedentedness of the COVID 19 pandemic (Van Lenker and Parolin, 2020). However, research has indicated that through Self-direction tactical learners were able to take the initiative to work independently to achieve individually set learning goals through resilience, discipline, perseverance, and commitment (Jossberger, Brand-Gruwel, van de Wiel and Boshuizen, 2018).

This implies that students were able to work at their own personal pace so that they can attain specific learning objectives, but these required flexibilities, the willingness, determination, and assurance towards their studies. Other researchers noted that through self-directed learning students were able to succeed and obtain problem-solving skills that allows them to always find solutions for their learning (Abdullah, Mohd-Isa, and Samsudin, 2019).

Van der Westhuizen and Golightly (2019) in their study titled: "Developing self-directed learning skills of Geography student teachers through online problem-based learning designs. In Self-directed learning for the 21st century: Implications for higher education" also noted that most students designed a timetable for their assessments so that they meet deadlines set by their instructors, while ensuring that they produce quality and authentic content. Most importantly, self-directed students indicated that they experienced change as a new way of living, a way in which

they can survive and thrive in society and the most efficient way for their development under the given circumstances. They considered the change in their normal learning environment as a challenge to adapt and continue learning through BL (Van der Westhuizen and Golightly, 2019).

To sum up, prior research has revealed that during BL students from all over the world have had to adapt to the new conditions of learning, which can consequently have an impact on their learning experiences negatively and potentially changes their learning experiences requiring them to devise learning strategies that would enable them to cope under the given circumstances. The current study seeks to describe the learning strategies that rural-based undergraduate students devised as they adjusted from contact to blended learning during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

2.7 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Theory is an important part of the research process. Ally (2004) argued that a theoretical framework is the “blueprint” that informs all the other aspects of a study. This study will be underpinned by the Transitional Distance Theory (TDT) and social learning theory. The TDT argues that the students’ experience of learning online can be effective only by consideration of the attendance to dialogue, course structure and student ability to independently take charge of their own learning. The TDT theory consider the students’ experiences as multi-layered, and are thus influenced by multiple factors, many of which are beyond the students’ control.

2.7.1 TRANSITIONAL DISTANCE THEORY

According to Moore (1993) the TDT focus on the attendance to dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy to ensure an efficient distance online learning methodology. His analysis is based on the notion that online learning is challenging because it requires different teaching and learning methods as compared to face-to-face learning. To Moore (1993) the TDT consists of three main components, namely the instructional dialogue, the course structure, and the learner autonomy. Instructional dialogue focuses mainly on the communication used by the instructor to convey lessons to students. Course structure entails the flexibility and how well the students excel in the course content provided by the instructor.

Learner autonomy is the ability of a student to independently work alone academically without heavily relying on their instructor and other student’s assistance. These three components determine the students’ online learning experience and success. The TDT, therefore, could be used to explain the effects of communication between the lecturer and the students, and the influence this has on the students’ learning experiences (Moore, 1993).

Instructional dialogue (also referred to as interaction) is one of the key components that influence the students' online experiences. This means that if there is good communication between the instructor and the students, online learning could result in good experience as well as positive outcomes (Moore, 1993). In South Africa as Li and Lalani (2020) states, rural-based students found blended learning to be challenging because instructional dialogue has been affected negatively given the fact that instructors now must use technological ways to communicate and offer lessons to students and these new ways such as video calling, and conferencing calls rely mainly on the network which is challenging in most rural areas where most students are coming from.

Course structure has also been affected because of the change in the online methodology of teaching and learning. Because some modules had to be moved online, lessons are virtual, notes are on soft material and audios. Such changes can have different effects from person to person. The virtual course structure and nature may disadvantage some rural-based undergraduate students who don't have online learning prior experience and computer literacy skills.

Learner autonomy is a biggest concern in the case of most rural-based undergraduate students who in the surface of COVID-19 (academic year 2020) might not have the ability to work independently in blended learning because they were not provided with training and preparations for Blended learning which result in a completely different setting and learning experiences (UNISA 2021).

Moore (1993) noted that the interaction is also influenced by the educational viewpoints, personality, course content and the environment. Students from rural areas and developing countries have negative attitudes and bad experience with digital learning, as compared to their urban peers (Donlevy, 2003). Undergraduate students from rural areas also display negative attitudes towards digital learning, but digital natives are resilient to traditional teaching and learning methods because they are captivated by technology (Bosch, 2019).

This relates to the study because the experience of a student and where they come from shapes their educational viewpoint, that is most rural students are negative about blended learning. Preferences of traditional face to face methods of teaching and learning may result to students being reluctant to change and being from a rural area can be a disadvantage to limiting other students from benefitting equally in blended learning as urban based students. Success mainly relies on improved transitional distance tactics that result with the improved learning experience (Moore, 1993).

That is, if adequate changes in the interaction methods between the instructor and the students when shifting from the face-to-face learning to the online one, the interactions would create disruptions in communication, thus the process becomes challenging for the students. Furthermore, course structure also impacts on the students' learning experiences. The structure reveals the online program flexibility and how the students could find the course content (Moore, 1993). The instructor's main objective when designing an online course is that of providing quality content (Moore, 1993). The course structure influences the learning experiences because it determines how well a course would yield the expected outcomes. That means the objectively designed course that also considers the use of the digital platforms could potentially create the positive student experience when compared with those that do not take these factors into consideration.

Moore (1993) added that autonomy is also an important element that is required of the students, who are expected to have the ability to work independently. Autonomy is thus seen as the level at which teaching, and learning is "student-centred", and a learned skill rather than a natural outcome (Reissetter et al., 2005). Students who only depend on their instructor's academic assistance require additional support. In this case, shy students might feel nervous to consult virtually.

When interacting with the content, the students are expected to exercise their autonomy and participate during online learning. The way in which the students interact with the course content, and how much autonomy they feel they have in doing so determines the kind of experience they will go through, and this varies from person to person. Some students may have the autonomy but feel disempowered and disadvantaged when it comes to communicating with their classmates (Damuyakor, 2020).

Unlike the face-to-face interactions where students easily ask other students for any academic related queries, online learning requires a phone, data, or internet connectivity. These are some of the challenges that face the under-privileged students in remote rural areas (Moore, 1993). Not all the rural-based undergraduate students have quality devices and computer literacy skills required in the online methodologies, some of the factors may set them behind their peers in urban institutions (UNISA, 2021). Under the given circumstances it can be challenging for most rural-based undergraduate students in the academic year 2020 because some of them also lack proper supporting phones and laptops for blended learning. Logically, this should apply to their interactions with the lecturer and the course content as well. The internet and resource issues

also affect the students' ability to attend online lectures, submit their assignments and do presentations. This implies that if the interaction is compromised, the student cannot have the confidence to cope and adjust well from a contact to blended learning methodologies, they are likely to face difficulties (Moore, 1993).

2.7.2 The social learning theory

According to Hill, Song & West (2009) during BL there are various aspects that impact teaching and learning depending on the individual experiences which may differ from person to person. Such factors include context, culture, community, and learner characteristics. Context entails the basic cognitive functioning that enable understanding of the student in BL (particularly the online setting). Culture discusses the customs and beliefs (a way of life) or (changes in the context of rural-based institution of higher learning phenomenon). Community will comprise of the social groups that occurs because of the implementation of BL in a rural terrain during the COVID 19 pandemic. Learner characteristics entail epistemological belief, individual learning style, self-efficacy, and motivation, all these features play a major role in the transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning methodologies.

2.7.2.1 Context

It is the basic cognitive functioning which enables understanding of what the instructor will be lecturing, on a BL approach context is offered through various means such as live videos, live audios, recorded videos & audios. Recorded lectures are an advantage to students for revision and studying purposes. Context is mobile and students have a digital space where they can share notes, slides, audios, videos & PDFs, human interaction perpetuate context to be shared among students. Easy access on lecturers for rural-based students seemed not to be attainable as compared to urban-based students (UNISA, 2020) bearing in mind issues of poor network signal, load shedding & incompatible devices. Rural-based students were advantaged by various factors that are beyond their control.

2.7.2.2 Interactions

According to the social learning theory knowledge is transmitted during the engagement of various activities, getting feedback, partaking in other forms of human interaction in the society (Henning, 2004). Interaction is likely to be impacted negatively for most rural-based undergraduate students because of challenges such as poor network signal, load shedding & incompatible devices. Garrison & Cleverland- Innes (2005) postulated that the role of interaction on BL has been studied

widely and it is considered as the central to successful learning. Regrettably, the implementation of BL was unprecedented, the unintended consequences of online learning was not fully considered. The online environment hinders rural-based students to fully interact with their lecturers and fellow students. This means that most rural-based students may not have an equal chance to participate and interact entirely as compared to their urban-based students.

2.7.2.3 Group Formations

Caspi, Gorsky, & Chanjut (2003) argues that group discussions have a potential of increasing students' participation and attendance. The idea that the students must attend in groups or write group tasks is motivating considering that in learning teamwork is essential. Rural-based students in south Africa faced difficulties during the lockdown, not everyone was allowed to move as they wished so group work was compromised. During lockdown there were times (during hard lockdown) where there was no room for contact learning this automatically meant that group discussions, group assessments and any academic related activity was moved to the online environment.

2.7. 2.4 Culture and community

According to the social learning perspective during BL female students require more support than their male counter parts (Wheeler, 2002). It stems from our socialisation that the “blue world” dominates the “pink world”, male students seem to be more self-regulated and autonomous more than female students when it comes to adopting the newly advanced technologies. Lockdown regulations resulted to them moving back to their families where house chores become a hinderance for them to actively take part and excel on an online environment. Hill (2002) posits that during BL there is a diverse relationship between perceived sense of community and the learning processes, this means that there are strategies aimed at community engagement such as groupworks and team building. From this perspective a community may not exist in a vacuum, in an online setting it is impossible to practise group learning compared to the traditional ways of teaching and learning. Online learning experiences to rural-based students is not as conducive as urban-based students, who gets potential positive impact of group work & the benefits of integrative teamwork in BL.

2.7.2.5 Learner characteristics

According to the social learning theory learner characteristics influences cognitive activity, there are four factors that may result to the students transiting either effectively on otherwise these are epistemological belief, individual learning style, self-efficacy, and motivation (Graff,2003).

2.7. 2.6 Epistemological beliefs

Hofer (2002) states that epistemological belief refers to ones' belief about the definition of knowledge and how knowledge was constructed. In the case of rural-based students they prefer the traditional way of teaching and learning far more than BL. The more students are favored and convenience by contact learning, the more they are likely to be reluctant to the sudden change of teaching and learning (BL).

2.7.2.7 individual learning style

Graff (2003) argues that there are different personality traits that influences the learning of students, students with general styles of learning and specific abilities in learning are at an advantage than the challenged once. This means that some students may become reinforced and adapt efficiently or they may find it very hard to cope. Self-regulated learners are the ones who are likely to find the transition smoothly, while those who rely heavily on their instructors for assistance are likely to be disadvantaged. This means that the students who are willing to take a stand and become independent in their studies are the once who are likely to adapt and cope in BL. Students with poor managing and learning skills have been documented to be the one who fail and find the online experiences to be revolting and chaotic (Mtsweni, 2022).

In BL the individual learning style play a huge role in determining a good learning experience. Male students seem to devise effective alternatives to learn and excel in the new teaching and learning methodology (BL) (Lukenga, 2023).

2.7.2.8 Self-efficacy

Bandura (1993) argued that self-efficacy replicates the self-assurance enabling students to actively handle new task. From a social learning perspective, self-efficacy is correlated with social anxiety and attention (Hannifin, 1997). Song (2005) posits that students who are more comfortable with online learning technologies reported less difficulties in online learning thereby, they cope and perform exceptionally in an online environment. Most rural-based students lack access to reliable internet connectivity through which to participate and interact with lecturers and peers during the online lectures (South Africa. DHET, 2020). They also need to have sufficient

digital literacy and adequate personal and institutional technological infrastructure that supports the use of E-LPs (Almaiah et al, 2020; Aucejo et al., 2020). Since these elements were not available, students were likely to have a fragmented experience that discourages disposition to learning.

2.7.2. 9 Motivation

Lim Kim (2003) postulated that motivation is categorized as being intrinsic or extrinsic to the student. Intrinsic motivation entails the behaviour that are involved in for personal interest whereas extrinsic motivation refers to behaviours that are performed for a prize or an incentive Deci et., al 1991. Unfortunately, during the Covid 19 pandemic rural-based students did not receive immediate incentives to help salvage the transition from face-to-face to online learning. Only first-time entering students who were NSFAS funded during the 2020 academic year were offered tablets, enabling them to partake online classes efficiently compared to other undergraduate students (second, third & fourth years) (DHET, 2020).

2.8 SUMMARY

The literature brought to light the pre-COVID teaching & learning at undergraduate level in South Africa, COVID teaching & learning for global undergraduate students, student's challenges of blended learning on a global context, student's experiences of blended learning in a South African context, student support services by institutions of higher learning to rural-based students during BL and the strategies that undergraduate rural-based students devised during BL challenges. The theoretical perspectives that underpinned the study was also revealed to support this study's student's experiences.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The chapter's main purpose was to introduce the research methodology that the researcher used when conducting the study. The content below discusses the research methodology. This study used the explorative qualitative research approach. The researcher made use of the constructivism paradigm. Population and sample of the study were derived from one rural-based institution of higher learning at Thohoyandou in the Thulamela municipality of Limpopo province at South Africa using purposive non-probability sampling technique. The data collection instrument that was used to collect data is the semi-structured cell phone interviews and for data analysis thematic data analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data. The last section of the chapter covers the conclusions. All the mentioned methodology made it possible for the research objectives to be attained.

3.1.1 RESEARCH APPROACH

Qualitative research approach enquires people's behaviours', attitudes, and feelings, and provides an in-depth image explaining reasons why people act the way they do (Creswell, 2009). Qualitative research approach does not obtain numerical or statistical data, but collects facts based on people's experiences, opinions, and the meanings they attach on the phenomenon (Babbie and Mouton, 2012). This approach was suitable for the study to understand the experiences of rural-based undergraduates student experiences with blended learning during the COVID 19 pandemic in a rural terrain. According to Donalek and Soldwisch (2004) it is a type of research approach which places its focus on the detailed description of the context. Additionally, Creswell (2009) states that qualitative research approach is a means for obtaining the understanding and exploring what individuals or groups ascribe as meaning to existing social or human problems. Given the study's main objectives the study adopted a qualitative research approach. Qualitative research approach was best and suitable for the study because it provided methodological lenses for focusing on naturalistic experiences rather than controlled measurements, with a subjective exploration of reality from the perspective of an insider (De vos, Strydom, Fouche and Delporrt, 2011).

Unlike the quantitative approach, which provides more of a set of worked out formulas, the approach provides more nuanced understanding for a complicated social reality (De Vos et al., 2011). In other words, the use of qualitative research method enabled the researcher to gain an in-depth understanding to the experiences of undergraduate students with regards to blended learning; how students experienced remote learning and what challenges are presented and how these were negotiated and dealt with by the student's, universities & government in a rural terrain.

The researcher employed this research method because it has a flexible nature of obtaining clear data from respondents and it is also the best method known for the proposed study. Qualitative approach helped the researcher when investigating quality and relevant information from the respondents through the telephonic interviews. The process of data collection (interviews) was recorded on a cell phone recording software then they were repeated during data analysis to avoid overlooking certain parts of information in data collection process.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

The researcher made use of the constructivism paradigm to better understand the experiences of the respondents. This paradigm assisted the researcher to conduct the research and the respondents provided insider perspectives on the proposed topic, explaining, and answering all the research questions which enabled the researcher to get answers that are aligned with the research methodology, aims and objectives. Constructionists hold the views that there is truth not out there, only a description reality that is ever-changing (Devos et al., 2011).

Constructive paradigm was suitable for this research because it enabled the researcher to obtain social and personal insider perspectives about the lived realities and experiences of the rural-based undergraduate students. Life world refers to a person's conscious experience of everyday life and social action (Babbie, 2007). According to Fouché and Schurink (2011) Constructivism paradigm is aimed at explaining how life world of respondents is developed and experienced by the subjects, this research seeks to investigate more about BL experiences of undergraduate students in a rural university. This qualitative research orientation is informed by the constructivist paradigm and is consistent with the view that what matters is how people think about themselves and their realities, and the meanings they read into actions and thoughts. To understand lived experiences, the meanings people apportion in their lives must be considered. And the ways people structure and restructure their lives in response to circumstances helps us understand their behaviours, strategies, and experiences.

3.3 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study used the explorative qualitative research design. According to Creswell (2009), an explorative qualitative research design follows a pattern that seeks and describes new observations, where no prior information exists, or convoluted issues are involved.

It is an approach that occurs when a researcher examines a new interest or when the subject of study itself is relatively new (Babbie and Mouton, 2012). Thus, this study is exploratory in nature as the COVID-19 is a new phenomenon in South Africa and elsewhere. That is, the challenges faced, especially when moving to blended learning because undergraduate students are not used to new methods of blended learning provided new challenges that required exploring.

Given that COVID-19 is a new phenomenon both in South Africa and elsewhere, an exploratory research design was best suited for the study. The researcher explored the undergraduate students' experiences on blended learning at one rural-based university during the 2020 academic year in South Africa. Using this design makes it easier for the study to focus on naturalistic experiences rather than controlled measurements, with a subjective exploration of reality from the students' perspectives through semi-structured cell phone interviews (De Vos, et al., 2011).

3.4 POPULATION

Population is the aggregation of elements from which the sample is selected for the study (Babbie and Mouton, 2012). In this study (ten) first-time entering students from the following faculties were selected as the opening participants: Management science, Health science, Law, Social sciences and the faculty of natural science and mathematics (three students per faculty). Then, twenty returning students were selected from the following faculties: Management science, Health science, Law, Social sciences and faculty of natural science and mathematics (also, three students per faculty), the total number of participants for the study is thirty.

The study collected data from thirty undergraduate students from Management science, Health science, Law, Social sciences and faculty of natural science and mathematics who were enrolled for the academic year 2020 because these groups of undergraduate students experienced BL in a rural terrain due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The age group of the participants ranged from eighteen and they are all Africans. The population consists of both males and females. The sample was not bias, meaning it did not focus on one gender. All the participants were unemployed and depended on their families financially. Due to

the ever-changing infection rate all the students found themselves using both online and contact classes giving them insider perspective about the phenomenon in question.

3.5 SAMPLING

Babbie and Mouton (2012) defined sampling as the process of selecting a group of participants from the main population for the study. This study employed non-probability sampling. Cresswell (2009) defines sampling as a process which is used for finding cases to study. The study has a sample size of thirty participants. Sampling is a practical way of collecting data when the population is inestimable or very large.

In the case where the respondent(s) seem not fully interested to take part as they were not ready, the researcher allowed the respondents and postponed the interview. The researcher then asked for the respondents to pick the time and day of the upcoming interviews to avoid any inconvenience. Most of the respondents were recruited with the motive to develop BL conditions in rural areas so they took part willingly with the idea that the research was being conducted for the betterment of their education.

Not everyone had a chance to be selected because of the age limit (above-eighteen). Purposive sampling method is based on the judgement of a researcher concerning the characteristics of a representative sample (Bless, 2013). The researcher employed the purposive sampling method because it is flexible enough for the research topic.

The topic required the researcher to select undergraduate students who experienced the switch from face-to-face to blended learning in a rural-based university because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Purposive sampling is a decisive organised method of selecting informants suitable required for the research project (Babbie, 2007).

The purposive sampling technique allowed the researcher to select the participants that possess the required characteristics for the proposed research such as lacking in computer literacy, coming from a rural area, and having experienced blended learning during the academic year 2020.

Purposive sampling enabled the researcher to identify thirty participants from different faculties in the university (Management science, Health science, Law, Social sciences and faculty of natural science and mathematics). The researcher achieved this by targeting the on-going physical classes last semester (First semester 2023).

Although this sampling was conducted in such a way that not every element of the population has an opportunity of being selected in the sample, the method was feasible and less time consuming. The first ten undergraduate students from the faculties of (Management science, Health science, Law, Social sciences and faculty of natural science and mathematics) were asked for their contact numbers first day they meet with the researcher.

The researcher also used what's App to communicate further with the respondents for communication purposes. The researcher targeted the first-time entering and returning undergraduate students, these students volunteered to be part of the study. All potential participants were from one rural-based university's first-time entering and returning undergraduate students in 2020 (second to fourth year level then). The researcher opted purposefully for undergraduate student in one rural-based university if they are above eighteen and experienced BL during the year 2020. Undergraduate students were prioritised based on the notion that unlike the postgraduate students, they did not have sufficient prior experience on BL. Only undergraduate students above the age of 18 were considered because from this age a person can consent.

Research requires the adequate sampling method to address the research question and thus fully describe the phenomenon being studied. Qualitative researchers purposively or intentionally seek out the participants for inclusion in the sample because of their knowledge and ability to describe the phenomenon under study (Donalek and Soldwisch, 2004). The purposive sampling was suitable for this study as the informants were purposefully selected. This meant that those who possess the required characteristics for this research were chosen. This made it easy to make overviews about the sample compared to a random sampling procedure where not all participants have the characteristics that the researcher is interested in.

3.6 DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The researcher conducted the semi-structured cell phone interviews for the duration of two weeks. The duration for the telephonic interview took approximately fifteen minutes and more depending on the flow of the conversation. In all, thirty interviews were conducted over a period of three months between February 2020 and June 2020. These interviews were conducted telephonically. The initial plan was to conduct interviews face to face. However, this plan was unfortunately discontinued because of the Covid-19 restrictions in South Africa, which made it impossible to carry out such activities during the pandemic. To protect the study participants, it was necessary to avoid any possibility of physical contact that could potentially put the participants in harm's way.

Before the interviews, conversational rapport was developed with the participants to create a friendly environment for the discussions to occur. Trust, rapport, and comfortability between participants and researcher are important in establishing a successful qualitative research process (Bless et al., 2013). These factors create an environment that enables participants to easily recount their lived experiences.

In day five during the interviews, information was overwhelming already when the researcher reached the fifteenth participant. Because all the respondents are academics, the researcher used English to conduct the interviews so there was no need for language interpretation.

During the recruitments of the participants and interviews, some students expressed a phobia of talking in English as most of them are Venda, but the researcher assured them that being from a rural-based institution does not mean that they are less capable of engaging themselves in academic activities like research because of English. The researcher motivated students that they can play a huge role in research not only as respondents but also as researchers. Some of the students did not have a problem with English because they are not Venda as the researcher, it then becomes a need to use it for conducting the interviews.

Also, network was not a problem during data collection except for only two respondents where the calls were dropped due to poor network connectivity, during these incidences the researcher used what's App messaging to apologize and reschedule the interview considering the suitable time when the respondents would be free.

After some careful consideration the researcher had to make amendments by going back to the field and collect data regarding the Students Support Services (SSS) offered by the institution and government to rural-based students when they encountered challenges during BL. The interviews took only two days and after that the information was analysed, presented, and interpreted after a month.

Gibbs (2014) describes the semi-structured interviews as a set of questions posed to the participants and the researcher probes for elaboration. The interview is a social relationship between the participants and the researcher. In this case, the researcher was interested in other people's stories. Stories are other forms of inquiry during an investigation.

Fouche and Schurink (2011) quoted De Poy and Gilson (2008) as having stated that the researcher must be inclusive and expansive when selecting the participants for the study to cover a wide variety of perspectives. Fouche and Schurink (2011) acknowledged that the main purpose of semi-structured interviews is to understand the experiences of other people and the meanings they attach to such experiences. They allow for the researcher to also take part in the research as the researcher can give clarity to respondents about the questions during the interview.

The researcher also conducted a pilot study with five respondents (two undergraduates first –time entering and three undergraduate returning students) to ensure that the questions that were used on the interviews address the proposed research aim and objectives. The telephonic interviews served to be suitable for this study because they also adhered to containing and reducing the spread and contraction rate of the COVID-19 infection in a manner that it is a data collection tool that makes it possible for researchers to avoid physical contact.

3.7 DATA ANALYSIS

Data for this research was analysed using the thematic data analysis technique. This is the systematic way of using themes that appear as being substantial to the description of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2009). The researcher drew the themes from the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Braun (2012) contends that the thematic analysis method is customarily favoured over other analysis methods because of its theoretical freedom, and it provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide rich and detailed data.

Creswell (2009) stated that the process of thematic data analysis involves working back and forth between the themes and database until the researcher establishes a comprehensive set of themes. In the thematic data analysis, qualitative researchers build their patterns, categories, and themes from the bottom up by organizing the data into abstract units of information.

Braun & Clarke (2006) explained the thematic analysis as a method of identifying, analysing, and reporting themes within data. Thematic analysis is important as it mainly helps organize and describe data sets in detail and help interpret various aspects of the research topic (Gibbs, 2014).

This method of data analysis allowed the researcher to look at the emerged themes relative to the phenomenon being studied (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The thematic data analysis is also suitable here as it has proved to be effective in other researchers' qualitative studies.

Data generated through semi-structured cell phone interviews was subjected to the thematic approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) which comprises the following steps:

- Step 1 Rewrite and rereading all the collected data: Because the data collected was on audio format, the researcher had to start by writing down the responses of the respondents so that she can be able to reread them and understand their views clearly.

The researcher had to be precise for the data to be authentic, the first step was time consuming, but it had to be done thoroughly for the information to be analysed.

- Step 2 Drawing up a list of themes derived from the data: Major issues and themes were recognized and organised from all three research questions of the study. As the themes had emerged, it then became simple to know which data was more useful for the analysis. The data that was addressing the research objectives and questions was the one that the researcher focused on.

- Step 3 Rereading the data. The researcher made sure that the themes that had identified correctly represented the views of the participants, and that they link with the research questions. This step was done repeatedly to ensure that data would not overlook the views of the participant but had to be precise and coherent with the research objectives and questions.

- Step 4 Linking the themes to citations and transcripts: The themes that emerged from the data were linked to previous academic views. In this step it was imperative for the researcher to consider supporting the findings with consulted literature to be able to bring new information that could be useful for bridging the gap in BL.

- Step 5 Checking the categories of themes to interpret them: In the interpretation of data, the researcher stayed alert of the questions that the research is hoping to answer. the researcher made surer that the interpretation is in correlation with the research objectives and questions.

- Step 6 Designing a tool to assist in perceptive patterns in the data to triangulate and regulate the same patterns during data analysis. the researcher used Microsoft Word Office 2013 to design a diagram that had three sections (Research findings, Consulted literature and interpretations). The tool simplified the analysis and interpretations.

- Step 7 Interpreting the data and making meaning: the researcher had to highlight the research outcomes and placing the material according to groups, which are correlating with the research questions and objectives.

Familiarization with the data started with a detailed transcribing of the interviews and observational data from audio to written format by the first researcher. With the transcribing of the data done, it was easier for the other researchers to read and re-read the data. The generation of initial codes and searching of themes followed. Here, statements which stood out for the research were identified and categorized in a simple Microsoft document, with use of colours.

Major issues were also recognized and organized as codes, separately by the researchers. The generated codes by the researchers were constantly compared to ascertain objectivity and dependability of the data. As these codes synchronized, it became easier to categorize them in terms of how they related to the research questions. Furthermore, the fourth step was reviewing of themes. This involved categorizing all significant responses and all the recurring arguments from the participants' statements in a way that relates to the research questions. These responses were further arranged and reviewed as the main themes in relation to the research questions, as the fifth step. Finally, the data were written up (sixth step) in line with the developed themes.

3.8. MEASURES OF QUALITY CONTROL

3.8.1 DEPENDABILITY

Dependability is concerned with the stability of data under different conditions and over time. The study depended on the processes outlined in the research proposal. The study was conducted in accordance with the proposed method for data collection and analysis, interpreting findings and reporting the results of the study (Delpont et al., 2011). To check the dependability of the study, the researcher conducted a pilot study, pretesting in as well as a follow-up to determine whether the researcher made mistakes in conceptualising the study, collecting data, interpreting findings, and reporting the results of the study. The more the researcher is consistent in the research process, the more dependable the results of the study will be (Cohen, Marion & Morrison 2011).

3.8.2 CONFORMABILITY

The term conformability is the qualitative investigator's comparable concern to objectivity. Conformability is the extent to which the researcher admits his or her own biases. These strategies ensured that trustworthiness in the qualitative research projects was observed (Delpont et al., 2011). The research questions be in line with the research objectives, aims and goals as well as the methodology, the researcher aligned everything in the same focus to ensure that the findings remain confirmable (Devos et al., 2011).

3.8.3 CREDIBILITY

Credibility was implemented in this research, based on validity (i.e., tool measuring the degree of realistic quantity) and reliability (for example tool used to give the same results if applied repeatedly) of the theory. The Transitional Distance theory & social learning theory that were used to underpin this study has been tested to see whether they are philosophical and applicable to the topic (Fouche et al., 2011).

3.8.4 Reflexivity

The researcher did not allow her experience of working with some of the students in the classroom to temper and compromise the research processes. The data collection methods were professional succeeding the interview guides, (whether the researcher knew the respondents, there was no room for chit-chatting but, only research related questions were asked). The researcher distanced herself from her role as a tutor and put more focus on exploring the student's experiences and their perspective on the phenomenon. The researcher had a responsibility of being ethical and avoiding biasness during the research processes (Silverman, 2020).

3.9 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to De Vos et al., (2011), the concept of ethics, values, principles, community standards, laws and competence differ. The term "ethics" refers to the preferences that influence human behaviour that is related to the compliance to the code of ideologies, the guidelines of conduct, the charge of the researcher and the standard of notion of a given work (Silverman, 2020). The researcher considered confidentiality, voluntary participation, avoidance to harm and informed consent to protect the rights of both the subjects and the researcher.

3.9.1 INFORMED CONSENT

The consent forms were sent to the participants before they took part in the research in accordance with De Vos et Al's (2011) advice. The researcher created a form of statement of agreement and send it through email and what's App to informants and they printed out the consent form. The consent form was written in an English language considering that all the participants are academics, signing it meant that they understood the nature of research as explained to them by the researcher.

They noted that they were willing to take part of the research, and should it happen that they no longer feel comfortable with taking part to the research, they will discontinue participating. Informants signed the informed consent forms during the days in which they met the researcher

in campus. The researcher first asked if the respondent was an undergraduate student during the academic year 2020, this was done to ensure that the prospective participants clearly and evidently gave their consent to partake in this research (Babbie, 2007) This researcher recorded all the telephonic interviews and store them on the external hard drive which had a password that is known only by the researcher for confidential purposes.

3.9.2 ANONYMITY

The issue of confidentiality is closely connected with the rights of the respondents and the respect for their dignity, and the fidelity was considered (Gibbs, 2014). In line with this principle, this researcher never mentioned the participants' names when the data are presented and discussed. Pseudo names were used to protect the respondents' identity.

3.9.3 DECEPTION

According to Silverman (2020), deception refers to an intentional misinterpretation of perspectives related to the purpose, nature, or the findings of the study. The researcher did not provide respondents with misleading or false information when recruiting them to take part in the study.

3.9.4 AVOIDANCE OF HARM

This research was conducted just after the COVID-19 pandemic, the government no longer enforced regulations to be always observed during interaction. Besides that, the researcher avoided any harm to the participants in the context of exposing them to the situations that may lead to them contracting communicable infections. the researcher observed all the regulations and directives that were followed when communicating with an individual during the pandemic such as the use of sanitizers, keeping two meters and wearing face mask when she approaches respondents to ask for their contact details.

3.9.5 PLAGIARISM

Making use of one's work without acknowledging them is called plagiarism. Also known as academic theft, this act is prohibited. To avoid plagiarism, the researcher subjected the work to the "turn-it-in" software for check-up. Where incidences of plagiarism are noted, these was corrected accordingly.

3.9.6 ETHICAL CLEARANCE

The researcher first obtained the ethical clearance certificate as mandated by the university's Ethical Clearance Committee before conducting the research.

3.9.7 EXPECTED OUTCOMES

The possibility of filling important research gap on the lack of research on blended learning in African continent and providing important insights which could help rural based universities develops policies around blended learning.

3.9.8 DATA MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

The researcher bought an external hard drive purposefully for the research project; any sensitive information relating to the research was confidential. Interviews voice records were kept in that hard drive with a password option that is only known by the researcher. This data was re-played during data analysis to ensure that participants are not misinterpreted.

3.10 SUMMARY

This chapter gave an overview of the methodology that was used for the purpose of the study. The study used the qualitative research design. Population and sample of the study were derived from one rural-based university at Thohoyandou in the Thulamela municipality of Limpopo province at South Africa. Non-probability sampling was used to select the respondents through purposive sampling. The data collection instrument that was used to collect data is the semi-structured cell phone interviews and for data analysis thematic data analysis was used to analyse and interpret the data. Through this methodology the researcher was able to attain the research results. The chapter outlined the research approach, the population and sample, data collection instrument, data analysis and ethical considerations.

CHAPTER 4

DATA PRESENTATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the data that was collected in the study, the data that was collected telephonically was presented through diagrams. The content discussed on this chapter includes (Section A, B, C, D and E). First, it provides section (A) demographic information of each student who took part in the study, section (B) challenges posted by blended learning in a rural based institution of higher learning, section (C) the student support services devised by rural-based institution of learning to students when they encountered BL challenges and section (D) cover the learning strategies that were devised by undergraduate students to cope with blended learning challenges.

4.1.1 SECTION A

Section A presents the demographic information of the participants. Gender, age, school, and level of study. The total number of participants who were interviewed for the purpose of this study is outlined. The gender of the respondents in the study included both males and females. Males took the large proportion of respondents and females on the other hand took the lowest proportion with few participants.

4.2 DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF PARTICIPANTS

Detailed biographic information of the participants is summarized in diagram 1. As indicated in the diagram, of the 30 participants, 10 were first year students, 8 second year students, 6 third year students, and 8 fourth year students. Most of the participants in the study were male ($n = 24$), with fewer being female ($n = 6$). In terms of the field of study for the participants, however, distribution was more balanced, with each faculty at the university represented by six students. While the participants may have varied in terms of study area, age, and year of study, most of the participants ($n = 26$) cited the villages surrounding Thohoyandou (the city where the University of Venda is based) as home and where they had grown up. All participants also claimed to have come from poor backgrounds. Only four of the participants grew up in other areas (two each from Polokwane and Johannesburg), other than the surrounding villages near Thohoyandou. Below is the demographic information of the participants:

4.2.1 DIAGRAM 1: DEMOGRAPHIC DATA OF PARTICIPANTS

Participant number	Age	Gender	School	Level of study (In the academic year 2020)
1	24	Male	Health science	Third year
2	23	Male	Health science	Second year
3	25	Female	Law	Fourth year
4	22	Male	Law	Second year
5	21	Female	Management science	First year
6	24	Male	Management science	Third year
7	27	Male	Health science	Fourth year
8	25	Male	Law	Third year
9	21	Male	Law	First year
10	18	Male	Health science	First year
11	19	Male	Law	First year
12	20	Male	Management science	Second year
13	22	Female	natural science and mathematics	Second year
14	19	Male	Health science	First year
15	20	Male	Law	First year
16	24	Male	Health science	Third year
17	25	Male	natural science and mathematics	Third year
18	23	Male	Management sciences	Second year
19	23	Male	Management sciences	Second year

Participant number	Age	Gender	Faculty	Level of study (In the academic year 2020)
20	25	Male	natural science and mathematics	Fourth year
21	20	Male	Social sciences	First year
22	21	Female	natural science and mathematics	First year
23	22	Female	Social sciences	Fourth year
24	22	Female	Social sciences	Fourth year
25	23	Male	natural science and mathematics	Fourth year
26	21	Male	natural science and mathematics	First year
27	23	Male	Management sciences	Third year
28	24	Male	Social sciences	Fourth year
29	26	Male	Social sciences	Fourth year
30	19	Male	Social sciences	First year

4.3 DIAGRAM 2: THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

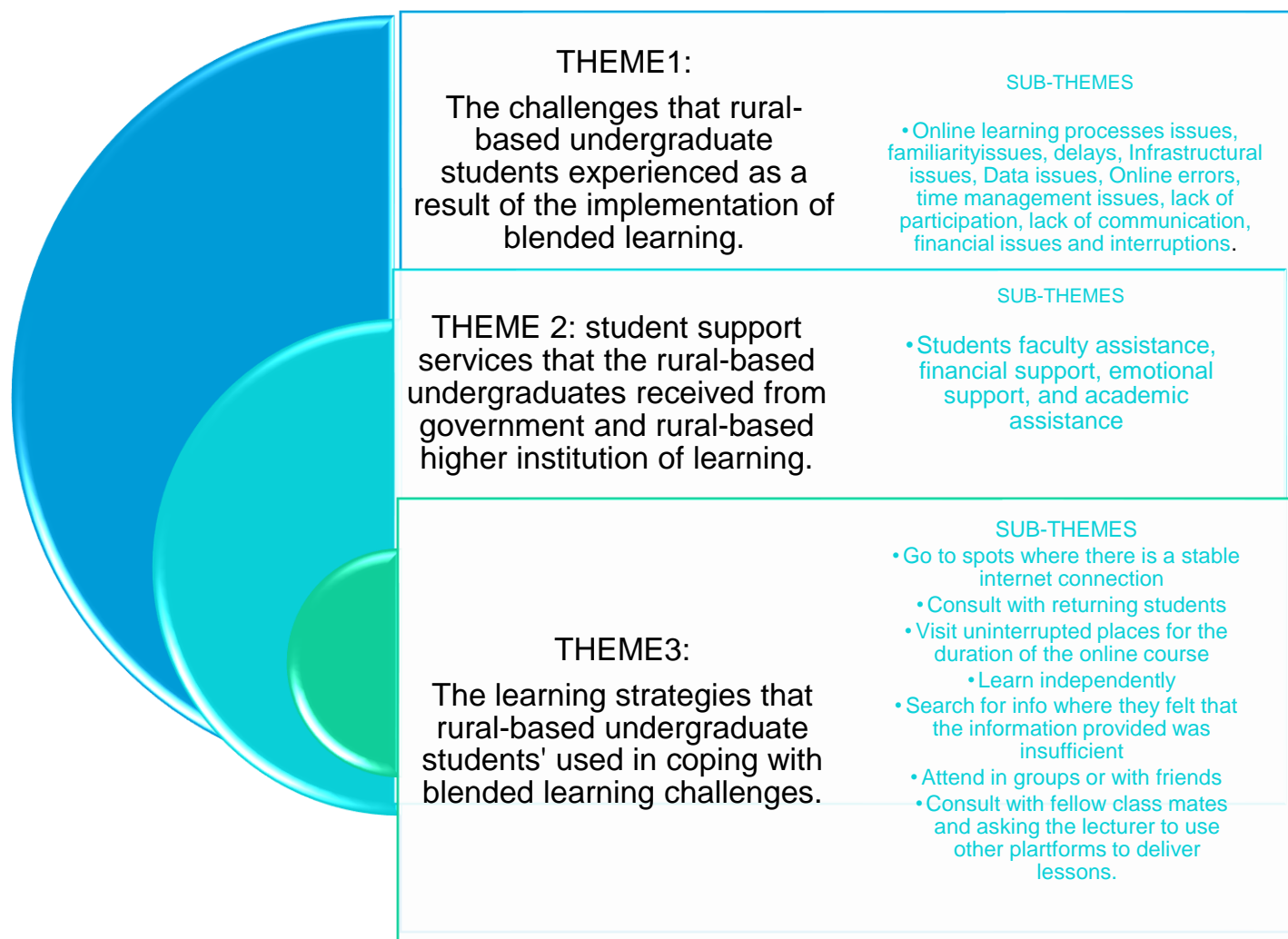


Diagram 2 presents the themes and sub-themes that emerged during the interview sessions. The themes and sub-themes were derived from the objectives of the study which were:

- To examine challenges encountered by undergraduate students at the university of Venda as they migrated from face to face to online learning during COVID-19 in 2020.
- To evaluate the online student support services provided to rural-based undergraduate students by their institution of higher learning and government during BL challenges.
- To examine the coping strategies devised by rural-based undergraduate students to deal with challenges encountered by the students.

4.4 Section B

THEME 1: CHALLENGES OF BLENDED LEARNING

Section B presents the shortcoming aspects of Blended learning particularly the online learning part, the students indicated to have experienced numerous issues during the 2020 academic year. The themes and sub-themes were derived from the objectives of the study. The following research results outlines the challenges that blended education has brought to undergraduate rural-based students. Regrettably, most rural based students are prone to difficulties due to infrastructural and socio-economic factors which can affect their learning experiences.

According to this findings, COVID-19 pandemic was affecting rural-based students of institutions of higher learning in terms of reduction in utilisation of institutions, lack of quality appropriate education, inequalities of access to education services, a decrease in accessibility of education services, Infrastructural issues, Data issues, Online errors, time management issues, lack of participation, lack of communication, financial issues, and interruptions. These challenges made it hard and unbearable for rural-based students to take part in BL, in some instances they may result to poor academic performance and dropouts.

4.4.1 CHALLENGES IN ONLINE LEARNING PROCESSES

The participants' indicated that the learning processes in a virtual setting brought changes that were challenging for them and disadvantaging. They indicated that face-to-face learning processes were merely easy and convenient for them in a rural terrain. Some believed that BL was a good method of learning, but it can be more efficient if both the students and the instructors receive proper training to use the online platforms that are utilised.

Most of the students indicated that they experienced poor internet connectivity which worsened their online learning experiences resulting in poor academic performance, underperforming and even dropouts. According to Ziyu (2020) the call for online learning by educational sector during COVID-19 times worsens educational inequality and it could affect students' adaptation to BL, the current research findings attest to this argument.

Agormedah et al., (2020) stated that lack of formal training and experience in e-learning platforms and students' unpreparedness could negatively affect their behaviour including engagement in learning, satisfaction, participation, motivation for learning, online work skills proficiency, self-directed learning, and efficacy in the use of e-learning devices and their academic performance. It was evident on the participants' responses that contact learning processes were more effective

than BL in a rural terrain. Some students claimed that online learning processes are more advantaging, but most students indicated the opposite. They also indicated that BL may be the best option for learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic period but there is more that still needs to be done to ensure that rural-based students benefit equally from the implementation of 4th industrial revolution advancements.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 1

“Face to face method of learning was better compared to online learning because in contact classes I as a student had a chance to consult same time in class when I missed something, and the lecturer then addressed me instantly which simplified learning.

Lockdown has limited interactions, learning online has been problematic because the digital era is not applicable in most rural areas due to poor network signals, and what’s worst was that we did not receive training in 2020. I always find it slow to consult through emails considering the traffic of the emails that we send to our lecturers, network also make it problematic, and I find online consultations to be unreliable because sometimes I used to receive responses later and in some instances the instructor did not even respond. After the instructor has responded I still felt confused usually and not sure what was the right thing for me to do. Online learning makes learning to be difficult and it is boring because of interruptions that we experience.

One thing that I found uninteresting about online learning is the fact that it is entirely dependent on network and electricity to occur. I found it discouraging that now I must have a stable network connection, compatible smartphone, and data to be able to attend classes. The nature of online learning according to my perspective discourage learner-teacher interaction, learning is compromised particularly to those students that resides in rural areas where they struggle with network.

Face-to-face education was more efficient and less problematic. I understand that the pandemic was unplanned but there is a lot that still needs to be done regarding BL so that it can yield positive outcomes for all students. The engagement of a face-to-face method was encouraging even to students like me who are not good in English as we were able to get the exposure we needed to participate in class.

Even the presence of the instructor was of great help, it was encouraging to get a physical encounter with the lecturers, unfortunately in an online terrain physical contact is excluded. The digital methods of consultation are ushered with interruptions, delays, and unreliability”.

Participant 2

“Contact learning is better in the learning processes because students are more focused considering the allocated time for class or the session and there are few interruptions like in online classes where lecturers must pause if there is noise in the background, some people have a tendency of unmuting the mike during the lessons whilst there are others who make silly comments which waste time.

I feel like online learning has more interruptions from technical to network related issues, it has been a horrifying experience to pursue learning through digital methods firstly the students are not familiar with it and only 33% of the population was allowed in campus residences where there is a stable network connection. Think about it, what about other students who are from rural areas, network is a challenge so are the digital learning processes, I prefer the traditional method of learning it was effective.

The data that we are given by the university is not enough, it gets finished before month end. My mother is a street vendor, and she couldn't go to work because her line of work falls under non-essential services that were restricted during some times in the lockdown. As a result, she could not assist me whenever my data was finished because she did not have an income. I used to miss classes and as a result I failed two of my modules.

I honestly feel that online learning has post more challenges for students particularly us who stay in rural areas that are characterised with low socio-economic conditions and poor internet connectivity. Only first-time entering students who are NSFAS loan holders were allocated with tablets to assist them in taking part in BL.

What about other students who are needy but are not using first-time entering NSFAS loan/bursary holders? It doesn't make sense because I am of the view that most undergraduate students are unemployed and not all of them have a compatible smartphone.

It goes without saying that the unprecedented of the COVID-19 has resulted to educational divides amongst students, from first-time entering students who NSFAS beneficiaries are getting tablets while all returning students are expected to personally provide the devices.

To students from developed countries who also seem to be favoured by BL compared to those from developing countries, meanwhile students from urban areas also seem to have less challenges compared to rural-based students”.

Participant 6

“Online learning processes are far much better because during the sessions there are no delays like in contact classes where the lecturer must wait for late comers before starting the session, which is time consuming, some people make noise in class which is disrupting. I think the digital setting is more focused and has few interruptions from other students, besides considering the COVID-19 circumstances we had no choice but to go for other means to carry on with life.

BL for me is the new normal and until we win the fight against COVID-19 it seems to be the most suitable solution for education to continue and I am loving it. We all know that physical contact is prohibited due to the COVID-19 pandemic, what better way was going to save the academic years from 2020 if not online learning? I think this is the best time for us to realise the capabilities of the 4th industrial revolution. Times have changed and people are now collaborating with machines to solve problems that they encounter in their communities.

COVID-19 has opened new doors, though online learning has always been there we were not compelled by the circumstances to adopt it. Now it is without question that BL seem to be the only best possible methodology of teaching and learning that can take us further.

Everyone has a cell phone if not a smartphone one can use a friend or a relatives’ phone to attend classes, as for familiarity I think the problem is that students like to be spoon-fed and be dependent entirely on their instructors, blackboard has been introduced for years now but people are just so ignorant and when they fail, they then put all the blame to the authorities.

Students have a tendency of displacement instead of taking advantage of the situation, some turn to focus more on the negative and challenges which hinders them in adapting to new things. This is a perfect chance for us to embrace new technological advancements of the 4th industrial revolution and it shouldn’t be difficult because almost every student is used to the digital environment either through a computer or a personal smartphone.

This are the times of making moves not excuses, online learning has brought a different environment of learning that is fun and interesting. The face-to-face methods of learning didn't offer the student more exposure and independence. BL has made provision for a student-centred learning, and I am enjoying it".

Participant 10

"For me online learning complicate learning because our university is still facing issues that make it difficult for students to take part in it. It is one method that needs developed infrastructure and people who are living above the poverty line. Unfortunately, most families in rural areas are in the under-class, I am talking of people who depend on social grants.

I see myself as one of the people who are in the under-class because no one is working at my home, we rely on social grants. That is one of the reasons it was not easy for me to buy a new smartphone. Even when I had a cell phone before I was mugged, I couldn't afford to buy data that is why I use to go to places where there is a free WIFI access.

I think this is a lesson that we always must draw and draft alternative methods of doing things in case of a pandemic. The plan that should be in place must be inclusive, every student must be able to benefit from it. This time around, I think rural-based students were not fully considered.

Most students are coming from families that do not afford to support them financially, most of us are NSFAS dependents, how then does it make sense that we must buy data to attend online sessions. Free data that was given to students was not instantly distributed to students; it took more than five months before we were given the ten gigs."

Participant 30

"I think how someone finds blended learning would depend on their family backgrounds, most of the people who are coming from deprived family backgrounds were obviously hit hard by the negative impacts and the implications of the COVID-19 lockdown.

I had the best financial support system from home, I am the last born. My mother and father have five children, all my four siblings are having decent jobs. My mom and dad are also working, I am the one that needed financial assistance that time.

They did all they could to make sure that I was comfortable, they were making sure that I do not feel the isolation part that online learning posed. They firstly bought me a laptop and a router so that I can have internet access while I am at home. They also bought me a smartphone, but I did not use it for academic related tasks, I preferred to use the laptop because it was fast in internet access than the phone.

I also had a monthly allowance of R2000, I did not encounter any technical or administrative errors. I did not even qualify to get the free tablet because I was not using NSFAS to study. At least those who are NSFAS beneficiaries received tablets to help them attend online sessions. I think some students just have a 'complaining syndrome' suddenly there were some students who were complaining that the data that we received from the university is not enough, all my life no one ever gave me free ten gigs' data. Others were saying that the tablets that they received from school are not of good quality and they are malfunctioned. Some people always find blame in everything, I for one think that NSFAS did their best to help some undergraduate students to take part in online sessions”.

4.4.2 FAMILIARITY ISSUES

Most participants revealed that face to face methods of learning was more favourable to them. Some students stressed that distance education was challenging to them due to lack of knowledge to the online learning platforms that were utilised, those who preferred contact classes stated that it was better because it does not require computer literacy skills which posed serious challenges to rural-based students. Some students indicated that blended learning was better compared to contact learning while, some stated that they had previous experience on blended learning and some of them are coming from urban areas where network connectivity is not a challenge. Moore maintained that preferences of traditional face to face methods of teaching and learning may result to students being reluctant to change to other methods of learning. Success mainly relies on improved transitional distance tactics that result with the improved learning experience (Moore, 1993).

That is, if adequate changes in the interaction methods between the instructor and the students when shifting from the face-to-face learning to the online one, the interactions would create disruptions in communication, thus the process becomes challenging for the students. Brooks and Grajek (2020) confirmed that most of students had not received any e-learning training which made the transition to be a challenge.

The participants' indicated that when BL was implemented after lockdown was announced they were not familiar with the newly used Apps. They indicated that they had no choice but to adapt to the "new normal" which is characterised with virtual methods of teaching and learning.

Most students raised concerns regarding familiarity with the software's used for online lessons which is the reason why most of them struggled with the sudden switch from contact learning to BL. Most students indicated that they struggled with the online platforms that they used in learning and that was challenging because they had no computer literacy skills for instance Moodle and Microsoft Teams were new to them and they had to adapt to them to save the 2020 academic year. Only a few of the students indicated that they were familiar with BL the time when it was introduced last year. Some felt that it wouldn't be difficult to adapt to BL as it was previously used at South African universities through Blackboard, they saw the new changes as an opportunity to learn new things. Responses pertaining students' familiarity with the platforms that were utilised for BL are given bellow:

Participant 3

"I was not familiar with it in the beginning when it was implemented but I had to adapt and even ask returning students who knew what it was all about, as times come to pass, I realised that BL is way more interesting and fun. Most returning students had a bit of light to share, they were aware of the differences between a physical class and a digital one. Self-directed and online skills were important for students to adapt.

Most of us possess the mobile cell phone skills more than computer literacy, luckily there is a slight difference between the use of internet via a cell phone and a computer. However, when someone has used a cell phone in internet it becomes easy for them to adapt in the use of online platforms. Returning students had prior knowledge about Blackboard so it was not as difficult as for the first-time entering students to adapt to BL.

The only challenge I had was that Moodle was new to me, but it has turned out to be easy, other students who had knowledge about it also assisted and the Information and Communications team was always helpful in times where I was struggling with the Apps. BL has turned out to be joyful to me, it just needs someone who is self-directed and the willingness to learn, what I love is that there is an online help team which assist students in every academic related activity. At first, I didn't even know how to log onto Moodle, now I know how to write and submit an assessment, attend sessions and any other academic related activity.

I am now I even assisting 2021 first-time entering students on how to utilise the App, it is not easy for them to adapt because they never had prior tertiary learning, but BL is becoming normal and acceptable amongst them.

Most of us were negative to the transition because we preferred contact learning as we used it before to receive education. With these newly used Apps (Moodle, Teams, and Outlook etc.) I was not at ease, I thought it would be very hard for me because at first, I had no idea how I would manage under the given changes. Online learning is dependent on software's and soft material, the only thing that is required from the student is to familiarise themselves with this software's and have compatible devices as well as a reliable internet network connectivity”.

Participant 2

“The sudden shift of some of my modules to online learning had left me desperate, I was not familiar with blackboard to start with. For me now to familiarise myself with Moodle was a bit complicated. To start with I did not know how to log in, how to submit an online assignment and how to upload an assignment on Turnitin plagiarism App. Another App that was problematic for me was Microsoft Team which was sometimes used for online classes and tutorials.

I did not know what to do when I could not hear the presenter clearly, sometimes I would try to switch the mike on my cell phone to alert the instructor, but I would be kicked off the meeting. I was blank in most of the things because I had no clarity, as a result, I failed three of my 2020 modules in first semester.

Another thing that I found frustrating was having to upload the assigned document on a Turnitin App, I did not know which option to select after the document has been checked. Usually, I would download an assignment that has been highlighted in colours indicating plagiarism from the cover page and even things that I know that I typed them myself.

As a result, I would score lower marks on most assignments because most lecturers had a penalty for students whose similarity index is above a certain percentage. Me not being familiar with some of these Apps that we had to use during BL disadvantaged me, it took me close to a semester to familiarise myself with the new Apps. Second semester of the academic year I didn't struggle much because I was starting to see a little light on the dos and don'ts of online learning.

COVID-19 came as a wakeup call for us not to ignore new technological advancements because it's not like online learning is new, most of us were just ignorant and hesitant to online learning that is why we did not give ourselves enough time to explore it. I was taught by some of my classmates who were on the same level with me because during first year online training they dedicated themselves and it helped them during the COVID-19 pandemic periods”.

Participant 4

“I was familiar with it as it was previously used at most universities in South Africa through Blackboard, the only difference was the software's that were being utilised, it was challenging to get used to the newly used software's such as Microsoft teams, so it became easy to adapt.

Moodle for me turned out to be more advanced, I have always wish to study online and this is the perfect opportunity to enjoy the “digital era”. BL has just opened opportunities for technological advances, since the students received training for the academic year 2021 let's all hope that we will all find it easy to operate and explore this newly used apps. I think it is becoming a common way of teaching and learning and it will open more jobs for the youth which will eradicate unemployment.

I helped most first-time entering students who came to me asking if I can show them how to use Moodle. I cannot imagine how someone can be expected to take part in a different mode of teaching and learning without proper training. It is unfair that students had to device their own means to be able to familiarise themselves with the newly used Apps. Although online learning seems to be easy once one has experience, it would be of great help if all students received proper training before they could utilise it. Even us who once got the experience of Blackboard did not find the transitions that easy, Moodle like I said was different and more advanced.

Another matter was that when we were using Blackboard we were at campus where there is a reliable internet connection, now during Moodle most of us were in the comfort of our homes in remote rural areas.

During Blackboard we had a chance to explore the software because network was not a major concern, now it a different case. We do not have that much exposure like the one we had when we were in campus”.

4.4.3 STRESS

Regarding how students felt about the sudden change from contact learning to BL they indicated that they noticed that it was tough times as things were changing. They indicated that they were stressed, confused, and frustrated by the new changes. Some believed that they were going to be depressed if they carry out their entire degree via BL. Some participants were panicking while some were seeing the new changes as an opportunity to explore new things.

Some students indicated that they felt favoured by the changes and the circumstances whilst most students stated that they were not favoured by the shift, and it became very challenging for them to adapt to the changes which gives an indication that the sudden implementation of online learning had a negative impact to the mental health of some of the students particularly rural-based and underprivileged students”.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 5

“The sudden switch from face to face to BL made me frustrated when data was finished, I was at home and my parents did not have money to give me so that I can buy airtime. COVID-19 hit me hard in my life, because of this pandemic I lost a job that I had recently found as a peer counsellor where I was going to at least earn R1000 monthly, then after that I now must buy extra data so that I can attend all online sessions. The online learning part seemed to be chaotic, it didn’t seem effective for lecturers to send documents, audios and slides online, virtual education is characterised with interruptions such as load shedding and network connectivity challenges. Imagine after losing a job, then the online learning demands as well as the issues of unreliable network all these is straining.

I did not have an income and yet sometimes I was expected to buy data for online learning, I was always broken. It took the government and universities more than six months to give us free data, so I was very strained.

I had a lecturer that would make me even distressed, she was not audible, and it felt like a waste of time and data attending her classes. The lady was bad, even before online lessons most students found it hard to understand her, most people used to say she uses bombastic words to teach, and it is frustrating.

We were going through hell, she did not care that the students do not understand her, we ended up reporting the issue to the dean of our faculty. She changed from there and things were better, she was way too sophisticated for a rural setting, and I use to see her as a snob. It was very frustrating having to face changes while there were many issues at hand, for us the rural-based students, we were not ready for such sudden changes. We had a lot of problems, and it was stressful times. Everything just changed and we were not sure how long the pandemic would last.

It got to a point when I asked myself is this would be our new normal, it disadvantaged most of us and solutions would take years to take effect. I don't think that those who are living in urban areas were as stressed as us, network issues and load shedding was a major problem and it made things hard.

I was at home with my unemployed mother and siblings so there was nothing much that she could do. I did not have anyone to talk to because I could see that even my family members are also facing their own frustrations. The lockdown has made it possible for us to be quarantined even if we were not physically affected by the virus because there was a time when we were not allowed to go anywhere but advised to stay in our respective place of residences unless if it is necessary or an emergency.

It was hard and I was usually worried about my schoolwork, I missed most online sessions due to poor network issues from my village and even when I attended, I was struggling to comprehend what the lecturer would be teaching, and I did not know what to do.

I never pictured that my first-year experience would be this depraved, I was a victim of circumstances like many of my fellow rural-based students, and it is very painful that I failed two modules in the academic year 2020”.

Participant 7

“Some lecturers don't respond to our consultation emails and those who do take time because traffic of emails might delay the responses as we are many consulting at the same time. I don't even like cell phones and worst case there was no online orientation to students of other levels for the academic 2020, only the first-time entering students were offered training and it was not well planned, so it was a stressing and tough times for every student.

It is stressful to wait for a response only to be even more confused; I was always stressing about my marks. They were declining us access with our instructors and there was nothing I could do; I understand that we must avoid physical contact but what about the unreliability of online methods of learning and teaching in a rural area? This thing is depressing.

I think if all lecturers were compassionate and lenient when it comes to addressing the emails that we send when we are consulting it would be effective. Fourth year level fees are very expensive, and I feel like most instructors were not considerate of that fact. We were relying on these emails to take sensitive academic decisions and it would disadvantage and set us back if we were not getting responses.

What was painful is that when lockdown started, we were not allowed to go to lecturers' offices, I was amongst one of those who had access to campus around July 2020, but it did not help. I tried to go to lecturer's offices, but I ended up realising that most of my lecturers were now working from home.

It was hard to communicate with them because the email methods seemed to have a lot of problems, I was stressed and angry at some of the lecturers for not taking their students seriously during the time when we needed them more. It was like even them they were fearing for their lives, they were also preferred to avoid physical contact at all costs, and this had a very bad effect on consultations.

It even got to a point where most lecturers removed consultation notices on the door of their offices and put their email address instead, it was bad I was usually confused. Some students can mislead you if you don't know, one of my classmates once gave me a wrong assignment topic. I wasted my time preparing it only to learn that I was doing a wrong assignment, when I asked her what happened she told me that she made a mistake because she is also stressed by what was going on during the COVID-19 pandemic”.

Participant 27

“I was very happy that we have finally moved to the digital age, I have always wanted to study online. The only problem I had was that most online modules take more time to complete than full time contact modules. Another thing is that it is most common amongst the working class not unemployed young people.

I was excited that all my modules were moved to online, when lockdown started, I went home without any hassle. I decided to use some of my NSFAS food allowance to buy vegetable seeds, I wanted to make a garden at home to sell spinach, mustard spinach, tomatoes, and beetroot.

I took the lockdown as an opportunity for me to make some extra money, I made a lot of money, and I was able to buy data whenever the allocated one ran out. In online learning data is very important. My business was so successful that I did not want to go back to campus in August 2020.

The stress was that I had to leave my garden that has now form part of my daily routine and go back to campus. I remember in the following year 2021 around March there was another weave, so we had to vacate the campus again, I was very excited because my brother was taking care of my garden and we were going to harvest sweet potatoes at that time.

Even at home they were happy that during tough time when most people are restricted from going to work, we had a source of income and food altogether. I feel like the COVID-19 pandemic was a break for everyone to sit back and devise natural ways of producing healthy and cheap food staffs.”

Participant 1

“I felt happy that for the first time we will use BL which is a good way of embracing the innovations of the 4th industrial revolution, though my only concern was network and load shedding. It wasn’t easy buy doable, it’s not like we had a choice, we had to avoid physical contact, closed spaces, and crowded places. BL seemed to be the only option in which all these could be achieved, the government must improve infrastructure and socio-economic conditions for the underprivileged societies, and we can make it happen without more challenges.

People must stop blaming the government and universities for moving some of the modules online because they were only trying to salvage the situation. It is no one’s fault that physical contact has been identified as one of the transmitters of the COVID-19 virus, we must face the facts and reality. People were dying and I think it was a good idea to reduce the up and down movements of people. If we see this as an opportunity, we are going to make the best out of the worst, but if we continue pointing fingers at each other it will also not help.

This is our new reality and unfortunately no one knows how long it will last, it also does not make sense that we all can put our lives on hold and continue after COVID-19 pandemic has passed. We did not anticipate for this to happen, but it did, all we need to do is to find ways of moving on with life because this might take even more than five years until the solutions to the virus are found.

We know that the kinds of research that can bring a cure for COVID-19 might take time, I am happy that the government was able to come up with ways such as BL to save the academic years during the pandemic period. Like I said, no one knows when it will end so I think it is better that we have a way to carry on learning”.

Participant 14

“I was not coping, and it got to a point when I started drinking a lot for me not to stress about my schoolwork. I was at home, and I did not have a good working phone, my phone was a smartphone, but it was old. It kept on freezing and sometimes switching off, this frustrated me whenever I had to attend an online session, present, write a test or submit assignments, and before 2020 I used to see myself as a bright student.

I passed my matric with six distinctions in 2019, 2020 was showing me flames. What was worst is that I do not have parents, so I had no one to turn to. I only had my uncle who was also staying with his family, it was hard, and I was always worried about my schoolwork and performance.

Alcohol made things worse because I would be happy only when am drunk, but usually in the mornings my head would be spinning, and I used to experience a migraine headache. It was bad and I could not eat when I had a hangover.

I even lost weight during that time, I felt like my life was living me. I am one person who always wanted to be in control of the environment and what was happening in my life. During the lockdown I had no control, it was like was relying on what Ramaphosa had to say for me to decide how to live my life, how to do thing, where to do them and when to do them.

Life was so tough, and we were just being told that we must be patient and wait for the government to deliver free tablets that at least I qualified to receive. The only issue is that the tablets took time, and I was missing out while stressed at the same time. The thought of missing out online lessons did not sit well with me and there was nothing that I could do about it.

When lockdown went to hard lockdown alert level 4 for the first time in 2020, I felt like I had lost all control. It goes to a point where I started partying every weekend so that I can never have the time to think about the situation. My issue ended when we got free tablets for online learning from school. Because on first semester I did not have a good working phone, I ended up failing two of my modules in 2020. Luckily, in second semester I had a compatible device, so I managed to pass all my five modules.

4.4.4 VIRTUAL LEARNING ATMOSPHERE CHALLENGES

Considering the new changes, when students were asked if their instructor created an online environment that was conducive and enjoyable for them to take part in learning, some students felt that through BL their lecturers were able to devise a conducive and enjoyable learning environment. Other participants felt that it was the opposite, online learning was unfortunate and disadvantaging particularly to the rural-based students who experienced internet connectivity challenges. Some participants indicated that their instructors tried their level best to provide an online environment that was conducive and enjoyable for them to take part in BL.

Some indicated that their lecturer went an extra mile to always answer their emails and what's App texts that were academic related, but the problem was that even the lecturers themselves were struggling to adapt to the new changes. They indicated that in times they used to receive tips and extra study materials from their instructors. Other participants indicated that through BL their instructors managed and try their best to provide a good learning and teaching environment, but the issue was that the ten-gigs data that was allocated for them was not enough which made them to skip classes whenever the data was finished.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 8

“Some lecturer tried their best to devise a good and enjoyable online environment, but I feel like some lecturers were struggling to understand and adapt to BL methods of teaching particularly the online part making it hard even for lecturer to cope under the given circumstances. As a result of the unprecedented of the COVID-19 pandemic, time was not enough to train the lecturers and students on ways of operating the new Apps.

Most lecturers were also in shock and still learning online methods of teaching, these affected their teaching pace as time was not in our side. Some lecturers did not only conduct online sessions, but they also provided us with different materials to prepare us, we had recorded live sessions, recorded audios, PDF files, slides, and textbooks. I think that this placed us in a better position to make it even when we are going through changes.

It was an inspiration to see that other educators were concerned and kind enough to devise different materials that gave us more detailed information. There were some lecturers who did not mind even when you call them on their cell phone, this made things a bit easier because during BL lecturers seemed unreachable.

It was stressful to learn under pressure using new methods, I think it was good that some instructors also adjusted and came through for us by providing us with more content notes and other modes of conveying lessons”.

Participant 9

“The lecturers did provide a good and enjoyable online environment for the student to take part in learning, as time goes by, I realized that BL was doable the only disadvantage was that the 10-gigs provided was not sufficient and poor network connectivity challenges.

I remember one of my lecturers who was so dedicated that if you missed some information, he would create extra lesson sessions for us and after all the assessments that we were given there was a bonus test for those who might have missed or fail one assessment.

He did not mind inviting us to a lecture hall on a Saturday and revise things we told him that we did not understand, he was so committed to his work to an extent that most students were doing exceptionally well on his modules.

The issue of data was a concern for most of us, we enjoyed physical classes because they did not require network, a device, and data. We were fortunate to have him because most lecturers would not come to work on Saturday considering that they would not be paid by the University for doing so. The university pays for Monday- Friday excluding the Holidays. This guy preferred to use weekends and holidays to offer us with extra-lessons which makes his one ok a kind”.

Participant 10

“I felt like most lecturers were also caught off-guard by the sudden implementation of blended learning because most of them seemed to be blank when it came to the technical challenges that we used to face. It was frustrating to rely only on IT assistants because when it comes to technical issues, our instructors would not attend to such emails. The modules that were not moved to online be running smoothly as compared to those that we had to take online. The instructors were sometimes not audible, and the voice would be cut off due to network issues, it was a nightmare. We were trying to implement a method of teaching that disadvantages rural-based students.

The most frustrating time was during the early days of the lockdown around June 2020, some lecturers were not answering my emails and I found myself having to go back to campus so that I can take the risk and go to their offices to consult. One disadvantage of online learning in a rural context is that interaction and communications get to be negatively impacted, I think it's better for urban-based universities in this regard but for us the case is different.

Most people were not attending online session, they had issues because most of them were from rural areas, some did not have the device to attend and other would complain that data is too expensive and the free data that we received from school was not sufficient. A class of two hundred students will be having less than fifty students in most days especially the online one, at least the ones that were physical would have close to a hundred students”.

4.4.5 COMMUNICATIONS OBSTRUCTIONS

Participants indicated that they found the communication to have been impacted negatively. Some participants indicated that they found BL to simplify the communication between them, their classmates, and lecturers. Whilst some noted that a good communication either through online platforms or physically depends on the lecturer.

Participants specified that also the communication they had with their classmates depended mainly on the person because some people were reliable while others were not. Most students indicated that one of the disadvantages of BL is that consultations and interactions are done on a digital setting which delays things. Students indicated that load shedding, poor network coverage and unfamiliarity with BL platforms such as Moodle had negatively impacted their communication with their instructors and fellow students.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 10

“Due to lack of network, I found it hard to consult to my lecturer, in most cases I would get the response late or a wrong answer that would even make me to be more confused. It is not helpful at all to only rely on digital communication, it was prohibited for us to consult to our lecturers’ offices, and we were told to use emails.

I remember another day I sent an email to my lecturer asking how to submit an assignment via Moodle, if it was not for my friend who helped me, I would have not submitted that assignment on time because my lecturer replied 3 days after I sent the email, and I was submitting two days’ earlier time.

BL was posing a chance for us to reach out to others, in class I don’t usually find it easy to ask a fellow student about the scope of the test or time of online submission because the lecturers make provision of such information. In online classes I usually had no such information due to various reasons like being cut off from the meeting or load-shedding. This was a time when I started reaching out to my fellow classmate so that I would not miss out on any academic related updates”.

Participant 11

“During face-to-face learning I had an opportunity to make follow ups if when the lecturer is answering me but in BL if the answer is not addressing my concerns, I must make follow up emails which might be answered late or still missing detailed information which affect communication between me and my instructors and my fellow classmates.

The online ways of consultation delays things and are unreliable, sometimes I felt like the lecturer was just responding for the sake of getting rid of me and when I make follow up, they wouldn’t even show interest, and these really discouraged me to consult.

The boring part is that we were given office telephone numbers in case we wanted to consult, whenever I did, there was no response but rather, the phone will ring until it hung up. Most lecturers seemed not too comfortable with the idea of sharing their personal contact details with the undergraduate students. This was very disadvantaging and stressing at the same time.

The instructors seemed to be unreachable and hard to get to most rural-based students because we used to experience more issues that urban-based student do not have to go through. I really cannot wait to get over and done with the BL because it looks like a recipe for disaster”.

Participant 12

“My instructors were very helpful and quick to respond to my emails whenever I consulted. I used to receive responses before the day that I sent an email pass, it really helped me because in most modules I was relying on emails for consultations. It helped to have such committed and caring leaders.

There was one lecturer who used to answer emails instantly, you will even think that this person is always sitting in front of their computer or either they have a notified for incoming emails, with him and his module I was always up-to-date, and I could see that it is possible to rely on emails.

For the very first time I was starting to see the importance of email and even saw it as an effective mode of communication. It was through him that I could see that we were left behind when it comes to adopting some of the 4th industrial revolution advancements.

The COVID-19 pandemic has taught me to take emails very serious and to always check them whenever I get time. I think this is a life skill that one must possess because even at work, you need to be always alerted to email as some will be requiring your immediate response.

Before COVID-19 I also didn't know how to construct an email, BL has provided me with an opportunity of writing different kind of emails and I think now I have the knowledge and skill required in a professional working setting”.

4.4.6 DELAYED VIRTUAL CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Participants indicated that they found the communication to have been impacted negatively. Some participants indicated that they found BL to simplify the communication between them, their classmates, and lecturers.

Whilst some students noted that a good communication either through online platforms or physically depends on the lecturer. Participants also specified that also the communication they had with their classmates depended mainly on the person because some people were reliable while others were not.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant10

“It becomes hard to consult with the lecturers as some do not even respond to what's App and emails that I used to send. It's hard because some lecturers don't prefer sharing their personal

cell phone contact details and emails are unreliable, and to those who give us their numbers I don't know if it is because they are too busy but sometimes, they take -too much time to respond. Some of us are not used to emails, at high school we were never required to use them as a mode of communication with our educators.

It doesn't seem effective, and it set us back and slow down our progress. It is also very discouraging to wait for a response for more than a week when you know that the person had internet access but ignored your grievances”.

Participant 1

“Emails are very tricky and reliable; I remember a time I sent an email to one of my lecturers and it took me a week to realise the problem. What had happened is that the email did not go through due to lack of network and it was automatically saved into the drafts folder. I didn't know what I would have done if it wasn't for my classmates who gave me clarity on the Turnitin credentials that we were supposed to use when submitting an assignment on Moodle.

By the time I realised that the email did not go through I was busy blaming my lecturer that she did not want to respond to important emails. The lesson I learnt is that sometime is the technical issues that makes the virtual ways of communication to seem unreliable and malfunction but not the fault of the lecturers. Sometimes even in their side, you can find that there is something wrong with their email. I remember another time when my lecturer told us in class that their g-mail was not working and if we needed to consult it would be advisable for us to use the university's email. Most people were also being misled because they did not want to attend classes either physically or virtually, as a result they would miss out important information like sending an email to a wrong email address”.

Participant11

“You might send an email consulting about something which is an emergency and by the time the lecturer responds after 24 hours the information was no longer needed as we submitted considering deadlines. It is very disadvantaging as you end up submitting wrongly which has negative implications and failure to submit can sometime result to zero allocation whilst, to re-write one must provide a medical letter proving that they were sick during the date of the task. It is the only way were one can get a chance for a re-write for an assessment if they submitted late and penalised or did not submit. There was an assignment that I could not submit on time via Moodle, when I reached out to the lecturer he told me that he would not grant me a re-submission

unless if I present a medical letter, I had to go to the doctor and lie to her so that she can write a letter assigned on that date of submission that I had missed, this mistake cost me because I had to pay the doctor R500 for consultation fee”

Participant 16

“Some lecturers never even bothered to return to my emails, I sent many emails with no responses I then decided to go to their offices where I used to be told to go back and send an email again. Consulting through emails is not as efficient as contact consultations, it would be much easier if we had the lecturer’s cell number so that we can send what’s App texts or messages, but this was not the case. My lecturer gave me her office numbers and when I called there was no response, sometimes when the office phone was answered it was not her and I could not consult to someone that I did not know.

I got so helpless to an extent where I wouldn’t even leave a message because I would be told that my lecturer was working at home and not in campus. This lockdown issue has also given birth to a new style for lecturers lazing around with the excuse that they would be working from home, it didn’t seem to be effective. Lecturers were unreachable and hard to locate, we were left with the option of seeking for help to returning students, peer educators and tutors,

Some of these people had access to the personal contact details to the lecturers. A circle of communicating started to emerge because we realise that it was the easy way to get to the lecturers. It was easy and fast for the lecturers to address our issues if we asked the tutors, peer educators and mentors.

Most of the postgraduate students had cell phone numbers of lecturers and they were able to assist us, but it was costly. Instead of relying only on emails the failed system of consultation was bringing back the use of what’s App just that during those time there were various intermediaries between the lecturers and the students.

It did not seem fair that lecturers did not mind communicating with other students while other students were denied access. I was lucky because I had a friend who was a tutor in the academic year 2020, he is the one who used to consult with some of my lecturers physically while I was at home.

At least some of the students were allowed to stay in campus and they were the once who could assist us if we were desperate. The only issue would be if the person that you have sent is not reliable or did not find the lecturer in their offices or either they texted the lecturer and he or she takes time to respond. Although there was no guarantee that they would find the lecturer, at least it was another way of trying to reach the lecturers”.

4.4.7 CONSULTATION RESPONSE ISSUES

Question8 was focused on finding out if the students felt that they were addressed when their lecturer responded to their emails during consultations, participants indicated that their concerns were addressed promptly. Students indicated that they experienced hurdles receiving responses. Some respondents stated that they received responses after twenty-four hours of consulting whilst others stressed that they did not receive responses from their lecturers as they consulted.

Most students indicated that because of receiving late responses from their lecturers they found themselves submitting assessments in a wrong way, in wrong times and getting a zero because of failing to submit. Participants stated that even after they were responded to, they were further confused and felt misled whilst some students indicated that there are factors which can influence the responses by the lecturer.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant14

“It is hard to understand responses from lecturers particularly calculations of formulas, even after the responses I sometimes felt misplaced and needed more clarity.

At times when I saw that I was not promptly responded to, I would use YouTube to get more clarity because it was confusing to grasp more details in such little time that was left. I really felt behind because most of my modules were moved to online learning, I knew I would fail if I did not search for more information on the internet.

My phone was full of YouTube videos that I downloaded for me to study and practice formulas. Most lecturers didn't mind making more time for extra classes or revisions, if I had not pulled up my socks, I wouldn't have made it believe you me. This was a time where one needed to take charge of their own education, it was way past spoon-feeding times. We are learning during hard time and the predicaments are resulting to more blessings in disguises. I am enjoying various lessons and the fascinating part is that I get to learn even about the things I will come across on

the second level. It is exciting to have such exposure and no limitations to learning. I did not have time to stress but rather I focussed on the solution sides. I started to share some of the academic videos that I downloaded on the internet, they were very helpful because you can replay the videos until you fully understand the subject matter”.

Participant 13

“I felt addressed when the lecturer responded to my concerns, the lecturer’s inputs were very helpful. Tutorials also assisted in simplifying information; my lecturer even create a what’s App group with our tutor who used to focus on topics that the students indicated that they were struggling with during class time. The more we didn’t understand something the more it had a chance to be more elaborated to us during tutorials.

What I realised is that for learning to take place efficiently, we were supposed to have good working relationship and effective communication with our educators. A good communication enables for important information to be conveyed in the right time, while a bad and a malfunctioned communication channel results to miscommunication and misconduct”.

Participant 15

“It depends on the course and how well you ask the question and whether the lecturer understands your question, sometimes I felt addressed after the lecturer responded and sometimes, I felt frustrated. Most times I found it hard to understand if its calculations and formulas, these require focus and attention so I feel like we needed more time so that all of us can understand.

The problem with us most students is that we do not know how to write an email, as a result the lecturer asks further before answering and understanding the question that we will be posing. In most of the emails that my instructors would make a follow-up to understand what I am saying I would realise that I usually missed important information that would enable them to better help me for instance student number, name(s), and surname.

There was a time when I sent an email to my instructor but because I was confused, I did not include my credentials they had to ask me to provide them so that they can easily assist. Sometimes is not the fault of the lecturers not to answer what we inquired but ours. Sometimes it is the course code that needs to be included on the email for the person who is assisting you to be able to navigate your information. It is important for us to know how to write emails. After the

encounter I learned that I needed to re-read the email before I press the send button and it was my responsibility to make sure that I had included all the important information that would help the person helping me to quickly assist without follow-up emails.

It is also important to include your phone numbers in the end of your email because besides the fact that most lecturers don't chat with students via what's App, some don't mind, and they also have an option of calling you with their office telephone in case of serious matters or urgency".

4.4.8 MISUNDERSTANDING THE COURSE CONTENT NOTES

To identify if students encountered challenges in understanding the content of the notes, students were asked if they had trouble with understanding the course content notes. Findings revealed that students indicated that it was difficult for them to understand and follow up content notes that the lecturer provided online. Some students noted that it depended on the lecturer and the course whilst some students indicated that it was easy for them to understand and follow up the content in lecturer notes with online learning.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 16

"I understood the contents of the notes, academic work is academic work either done physically or virtually it depends on your willingness to take an extra mile and make your own notes when listening to the online lectures, it simplifies studying and enable you to read with an understanding.

What I know is that because some of the courses have been moved to online, some people won't attend but still expect to understand the slides. The issue is mostly with those students who are repeating they don't want to attend all they care about is previous question papers. That is the reason why most people were struggling to understand the lecturer's notes.

In my other modules for example there were people that I used to see only when we are writing a test or exams. You will be surprised to see many new faces and yet those people never make time to attend either in class or online,

In most slides the lecturer is the one who created them, leaving them in a perfect position to teach and instruct the students to the right direction. I attended all my classes either physically or virtually placing me in a better position of understanding the lecturer's content notes".

Participant 17

“I did not understand the content of the notes because I needed more elaborations, but I searched for extra information on the internet about topics that I felt that I lacked an understanding. BL requires one to take charge in their study, I feel more knowledgeable now. I depended more on myself which was more beneficial to me because at the end of the day I would be attaining more knowledge. If I did not give myself enough time to search and familiarise myself more with the virtual environment I was going to struggle because most of my lecturers were not that explicit.

I used to be surprised when the class is finished and as you look at the things that were covered that day you will realise that the class did not address many things. It got to a point where I saw it not seem for me to attend some classes especially the ones I was repeating. I gave more commitment to the courses that I enrolled for third year level; I knew if I studied the old material for the modules, I had failed in the previous academic year I would make it because the lecturers who were responsible for facilitating the module in 2019 was the same in 2020.

My main concern was on the modules for third year level that were moved online because I was not doing good, I managed to pass all my modules in 2020 anyways. This was because I took it upon myself to do something about the problem, I did not waste my time by complaining or blaming the government, university, or the COVID-19 pandemic.

Instead of pointing out fingers, I wanted to make the best out of a situation where most rural-based students were desperate and stressed. Complaining was not going to save the situation, COVID-19 is here, and it does not look like we will beat it any time soon. The better we accept the reality, the better we will devise ways to move on”.

Participant 22

“Understanding content notes depends on three factors in my understanding the course, lecturer, and my attitude towards the course, if I like the course & the lecturer my willingness to learn is easy to attain but if I am negative about these three things it is challenging to understand what the course is all about.

Most people expect to pass a module while they do not like the lecturer, it is impossible. I wonder why people tend to develop feelings for lecturers, it is not ethical at all. The only thing that can enable one to pass is to establish a good working relationship with their instructor. This will enable the student to give themselves time to listen and understand the educator.

One must also have interest on the course, if you hate the module, you are studying you are likely not to commit yourself to it. Conversely, if you develop an interest on the module, you are likely to commit yourself, improve and excel on the course.

There is a saying that says “your attitude determines your altitudes” this is very true because if your attitude is bad about someone you are likely not to give them a listening ear. In education I think it is important for students to have a positive approach and attitude towards their modules and lecturers”.

Participant 23

“BL makes things to be complicated, the lecturer did not have enough time to explain everything on the notes. In most times I had to ask my fellow classmates to meet up and discuss sections where we misunderstood the notes. Through group discussions I managed to grasp more information on the notes that the lecturers were providing online.

In an online class students are just quiet, and the lecturer would be talking alone, in some modules the lecture will even choose students randomly, but still, we use to keep quiet. Mostly, the class will end, and I would realise that I did not grasp even a single thing from what the lecturer was teaching. It felt like it was a waste of time I think that is why most people were not attending online classes because they were not detailed”.

Participant 25

“To tell the truth I am even surprised how I passed that year, I was blank with most of the notes in my modules but to my surprise I used the “cram, pass & forget” strategy, it works hence I did not learn much because time was not on our side. I had to make sure that I memorise the notes without understanding because sometimes I missed the lectures, when I wrote exams, I was panicking thinking that I would fail some of my modules but to my surprise I passed all of them.

What most of us would do is that we used to use the power point slides provided in class to prepare for a test, the strategy of cramming worked well, and I passed most of my fourth-year level modules with flying colours, my only concern was that I was not learning more but I was learning just to get over with and graduate.

I feel like online course don't carry much weight, students have many ways of cheating the system and making it without being caught. I did not agree with the idea that one can use a cell phone to write an exam or a test on Moodle. Firstly, how would the invigilator ensure that you do not go to Google and search for information that can assist you answering some of the questions?

It didn't make sense the system was compromised and had a lot of loopholes. There was this thing of having to upload a document for plagiarism detection before submission and attaching the report with the document. While there are such software's there is also many more Apps for paraphrasing and more tactics one can use to override the penalties.

The more the university came up with notions of how to spot unethical behaviour, the more we were devising ways to survive and score good marks. It was boring that now the educators were very vigilant and acting like they themselves never plagiarised once in their lives, I am not saying that it is right, but I felt like we were being ambushed".

4.4.9 NETWORK CONNECTIVITY ISSUES

Access to the internet is one of the critical factors to BL success since students will have to access the internet before logging into a particular BL platform. Most of the higher educational institutions in African countries lack access in internet connectivity or gadgets needed to fully participate in BL, the condition is far poorer for lower resourced environments like African countries where internet broadcasting rates is typically little and many students who lack devices to enable BL at home (World Bank, 2020). Students' failure to have access to a stable network connectivity would disadvantage students during BL. These results align with previous study that forty three percent have no Internet access at home. Most of the students in sub-Saharan Africa have no household computers while eighty-two per cent are unable to get online. About fifty-six million learners live in locations not served by mobile networks in Africa (UN, 2020).

Most participants indicated that they experienced a poor network coverage because they live in rural areas. Some of them indicated that BL could not be possible if they are in their respective homes, network was a common problem. Whilst some felt that they did not have network connectivity problems, most students stated that it was tough times for them to shift from contact learning to BL.

Below are the responses that were given:

Participant 18

“The only problem with online learning is poor network coverage from where I come from, at Manini the network is bad, and it is stressful. I had to come to campus so that I can have access to free WIFI because I realised that when I am at home, I missed lessons and could not do what I wanted to do online, and it was a problem for me. Still, I was at home but had to pay for transport to come to campus when I wanted to do things online to get a stable connection.

I was lucky because I stay at Manini which is not far from the campus, I was paying a local price of R10 to go to school using public transport. The financial burden was devastating, and I couldn't help it, if I chose to do things while I am at home, I was the one who was going to suffer academically.

The challenge I had was when WIFI is down on campus or whenever there is load-shedding, it was inconveniencing me because I would be left confused not knowing what time the electricity was going to come back. We all knew that once there is an electric power cut, it is likely to take two hours so if it happens in the afternoon around three o'clock, I had no choice but to take a taxi and go back home.

It set me back because I sometimes missed presentations and lessons. At least some lecturers were kind enough to understand some of the new challenges we were facing because of online learning. I remember a time when I failed to submit my assignment on Moodle while I was in campus because WIFI was acting up that day, I quickly rushed to the lecturer's office and as I explained to her what transpired, she understood, and she gave me a chance to re-submit without a penalty.

It was good that we had lecturers who felt the disadvantages that were posed by online learning. The challenges that we were facing during those days are different from the academic issues we had before the COVID-19 pandemic. In online learning there are technical and infrastructural challenges while face-to-face learning doesn't pose such issues”.

Participant 19

“I did not experience network connectivity issues as I am from an urban area, at Gauteng BL was doable for me, although at first, I was not knowledgeable of the platforms that were being utilised even this year in 2021 June when the country went back to alert lockdown level4 I continued my

modules through online learning. Now I am familiar with Apps like Moodle, Microsoft teams and Connect yard and network is not a concern.

Online learning is doable if you have a stable network connection, access, and a device. It doesn't matter where you are, you can attend while sleeping, cooking, eating or anything you can think of. If you switch off the mike, you can even go to the loo.

The only thing that did not sit well with me was in instances where the lecturer will be pointing out students and then they kept quiet. People will act like they don't know where the mike is so that they can switch it on or that they are experiencing a poor signal.

Most people were like robots, the person would attend classes' everyday but not say a thing in any of the sessions. It was like the participation of most students had gone down because they did not want to be called out to answer questions.

We are afraid of making mistakes whenever we are talking in English which make most of us to be nervous. In most sessions the lectures would just read the slides and flow for two hours without stopping and asking the students if they understood. It was like we were dramatizing learning for the sake of trying to salvage the situation".

Participant 20

"I am from Tshidzivhe and network was very bad to the extent where I could only find a stable connection in the mountains, mind you it was in 2021 during alert lockdown level 3 and we were told to stay at home and only come out of our homes for essential services and work with proof. The police used to chase people and arrest them if they are just gallivanting, under such circumstances I had no option but to go to the mountains if I wanted to do academic related things. I felt like "I was risking my future to save my future".

Participant 21

"I stay at Tshakhuma and network was a major concern for me, it was frustrating because sometimes I would be cut off from an online class, not being audible when you unmute the mike and submitting assessments late.

I wish something could be done about these network issue because if we carry on with BL education is to be distributed unequally because urban-based and privileged students do not experience the same issues as rural-based students".

4.4.10 DATA ISSUES

Most students indicated that the ten-gigs data that was allocated to students was not enough and when it ran out, they did not have the means to buy until the end of the month. All the respondents were unemployed undergraduates who depended on either their parents or guardians. Other students stated that they had no problem with data purchasing because they had the money whilst some of the participants indicated that they had issues with how expensive data was because they were home and unemployed. Some students indicated that they were affected negatively financially and found data to be expensive and hindered them to attend all online classes.

Below are some of the responses which were given:

Participant 1

“I ran out of the data that was allocated to me by the university before month end, 10-gig is not sufficient for BL in a monthly basis. I ended up buying promotional starter packs just to use for data so that I cannot miss any academic related activity due to data”.

Participant 22

“When my 10-gig ran out before month end, I used to go to campus, luckily, I am from Maungani so I couldn’t miss classes because my data was finished, and I opted for plan B. I had challenges of entering campus on the early days of the lockdown, I remember in June last year the securities at Maungani gate were refusing for students to use that gate and we were told to go and use the main gate.

At the main gate there were lists of the 33% population of deserving students and I was not amongst them. During that time, I used to sometimes miss classes or either resort to removing my main starter pack from my phone and put promotional starter pack to be able to attend”.

Participant 5

“Ten-gig is not enough so when it was finished, I used to miss classes and attend sometimes when I had data, and this had a negative impact on my studies as I ended up failing. It was unfortunate that we were given insufficient data packages, we discussed the issues that we were facing with the School Representative Council, and we wrote a memorandum with our grievances and submitted it to the authorities when we went back to campus in 2020, the insufficient data package was also of the concern that we had raised. The universities and the government

reconsidered because on the academic year 2021 forty-gig was being allocated to students, twenty-gig for daytime and twenty-gig for night surfing.

I think this put students in a better position to attend all online sessions, though I think it is also the responsibility of a student to use the data sparingly. People must stop watching porn and downloading music with the data that was meant for their learning so that they can complain”.

4.4.11 TECHNICAL ERRORS

Online technical errors turned out to be a biggest concern for most students, some of the students stated that they did not encounter any technical error. Whilst many students stressed that they experienced technical errors now and then in BL. Most of the students indicated that they experienced technical errors due to lack of supporting devices required for BL, network issues and load shedding.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 23

“Sometimes my phone would freeze as I was writing schoolwork online because my smartphone was not a quality one, I would end up submitting late, skipping sessions and lack of participation as it sometimes acted up when I was answering a question to a lecturer. My phone was not up to the standard that was required for online learning, I asked for my parents to buy me a new device, but it took them three months to save the money and around August 2020 I bought a new phone”.

Participant 10

“Sometimes when I missed a session online and later want to listen to the recording, you will find that the recording is inaccessible or not available which opens the gap to misunderstanding and missing information, when you ask for the lecturer to send you the audios through what’s App some of them refused. I felt like it was everyman for himself and survival of the fittest”.

Participant 1

“I never encountered technical issues, the only challenge was familiarising myself with Microsoft teams and Moodle and knowing where I can find a reliable network connectivity after that everything went well”.

4.4.12 TIME MANAGEMENT ISSUES

Another major concern for many students was time management, some suggested that they had no problem managing time. Some students indicated that they experienced time management issues such as submitting late or time mismanagement. All students supported having experienced time misuse during the academic year 2020 which had a negative impact on their studies.

Students indicated that BL requires one to have time management skills, without these one suffers. Most of them indicated that due to low network coverage they were failing to manage time on online classes, deadlines were a common concern for most students. Other felt that the online environment was characterised with interruptions which contributed to poor time management, whilst other indicated that they had no problem with time management.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 25

“Time management was a big issue for me because time was not on our side after locking down everything was upside down; I couldn’t handle submitting more work in a short period of time. We as the students were under a lot of pressure and stress considering the deadlines, by November 2020 second semester had not resumed so time was a major concern”.

Participant 26

“Working online is interesting, I had a Google calendar which assisted me to organise and manage my time efficiently, and the App always reminded me of the tasks that were due. Online environment is advantageous because most Apps simplify things.

Instead of focusing on the time wasted focused on making more time to cover the time that I lost, I used to set alarms and sometimes worked at night to cover the work. BL has offered me an opportunity to learn to manage time independently without heavily relying to my fellow students and lecturer”.

Participant 27

“Time management was a major concern to me because I was stressing about due dates and deadlines that were always on a weekly basis, during contact learning things were running smoothly, but now because a lot of time has been wasted and instructors are trying to cover up

for the lost time things are on a fast pace. I feel like COVID-19 has given birth to distribution of education without consideration of the circumstances”.

4.4.13 LACK OF PARTICIPATION

Most students also posed that they experienced lack of participation due to group allocations and network interruptions. Students specified that they participated averagely, most students suggested that there are many issues which hindered them from attending classes or participating fully in class. Lack of communication was among one of many challenges that the participants posed, students advocated that due to the implementation of BL, communication started lacking, it became hard to communicate with lecturers and classmates because virtual communication requires data and a stable network connection. Some students indicated that they did not have challenges of communicating with either their lecturer or classmates because they could afford to buy data during the academic year 2020. Below are some of the responses that were given:

Participant 4

“When the data that was allocated for me got finished before month end, I missed some lessons. I sometimes couldn’t afford to buy data; it affected me badly because even in class I could not ask or answer questions as it takes more data. In online classes’ participation by the students is declined although the lecturers motivate us to engage more, sometimes we don’t have the means to make it happen”.

Participant 8

“Network hindered me to participate fully during class sessions, I would sometimes be cut-off from the room while I have raised a hand and at times, I used to be talking alone thinking that they could all hear me in class only to find out that I am not audible or there is a breaking sound in my side which is disrupting”.

Participant 17

“I feel like the traditional methods of learning was the one that was characterised more with more disruptions, now we don’t have to go to our lecturers’ offices to consult and I can communicate with them anywhere anytime which is quite convenient. For me I feel that even my class participation has increased because now we have extra lessons with our tutors online and they also encourage us to participate. I am shy but through Teams I can engage with my fellow

classmates as well as my instructors because I am more comfortable at the same time enjoying the new experiences of the digital era”.

4.4.14 FINANCIAL CONSTRAINTS

Financial issues were also a major concern for most of the students as all of them were unemployed. BL requires one to be financially stable to fully participate, not all students had supporting smartphones. Tablets were only allocated to first-time entering students who were NSFAS loan/bursary holders and data that was allocated did not seem to be enough. Quality gadgets was another concern to students who did not have the necessary means to obtain such devices. Some students stipulated that because of the implementation of BL they encountered financial constraints as they had to device proper and compatible devices regardless of their financial backgrounds.

Below are some of the responses that the respondents indicated:

Participant 1

“It was stressful having to always buy promotional starter packs so that I can attend, they can only last for a week so I always had to budget for data so that I can attend all sessions. I spent most of my R350 COVID-19 relief funds on starter packs and as a result I was always broke, to tell you the truth it was rough. Financially I was not okay, and I did not want to miss some of my sessions because had run out of data. That is the reason why during those time, data was the only thing I would buy, I did not buy voice bundle anymore because they were not helpful”.

Participant 4

“The only financial challenge I faced was the fact that I did not have a supporting smartphone or a pc, so I had to ask my father to buy me a new phone. I did not get the phone in April 2020, but my dad managed to give me the money around June 2020 which really stressed me. By the time I had a new device I was struggling with the newly used Apps. I was concern about time and whether I would pass all my modules and when data was finished, I couldn’t attend because there was no money for me to buy extra data”.

Participant 8

“I didn’t struggle financially because I had the support of my family, my mom and dad bought me a new pc and I had a tablet that I received at school as a first-time entering student. At home we have a WIFI, so data was not really a concern for me, and I really think that online learning reduces

expenses as I was at home, I was no longer worried about all campus related expenses of food and accommodation. The only thing that was required for me is the determination and the willingness to take charge of my studies and explore new things”.

4.4.15 ONLINE LEARNING INTERRUPTIONS

Interruptions was also among one of many challenging issues that were most common to respondents, respondents mentioned that contact learning has more interruptions. Other students stated that they did not either submit, attend, or consult due to interruptions from home. Network was also a major cause of interruptions including load-shedding and technical errors. Games and other non-academic internet activities also hindered students to focus which divided their attention.

Below are some of the responses that the respondents expressed:

Participant 7

“It was disturbing to study while at home because we are overcrowded, my sisters’ kids always made it impossible for me not to be able to focus. They used to make noise and I couldn’t concentrate, the laughing, screams and crying were too noisy. I ended up going to my friend’s place whenever I needed to attend sessions online. It was better at night for me to focus and concentrate, usually I used to study at night because it was quiet. To avoid these interruptions, I must walk a very long distance to my friend’s place, and it was tiring”.

Participant 8

“We are many at my place, it is a family of twelve people. Usually there was noise from my siblings, a television or a radio which caused huge interruptions for me. The noise was not conducive for my learning, I told my parents about it, and we came to a decision that I had to move to Polokwane to my aunt. Relocating was not easy, and it took me more than three months to get used to the new setting, I stayed there for six months so that I can be able to attend and participate during the sessions. I was happy that I came up with a plan that would benefit me, in my aunt’s place I had focus. Although it took me long to re-adjust, I ended up developing my own timetable and a daily routine, I knew when to attend and when to study. I also made sure that I had some extra-mural activities that would keep me busy whenever I am not doing school tasks. I adapted well at my aunt’s place, and I was not under pressure.

There was a stable internet connection and no noise at all, the house chores were also not my responsibility because there was a house help. I got enough time to plan and study so even my performance started to improve and I managed to pass all my 2020 modules”.

Participant 12

“For me there were no major interruptions that enabled me to attend my classes online, apart from load shedding and poor network interruptions I wouldn’t say I got interrupted mostly during my online lessons. Also, internet has a lot of interesting things that has a potential of driving ones’ attention away of focus. Games, movies, and videos that are not academic related can keep your mind fascinated while wasting your time and data. It wastes data to play a video or watch it online that is why most people complain that the data allocated to them is not enough because they usually waste it on non-academic related activities.

One needs to be focus on online learning; people must know that to always fiddle with your phone can make you to ruin the device. Sometime people are interrupted by non-academic things, and it is not worth it. In an online environment you must always know what you want to do.

There are commercial notices that always pops on the screen and the sellers make sure that they put attractive and unavoidable images or videos. I even set my phone to block those kind of incoming alerts because imagine you are attending a class and focussed, and a white lady just appears on your screen saying ‘tap to explore more exotic videos’, it is obviously disturbing but one needs to have control and put it in mind that it’s those kind of commercials that finishes your data faster even before month end”.

SECTION C

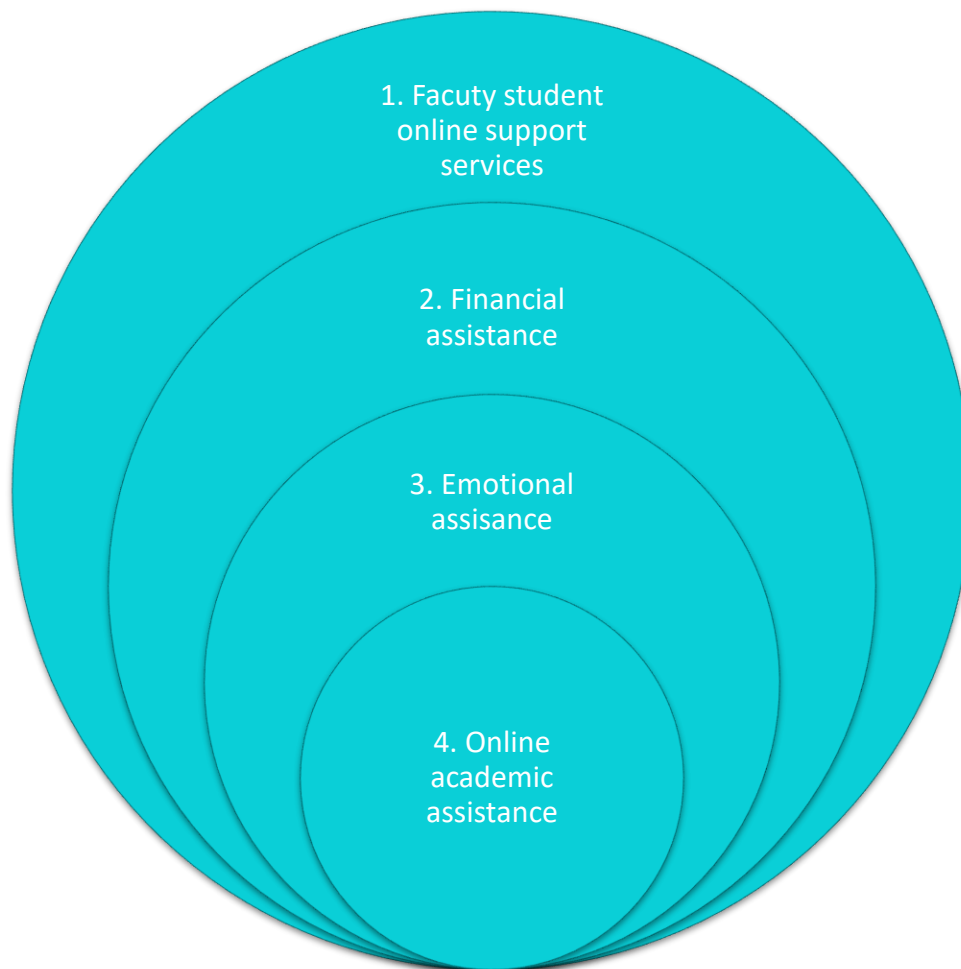
4.5 THEME 2: STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES OFFERED BY INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING AND GOVERNMENT TO RURAL-BASED STUDENTS DURING BL

In BL “student support refers to meeting the needs that all students have because they are central to high quality learning, for example guidance about course choice, preparatory diagnosis, study skills, access to group learning in seminars and tutorials” (Thorpe 2001). Previous research indicates that most institutions of higher learning globally responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by joining forces with local, regional, and international organizations such as the World Health Organization, research institutes and national governments amongst others for the formation of

proper responses that would allow them to prevent the spread of Covid-19 and safeguarding the continuity of learning of students in universities (Richardson, 2020).

This section outlines the findings of the student support services that the rural-based undergraduates students received, according to these findings students stated that they were offered with enormous support from their institution of learning and government, this included faculty assistance, financial support, emotional support, and academic assistance to cope with the challenges of BL. Below is an illustration of some of the responses given:

4.5.1 DIAGRAM 3:



4.5.2 FACULTY ONLINE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Most students posed that they received massive support from their respective faculties, they indicated that their faculties made provisions for various support services including technical support, ICT services, advising services and eligible lecturers. Most students indicated that these support services made their learning experiences a lot easier when they encountered challenges like misunderstanding the lecturer notes, poor network signals, and technological glitches. Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 1

“I liked the fact that our faculty had the best instructors in place. I used to worry a lot but the kind of lecturers that I had were so eligible to an extent whereby I ended up having the eager to attend online lessons more than the face-to-face lessons. In our classes we used to have what’s App groups where we used to chat and deliberate on topics that we needed more understanding on, the groups were very useful because sometimes we used to invite our lectures to come and rectify us in issues which we are finding hard to conclude on. Although most things were happening in a virtual setting, I felt that the use of Moodle was more advanced, and Blackboard helped to pave a way for us to familiarise ourselves with BL approaches, Apps, and its advantages and disadvantages.

The online module content was designed in such a way that inspires and motivate students, I started developing more interest because every time I encountered challenges or technical glitches, there was always someone to assist. I remember an incident where I was struggling to upload my assignment on the Turnitin credentials that we were given in class by our lecturer. I wanted to submit before the deadline and I only had two hours left, but because she was a committed and reliable lecturer, when I emailed her, she responded right on time. She even went as far as to let me take a screenshot of the issue that I was encountering at that time, she then took me step by step on how to upload my assignment on the Turnitin website. I managed to submit my assignment in time because she was there to help me and since from that day, I have been also teaching other students how to upload your assignment on Turnitin. The information and communications support also helped me when I could not have access to my Moodle account, it was very stressing for me when I did not have access because that is where I was sometimes required to submit some of my assignments. I only had to call the ICT assistance once and after that I had a new pin for accessing my Moodle account.

BL turned out to be very effective because from time to time I always felt like everything was in the palms of my hand. It was comforting to know that I had people that I could rely on in times of desperation. I felt like online learning was grooming us with the relevant skills and expertise for the context of the real world because some of the issue that we used to experience are still going to bother us in the working sector.

Imagine an instance where you are sending a colleague an important email and they do not respond in time. We always must be self-directed and make it out of the worst circumstances. And another thing that I learned is that change is inevitable, so we rather hop in and make advantages out of our dilemmas.

COVID-19 came as a wakeup call to most of us we were relaxed, relying on manual modes of doing thing. This is the digital age; we were forced to move by the circumstances. It is now time for us to do most things in a virtual setting and that is doable”.

Participant 6

“There was a lot of technical and academic support from our instructors to an extent where I ended up succeeding and passing all my 2020 third year undergraduate courses. The Information and communications technology department was able to operate and become effective virtually, the assistance was there even after working hours and sometimes during the holidays. There was a time when we were on recess and I was in Pretoria for the weekend, I had forgotten my Moodle credentials and it was very stressful for me because the Monday that followed was a holiday and we had to submit an Economics assignment through it. I was very tense because I knew that even if I was at home, I would not get help by going to campus while it’s the weekend or holiday, luckily, I found the email address of one of the assistants at the ICT department. When I found her, it was on Saturday, and she told me that I found her late because she had just knocked off. She told me that I must call her again on Sunday morning around 08h30, I did, and she was already in her office, she assisted me, and I could not believe it”.

4.5.3 FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Some students indicated that it was not fair for them to be excluded when free tablets were distributed to undergraduate students for BL. They posed concerns for also not getting the R350 Unemployment Social Relief Distress (USRD) grant which was a great disadvantage for them. Other students felt that there was enough financial support from government and institutions of higher learning.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 4

“I feel like the government and our public institutions of higher learning did not make much effort in assisting the rural-based undergraduate students. I say so because I was using NSFAS in 2020 but only the first year-entering student received free tablets for BL, it didn’t seem fair to exclude other students. I kept asking myself which selection criteria they used to identify the students who needed compatible devices.

I bought a smartphone, and it was not easy for me because my parents were both not going to work at that moment, my dad is a cobbler, and my mom is a street vendor. During lockdown alert level 5 such services were restricted, and it felt like they were all unemployed at that time. It was very hard, and I could not afford to buy data when the allocated 10gigs from school was finished.

I also think that it is not fair that the R350 social relief grant does not cover the NSFAS beneficiaries, it was going to become very helpful when the data that we get allocated gets finished. This was very stressful, and I don’t think it’s fair to exclude other students while we are all coming from deprive family backgrounds.

There were a lot of inequalities that were exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, still some groups seemed to be given more attention than others, when it comes to education is like the urban-based students have progressed and they are not prone to some of the infrastructural and socio-economic issues”.

Participant 9

“For me I think the government and institutions of higher learning tried their very best to aid us financially, firstly, we received free tablets from NSFAS and in my side I did not have a smartphone, so the tablet came to me as a rescue. Secondly apart from the free Wi-Fi that every student could access in campus, we all received 20 gigs allocated for 10 gigs to use during the day and 10 gig for night surfing. I didn’t have an issue with the allocated data because sometimes I couldn’t even finish them especially the night surfing data. Sometime the data would run out before the end of the month, but NSFAS was giving us transport and food allowances while we were at home, so I used that money to buy extra-data”.

Participant 7

“I received a text message from the finance department alerting me that I qualified for a bursary that was going to pay all my 2020 fees without applying for it, it was such a blessing for me to receive such funds because I was not an NSFAS beneficiary. After my mom’s passing it became hard for my dad to pay my fees, I did not know how I was going to settle the bill but to my surprise our finance department took initiatives to help the underprivileged”.

4.5.4 EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Most students indicated that they experienced stress due to the challenges that were posted by BL. Some students indicated that they received various psychological and career services from the academic development unit. Other students’ expressed gratitude towards the emotional support that they received as some of the skills they acquired are life-long-skills that would help shape and mould their personal growth and development.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 7

“There was a time when I felt depressed and I was not coping with the lockdown circumstances, I lost my mom from COVID-19, and she was the only person I can talk to. My dad and I never really had a good relationship since from my childhood, I always felt like he was more committed to his work more than his family.

The academic year 2020 was the toughest year in my entire life, I was doing fourth year level and it was not easy to mourn and adjust with the new changes. There were times were I even attempted to commit suicide during the early days of the lockdown, I had just lost the only person who understood and supported me emotionally.

If it wasn’t for the help of my lecturer, I don’t think I would have found a way to move on and cope under those dark days of my life. She has always lectured me since from first-time entering level, I was not aware that some of our lecturers know us by names. She really surprised me when I received what’s App text from her asking me to meet her, she can schedule an appointment for me so that I could go to her office and discuss my academic progress.

When I went to her office during the session unfortunately, I just broke down and started crying, she was also weary too and she told me that she noticed that my performance has been declining lately, after I had told her about my late mom, she suggested that I go for psychological

counselling. She explained to me that there are services that can assist me to move on, what I loved more is the fact that I would be provided with private and confidential aid. During the first week I went for student counselling and career development unit where I was appointed a professional psychologist to help me. She offered me various therapy sessions including personal counselling, trauma, bereavement and grief, relationship issues, anger management and family problems.

The psychologist that my lecturer suggested then referred me to the career development unit, I went there on the second week, and I received academic and career advice. It was through the career development unit that I decided that I would further my studies and register for masters the following year (2021). I was not certain which direction I would take but they made me to realise my interests and abilities.

On the third week I received help from peer educators who offered me psycho-education programme of substance abuse, emotional intelligence, and stress management. After four weeks of extensive sessions in four days per week, I picked myself up and carried on with my studies regardless of my predicaments. I managed to pass all my modules that year and I love the fact that I also received life-long skills like problem solving, critical thinking and managing stress. These skills have become very handy for me because now I have a good relationship with my dad which was very challenging for me before the counselling sessions”.

4.5.4 ACADEMIC ASSISTANCE

Most students indicated that when they faced challenges during BL their rural-based institution devised academic online student support services which enabled them to effectively take part in learning. Other students alluded that they realised a rise of e-tutors who also offered enormous academic support, these e-tutors provided students with assessments guidelines, advice, sessions, and revisions. Some students indicated that the tutors provided them with administrative support such as how to write and reference their assignments and face-to-face tutorials on Saturdays.

Below are some of the responses that were given:

Participant 30

“I think BL has made services of tutors to be more available to students, we had different tutors in different modules, and they made life a lot easier. We were learning how to read and understand

the assignment, how to formulate ideas for responses to assignments questions, how to select academic sources and read , how to select the best ideas, summarise readings using the reading tracker and formulating a thesis statement, formulating paragraphs, providing evidence for argument, in-text referencing, linking paragraphs, how to read and understand assignment question, main ideas of each paragraph and how it relate to the thesis statement, how to write a convincing introduction, body and conclusions, editing, proofreading and formatting your document. All these sessions assisted, and I managed to pass Introductions to Sociology & Industrial Sociology 1541 in distinctions for both semester 1 &2 during the academic year 2020”.

Participant 23

“I was a tutor that academic year and we received a raise in the stipend that tutors used to receive, we started to receive R1300 per month which was better compared to a R1000. The money helped me a lot because I managed to save enough money to buy a compatible tablet because I did not qualify to receive a free tablet from NSFAS. Even when airtime was finished, I used to afford to buy extra data that would last for the entire month, I did not struggle much because I had a small income that enabled me to attend and submit all my assignments in due time. I managed to pass all my final year courses and registered for my honour’s degree in Sociology during the academic year 2021, now in 2022 I am doing my first year of a master’s degree in Sociology at University of Johannesburg. To be an e-tutor gave me more exposure and I am still tutoring up to date”.

Participant 1

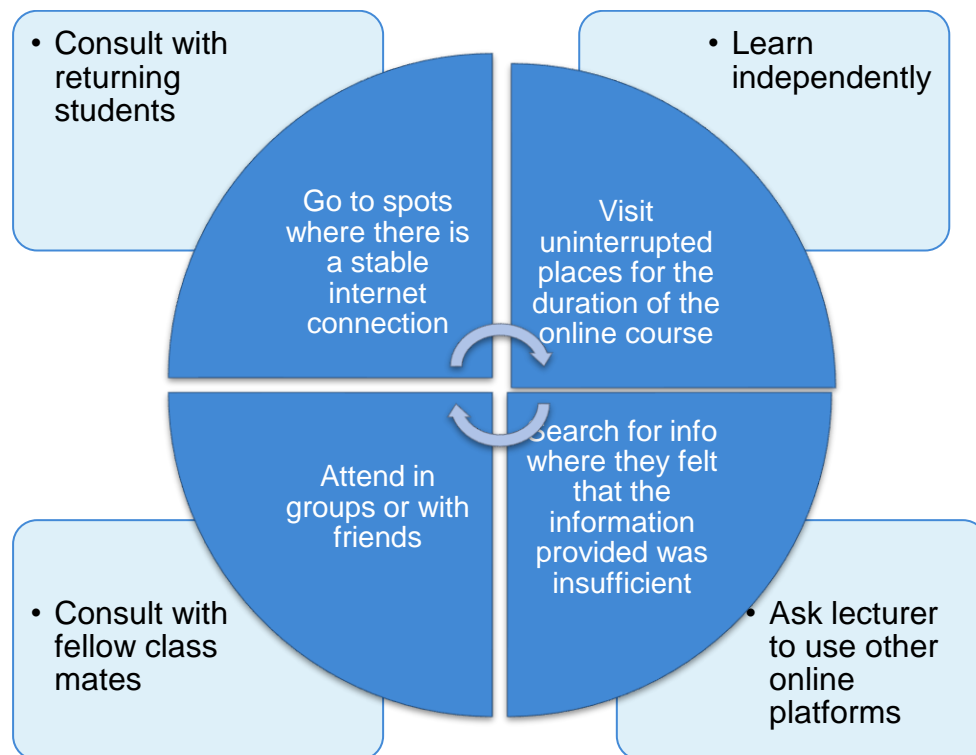
“COVID-19 has resulted to most of us students to seek tutorial assistances. Because more time was wasted during the academic year 2020, we needed more revisions and extra lessons. I was happy that during BL I had tutors in all my modules. One of my tutors was very clear and offered us lessons that were reviewing classroom curricular or topics and assessments, assistance with projects, assignments, tests, exams preparations, papers, research, any academic related activities, helping us to understand key concepts, particularly those learned in the classroom”.

SECTION D

4.6 THEME 3: STRATEGIES THAT RURAL-BASED UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS DEvised TO COPE WITH BL CHALLENGES

During the COVID-19 pandemic students faced a huge change in the education sector, the implementation of BL approaches meant that now they must also study some of their modules online. Meaning that they had to have compatible devices required for online learning, stable internet connections, data, and computer literacy skills (Bates 2020). This research noted that students had more control of their learning environment on an online lesson than in a face-to-face lesson and students devised various learning strategies to cope with the challenges brought forth by the implementation of the BL approach of teaching and learning in the institutions of higher learning. This section outlines the findings of the strategies that the students indicated, according to these findings most students stated that they had no need to come up with strategies as they did not experience any challenge when they learned through BL in the academic year of 2020. Below is an illustration of some of the responses that were given:

4.6.1 DIAGRAM 4: The learning strategies that undergraduates' students devised during BL challenges:



4.6.2 CONSULT WITH RETURNING STUDENTS

Most students indicated that when they faced challenges during BL returning students played a huge role of teaching and advising fellow students who were struggling with Moodle. Other students alluded that they realised that those who were having little light of how to utilise Moodle had an advantage, so they had to ask returning students for assistance. Some students indicated that on the following academic year they also started to show other students how to utilise the newly used Apps.

Below are some of the responses that were given:

Participant 30

“As I experienced difficulties to operate the software’s that were being used at that time such as Microsoft teams and Moodle, I then came up with a strategy to go to the returning students who had knowledge about those platforms. There were students who were doing fine with those Apps, I went to a returning student who showed me how to login Moodle, from then things started unfolding for themselves. I realised as time goes by that the apps just needed a little attention and focus. Microsoft teams was not that difficult, and the guy also installed it on my phone to make things easier for me because we used his phone when he was orientating me.

As time goes by, I was the one who started to show other students who were also struggling with technical or software related issues, the thing that I loved most is the fact that we had what’s App class groups where I could access the contact numbers of all my classmates, my tutors, and lecturers. Going an extra mile to look for help to returning students made me to acquire new skill that made me useful to others.

One returning students also motivated me that I seem to be doing great mentoring and advising my fellow students, she made me to consider becoming a peer educator, I am looking forward to working with large groups of students because it’s a dream come true for me, I love helping others.

Struggling can make you to become a better person because if I had not taken it upon myself to reach out to other people for help, I would have not gotten the exposure that I had acquired, now I am the one developing another student. COVID-19 made me to stand up and fight for my education before the pandemic I was one person who found it hard to ask other students for assistance. I realised that I was not going to make it if I do not reach out to others for help. It was easy now to show others because I was familiar and getting good on how to use some of the software that were being used in online learning”.

Participant 8

“I developed an interest of helping second year students during the year 2020, by 2021 I applied and got to be assigned as a tutor in our faculty. I got an opportunity to help students who were struggling in our faculty. Most students would email me to consult whenever they encountered challenges.

I remember a time when I assisted a first-year level student on how to write an assignment. Most of the first-time entering students struggle on academic writing. I realised that it was important for undergraduate students to be taught how to write, construct paragraphs, and align their work with referencing.

Referencing was also a major concern that most students were struggling with, we usually used Harvard referencing method, so I used to download guides and send to students through videos, audios, and pdf files.

The lessons that are offered to fresher’s lays a foundation phase for their learning and most of them start to improve and eventually they become self-directed learners. It is a pity to those students who think that asking returning students for help is hopeless. Many students benefitted from my advice and guidance, and I got an opportunity to acquire expertise that developed and improved my experiences”.

4.6.3 LEARN INDEPENDENTLY

Some students indicated that when they faced challenges that were posed by BL, they took it upon themselves to educate themselves more. Most of the students indicated that learning independently also enables one to never forget. Other students indicated that they used night data usually for exploring and learning more about the Apps that were being used in BL. Most students indicated that it did not take them long to get to adapt and adjust with the newly used Apps.

Below are some of the responses that were given in the interviews:

Participant 10

“I had challenges because I was unable to use the online platforms that were being utilised so I paid more attention so that I can familiarize myself with the required software’s for BL. At times I would search on YouTube for videos that would orientate me, I had no choice but to search for more information and be self-directed so that I can adjust well and carry on with the new method

of learning. Luckily, the 20-gigs that was allocated for online learning was split up to use 10 gigs during the day, and the other 10 gigs was for night surfing. During the night I usually used to wake up and just take my time to familiarise myself with the newly used Apps. I would also download PDF files, videos and slides on topics that I felt that I was struggling on, online learning offered me so much exposure to an extent were I felt like it would be better if they took all the courses online because I was realising that I improved on the online modules compared to the once that remained on a face-to-face approach of teaching and learning”.

Participant 1

“Online learning was like exploring an adventure. Every day I was learning new things all by myself, from operating the used software’s, technical skills such as typing and gaining more information on different topics. I started to see the fruits of hard work; I was improving in all my modules.

During the academic year 2021 I got awarded a bursary on merit by the department of health and social development because I had passed most of my modules with distinctions. It was an advantage to receive free data from our school because at least we had a chance to explore and teach ourselves. This experience was like when you buy a new phone, you start by struggling while familiarising yourself on how to use the phone and getting used to it. By the time you have six months possessing it you can do things at ease and in an efficient way.

I am from a poor family, but I never thought that I can graduate without owing the university. It was because I took it upon myself to learn and explore online learning that I got the bursary. I realised that when we were receiving free data, I had more chance to apply for financial aid and know everything there is so that I can pass with flying colours”.

4.6.4 GO TO SPOTS WHERE THERE IS A STABLE INTERNET CONNECTION

All the students who resided on rural areas indicated that there was a time when they had to look for other places where they can have a stable internet connection because network is bad in their communities. Other students indicated that they used to go to the garage where there is a free WIFI. Other students indicated that they use to go to campus where there is a free WIFI for all students, unfortunately not all the students had access to campus during the hard lockdown alert level5 leaving other students desperate. Some students indicated that they had to go to the bushes, mountains, and forests just to get access to a reliable network connection.

Below are some of the responses that were given:

Participant 21

“Because of a poor network condition in my village I decided to go to places where there is a strong and reliable network connectivity such as restaurants and garages. Home was quiet but there was no stable network connection, my concern was that in public places there is a lot of interruptions and sometimes I couldn’t pay attention. I managed to attend all my sessions, but it was not easy because I had to go to other places in search for a stable network connectivity.

The issue was during the early days of the lockdown where the restrictions were too strict, I could not go to public spaces because only those who were performing essential services were permitted to walk on the streets, during those time I was too stressed because there was nothing that I could have done. Luckily, as time goes by, the restrictions were eased, and I was able to locate places with hotspots and free Wi-Fi. Apart from the hassle of having to go up and down looking for places with reliable internet connections, I enjoyed doing things online, it really simplifies things rather than in a face-to-face setting where there is no fun, exposure, and independence.

The only thing that seemed odd in the online part was having to go to weird places for internet access, like during the early days of the lockdown I had to go to the river where I could get a stable internet connection on top of a rock. I was risking my life because I was alone, there are snakes in my village and some snakes prefer to stay in the river or to drink water there. I was usually scared and not comfortable even to answer questions whenever the lecturer was asking because I was always cautious of my safety and whether I would fall from the boulder because I used to climb it to the top”.

Participant 23

“I had challenges of data and network issues off-campus I then decided to come to campus for free WIFI access. I was lucky that I am a nursing student, so I was amongst the 33% population who was allowed to come back to campus residence. I had a room at lost city girls, so I came back to school, there I had free WIFI access which simplified my learning. My concern was to some of my friends who didn’t qualify to gain access to campus because most of their modules were shifted to online sessions.

We had not yet received the data that was allocated to all students and that implied that they had to make means of attending online classes, it was stressful to know that other students are left behind and there is nothing that could be done. The university had no choice but to reduce the population that had access to campus to contain the spread and transmission of the COVID-19 virus, unfortunately that was a disadvantage to some students”.

Participant 12

“The main issue that I encountered with BL was poor network connectivity because I am from a rural area at Tshidzini, I then came up with a strategy to go to spots where I know there is a stable WIFI connectivity in campus so that I can attend, consult, and submit my assignments in time. Usually, I used to seat on benches next to recreational centre and student centre, there WIFI coverage is reliable and even other students who had the same problem used to come there. There I sometimes found my classmates who used to make group discussions after attending and I really benefitted a lot.

But this was after the early days of the lockdown passed, during lockdown level 5 it was tough, I was usually in the side of the mountains where I sometimes had access to a stable internet connection. The was a time when I had to climb a tree so that I can submit my assignment on Moodle, I realized that COVID-19 pandemic came nine teen years after the year 2000 floods, but I could relate to the woman who had delivered a baby on a tree during a natural disaster at Mozambique. In that incident I found myself reflecting wondering about the inequalities that still exist between the rich and the poor. After two decades we still experience lack of social and infrastructural support in remote rural areas of the African continent”.

Participant 15

“I am from a rural town in Venda, but I was fortunate because in our town there is a hotel that has free WIFI for everyone. Whenever the data that we used to receive from school got finished I used to go near the hotel in the park, that’s where I used to attend most of my lessons.

I stopped going to that spot after this other day I was attending extra-classes around five o’clock in the afternoon, I almost got stabbed that day because as I was attending, out of nowhere three men came straight to me. I thought that maybe they wanted to ask for directions, I started taking them seriously as one of them took out a knife and pointed me with it.

I had to choose between my phone and my life, so like any other normal person I chose to give them the phone. I was traumatised and I was not coping emotionally. During that time there was a list of people who were allowed access to campus that period, unfortunately I was not qualifying, so I had to remain at home.

I tried to call the career development unit but the airtime that I had was not enough, so my efforts proved abortive. It was very tense, and I felt bad that I had to go through a horrific accident because I am from a rural area and at my home, I struggle to get a reliable and stable internet connectivity. I was traumatised and I did not get any professional assistance, I had to get over the issue because I was not going to be able to focus if I dwell much on it. What helped me was talking to my friend who also offered to attend classes with me because I did not know what to do. I was lucky to have her because she is the one who made me understand that it was not my fault that I got mugged and such things happens”.

4.6.5 VISIT UNINTERRUPTED PLACES FOR THE DURATION OF THE ONLINE COURSE

Some students stressed that they are from large families, and it was not conducive for them to stay at home. Others noted that there was noise and a lot of factors that pushed them to move to their relatives who at least stay in a quite environment. Other students who resided on rural areas stressed that poor network forced them to relocate to urban areas for the duration of the BL or until they return to campus. Most students indicated that moving to a more conducive place enabled them to adjust and cope in BL.

Below are some of the responses that transpired during the interviews:

Participant 16

“I encountered interruptions at home because we are overcrowded, I then decided to move to another place where I know there is a reliable network connectivity so I had to visit my aunt who is staying in an urban area so that I can be able to attend classes without hurdles. We are a large family at my place so there was no way it was going to be possible for me to focus there.

At home I am the first born and I have seven siblings, although we are many, most of them are still young and we only have one girl who is the last born. She was five years old in 2020 so she cannot help with the house chore, I was expected to carry out some of the house chores while I must study online.

I knew that if I continued staying at my home, I was not going to make it because already in the second week after I went home, I was struggling to manage my time and that was going to result in me failing some of my modules in third year level.

At least my aunt at Pretoria only stayed with her husband and two children, there it was better, and they were very supportive. Even when my data was finished before month end, they used to give me money to buy extra-data so that I can always engage with my education”.

4.6.6 ATTEND IN GROUPS OR WITH FRIENDS

All students stressed that during BL there was a lot of groups assigned tasks. Some students indicated that when BL posed challenges attending in groups became common. Some students indicated that they had to meet in public places with their classmates to attend together.

Other students indicated that the issue of network made them to go and attend with their classmates who had better devices for BL. Other students indicated that group attendance and group work was more effective because after the online sessions they used to discuss and revise which was helpful.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 22

“I did not have a supporting smartphone so I used to attend with my friend using her phone, if I missed a session, I would ask other fellow classmates who are reliable. Attending with someone’s phone did not give me enough opportunity to learn more about the newly used apps, my friend was the one who used to operate the phone. We ended up attending in groups before our group discussions, the idea of group discussions was to tackle all the challenges that we were facing that time as well as clarifying each other in any academic related activity. It helped me to attend with others because I got more information from my fellow classmates. It felt like I was still getting a chance to interact more with my classmates, we were not in class but the inconveniences of some of us lacking incompatible devices and experiencing network issues ended up leading us to be in one place either online or physically through groups”.

Participant 15

“I had lost a phone and there was no way that I would miss online sessions, so I used to go to my friend who is also my classmate. At least it kept me updated on all academic related activities.

I realised that sometime her data would run out during the middle of the months because we were both using one device, so I used to contribute by buying data when it was finished. The time when I was learning with my friend, I realised that I was no longer feeling isolated and shy, my participation also improved, and we used to inspire each other with my friend that we must fully participate and attend all our classes. Apart from the issue that I lost a phone during the academic year 2020 in November, that second semester I managed to pass all my first-year level modules. I went through a lot, but I did not sit and complain about my circumstances, rather I made other efforts to attend, submit and partake in any academic related tasks”.

4.6.7 SEARCH FOR MORE INFORMATION WHEN THE INFORMATION IN THE NOTES WAS INSUFFICIENT

Most students indicated that if they missed information during their sessions with the lecturer or tutors, they used to search for more information on the topic. Some students indicated that they used to download academic videos on Ted talks, and they would replay them to understand fully.

Other students indicated that they used to download and watch live lectures about the same topic that they needed to understand on YouTube. Some students indicated that they used to download article PDF files on Google scholar and read more on the topics that they needed more clarity on. Below are some of the responses that transpired during the interviews:

Participant 18

“My main concern was that audios that the lecturers were uploading were easy to forget so I searched for more data on the internet. There are many sites that are academic that provides preliminary information that is reliable and useful. YouTube for instance has a lot of academic videos explaining different topics, they are very helpful. What I love about YouTube is that it is wide ranged like Google you can find information about anything and the good part about it is that it’s in a video mode so that you can watch and understand”.

Participant 10

“Recorded sessions were a hint for me to search more information where I misunderstood or missed something. The internet has many sources where one can get more data of different topics. I used to enjoy watching lessons on Ted talks because they are more like lectures. Another source that I used was Google scholar because it is the most preferred and reliable source of information. There I used to download PDF files that would assist me”.

Participant 24

“Online lessons turned out not to be effective for other modules because they require more details, I then decided to go an extra mile to search for more data on Google. I feel like some courses were not flexible enough for the online situation, time was not on our side and courses like accounting requires more time. More time for class, tutorials, study, and more practice I am just thankful for the internet because that is where I used to get more clarifications”.

4.6.8 CONSULT WITH FELLOW CLASSMATES

Some students indicated that they did not like group discussions but rather they preferred to ask a fellow classmate on a one-on-one session or either telephonically. Other students indicated that the use of what’s App groups gave them access to other students contact details. Most students indicated that due to network challenges they used to miss classes, but they would consult with their fellow classmates who attended and get updates on whatever they missed.

Below are some of the responses that emerged during the interviews:

Participant 19

“Due to slow internet connectivity, I sometimes missed classes, so I had to ask my fellow classmates to give me feedback on the lessons that I missed. We used to use what’s App audios and texts, they were more reliable and efficient than emails”.

Participant 13

“As I experienced network connectivity challenges, I then came up with a strategy to inform my classmates that I am experiencing network connectivity issues and ask them to brief me about anything that I missed via what’s App. Fortunately, we had what’s App groups where we used to discuss different topics, the group discussions made us to gain more insight on various topics that we were struggling on”.

4.6.9 ASK LECTURER TO USE OTHER ONLINE PLATFORMS TO SUPPLY LESSONS

All students indicated that when they were unable to make it on an online session due to the challenges that were beyond their control like load shedding, they asked their lecturers and tutors to record the sessions then upload through other Apps like what’s App which almost every student had access to. Some students indicated that it was better for instructors to record the lessons

rather than live sessions. Other students indicated that the issue with what's App is that not all lecturers agree to give out their personal contacts details to students.

Some of the responses that were given are below:

Participant 14

"Whenever I experienced network connectivity challenges, I would ask the lecturer to use what's App to send notices and recordings of sessions because it is less problematic compared to Moodle and other used software's, after we adopted various ways of conveying information things became easier. I realised that in online learning we had different methods of sending and receiving information, the lecturer used to send us the saved lectures and send it after the sessions.

This was an advantage because I had the opportunity to re-play lessons and tutorials. I even had folders of different records on my phone, and they assisted me whenever I was studying, doing assignments, or preparing for a presentation.

The recorded sessions helped me, and they were able to bridge the gap of the information that I missed due to poor network connections or being kicked off from the meeting. The stimulating part is when I attended the session and the audio gets to be uploaded, it was an automatic revision and put students in a better position to understand everything".

Participant 8

"We had reached an agreement with our lecturers that every recorded session should be distributed in what's App groups that we had. It was better because we had a chance to get lessons even when we could not make it to class. The lecturers knew that they had to upload the recorded sessions after every class.

This assisted also in the examinations preparations because we had more sources of information to rely on. During the face-to-face classes we did not have a chance to record the lecturers, fortunately, online learning is making things possible. To be honest I don't know how I would have passed all my third level modules. Even through the tribulations that we were going through our educators devised plans to convey the lessons because they understood that we were going through a lot. Another thing that I am seeing is that now if you fail it is just a matter of being lazy.

Most people make a habit of making up excuses so that they find someone to blame for what they are going through. All in all, I have observed some of my classmates' making defences because they found online sessions to be impossible. Yes, we were disadvantaged previously, but we must move with the times. It's after twenty-eight years after Southern Africa has gained independence. What is surprising is that we still have people who are hesitant to change, I don't know if its fear or being too rural, but such kind of an attitude disadvantage the person (the fear of the unknown)."

4.7 SUMMARY

This chapter covered the presentation of the data collected from undergraduate students in a rural-based institution regarding their experiences of BL. The data was collected through cell phone interviews to rural-based undergraduate students. The study was based on the four research questions first, students' challenges of BL second, students support services offered by the higher institutions and government during BL challenges and thirdly, the learning strategies that students devised to cope with BL challenges during COVID-19 pandemic period. In this chapter the experiences and views of all the respondents were outlined.

CHAPTER 5

DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents the discussion of the study findings from the themes that were developed during data analysis. The researcher acquired more information on tremendous amount of the challenges experienced by rural-based undergraduate students, the Student Support Services that was offered by the university to help the students cope with BL challenges and the strategies that students devised to cope during BL challenges. BL brought drastic changes to rural-based undergraduate students' learning experiences. Rural-based students experience the effect and challenges of BL simply by virtue of where they come from. Students cope in different ways and are affected differently from individual to individual (Hodge, Moore, Lockee, Trust, and Bond, 2020). The experiences of 30 students at Thulamela municipality in the Vhembe district, within the Limpopo province in the era of BL, are typical examples of what rural-based students go through. They usually must face various infrastructural and socio-economic challenges that hinders them from coping in an online learning setting. The recommendations for future research are made based on the outcomes of the empirical study.

5.1.1 THEME 1: STUDENTS CHALLENGES OF BL

5.1.1.2 CHANGES IN THE LEARNING PROCESSES

Research findings
Participants indicated that using BL methods of learning has brought tremendous changes that is characterised with challenges that are disadvantaging, in their rural-based learning experience. Learning remotely has concerns in the delivery of instructions through technology. They indicated that network connections make the online learning to be challenging as compared to the contact classroom learning where a student has more opportunities to engage and consult with their fellow students and instructors physically, their anxiety was on the unreliability of the digital learning processes, consultations, and interaction. Students could not access academic sites like library, computer labs and hotspots of free WIFI access in campus. All these circumstances made the learning experiences of the students to change irrevocably to the worst, affecting their learning destructively.

Consulted literature

According to Rao and Giuli (2010), learning remotely utters challenges for rural-based students relating with technology (i.e., poor or no internet connection), lack of knowledge on computer literacy skills, devastating assessments, and negative acceptance of remote learning design because of being used to the contact classroom learning. However, Wang, Cheng Yue and McAleer (2020) indicated that regarding technology acceptance and adoption students face challenges because there are some who find the online learning environment too problematic. This means that some students were not comfortable with the adoption of technology towards facilitating blended learning due to unfamiliarity thereby influencing technology acceptance behaviours. Some of the students are not ready for drastic changes in their education system design (Flavell, Harris, Price, Logan, and Peterson, 2019).

Interpretations

The research findings attested to what the literature said about the challenges that online learning posts to rural-based students, most of the students gave the impression to have no other option - but to adopt the newly used method of learning (BL) regardless of the challenges that they were experiencing. The changes make it hard to shift from classroom contact learning to BL and prevents them from moving on and acceptance of BL because they felt that under the given circumstance of COVID-19 the BL approach was suitable and compulsory. Main concern was raised on the issues of network connectivity, lack of computer literacy skills and the unacceptability of the change by students which result in the ineffectivity of the new learning approach (BL). Not accepting the changes means that the student may not comply and commit themselves towards the transition. This belief made students to prefer the classroom contact learning instead of BL. The transitional distance theory suggests that BL is the consideration of insights that is a result of physical remoteness that must be accepted by both the teachers and the students. The theory assumes that if educators and students are not active, open, and accepted the transition, unpleasant learning may occur. In the case of South African rural-based students, the COVID-19 pandemic forced them to adopt BL which is characterised with challenges that hinders them from partaking online classes. The online learning part in BL is challenging which is why the students would rather prefer the old face-to-face methods of learning instead of BL.

5.1.1.2 FAMILIARITY

Research findings

All students indicated that when BL was introduced, they were not familiar with the platforms that are used for learning for example Moodle that was used to facilitate virtual education. Some indicated that they knew Blackboard and prior knowledge eased the transition because some of the features on the Apps are similar. Some indicated that they now acknowledge the need for computer literacy skills. They also noticed that the newly used Apps are simple if one is eager to learn, some felt that failure to adapt to the new method of learning (BL) is a result of computer illiteracy. Most students indicated that they did not receive online training during the academic year 2020 which made the familiarity to the newly used Apps to be lacking. Some students were worried that the lack of information about the newly used Apps may disadvantage them thereby having a negative impact to their academic participation and performance. Only few students understood what online learning was about because it was recently lodged at most South African universities for part-time use and in other modules but not compulsory.

Consulted literature.

Some students are not pleased with the adoption of technology towards facilitating blended learning due to unfamiliarity to the used Apps, this has a negative influence on students' adaptation (Lim, Sam, and Wah, 2008). Online learning ushers' students with challenges in lacking knowledge regarding technology use (Joosten and Cusatis, 2020). "Students who enrol in online courses may have lack of prior knowledge of the online learning methods that could likely affect their academic excellence" (Huang, Liu, Tlili, Yang and Wang, 2020). According to Agormedah et al., (2020) "Lack of formal training and experience in e-learning platforms and students' unpreparedness could negatively affect their behaviour outcomes including engagement in learning, satisfaction, participation, motivation for learning, online work skills proficiency, self-directed learning, and efficacy in the use of e-learning devices and their academic performance". Babu (2020) believes that students' familiarity with technology plays an important role in familiarising students with BL and ensuring that they yield positive outcomes.

Interpretation

The research findings attested to what the literature said about the importance of students being familiar with the online platforms that are utilised for BL. Orientation to online learning methods can familiarise students with the newly used method of learning. Unfortunately, due to the unprecedented situation of COVID-19 some students lacked formal training to the BL platforms which disadvantaged them. In view of this students were negative and not pleased with the alterations. In a rural-based students' perspective satisfaction and participation was negatively impacted which hindered students from being positive and eager to adapt to the changes. Unreliable network connectivity reduces engagement, participation and self-directed learning of students' which is also disadvantageous. Stress of being unfamiliar with the newly used Apps can result to a student not being able to cope to the changes leading to a decline in their academic performances. Transitional distance theory explains unfamiliarity challenges because of the distance that occurred between the students and their lecturers including denied access in the facilities in the university. The "physical" separation led to many students experiencing a communication gap with their educators. The unprecedented of the COVID-19 pandemic resulted to universities and students not having enough time for training and familiarizing themselves with the newly used software's for online learning, this created a potential of misunderstanding the newly used methodologies of learning.

5.1.1.3 STRESS

Research findings

Most students indicated that when BL was introduced, because of not being familiar with the platforms that are used for online learning they panicked and stressed a lot. Some indicated that they were mostly worried about poor network connectivity and additional data charges that occurs because of insufficient allocated data. All students indicated that at times data that was being allocated to them would run out before month end and that was stressful because not all of them were able to buy extra data, failure to buy data would result to students missing classes, fail to submit assessment in time and full participation in any academic related activity.

Consulted literature

A study that was conducted in South Africa indicated that living in urban areas was more encouraging to reducing student who are worried than in rural areas during the COVID-19 outbreak (Venter, Craffert, van Greunen, Veldsman, Candi and Sigurdarson, 2019). According to Aung (2020) the inequity of economic, cultural, and educational factors between developing and developed countries, urban and rural areas was the reason for Asian educational divide. This study shows that anxiety is higher in rural communities compared to urban communities during the COVID-19 outbreak. In view of this Hicks (2016) indicated that online learning poses serious frustrations and distress to rural-based students and exposes education inequalities between urban and rural areas.

Interpretation

The research findings attested to what the literature said about challenges that rural-based student experience regarding the shift from contact classroom learning to BL which resulted to stress and frustrations due to the challenges that the students experienced. Most students indicated that COVID-19 pandemic has brought massive changes in education by the shift from contact classroom education to blended education. Most of them indicated that they were usually worried about network issues, data issues and being unable to attend classes. Some indicated that the stress was escalating, and they were afraid they might even get depressed, they noticed that online learning was ushered with various challenges, from economic to infrastructural which is worrisome. Such levels of uneasiness hinder students from coping and managing their academic activities adequately which can have a negative impact to their academic performance. The transitional theory state that in BL there should be careful consideration when combining the face-to-face and online classes so that they cater or be convenient to the needs of all students. The unprecedented of the COVID-19 resulted to inconveniences and stress that distracted the students and made the transition challenging.

5.1.1.4 VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES

Research findings

The students mostly preferred contact classroom learning because they can meet face-to-face with lecturer and classmates. They indicated that they preferred face-to-face learning because they had the opportunity to share ideas directly and make a group without obstacle such as poor network connections or insufficient data which is a prerequisite to online learning. Content notes presented in the classroom make them easier to understand than in online learning. In addition, the available time in contact classroom is much more than in an online learning environment because some lectures truncate due to a bad network to participate in a digital environment.

Consulted literature

Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson and Hanson (2020) in Ghana found that students shifted to e-learning resulting to changes in the methods of learning bringing the use of a digital environment that reduces students' engagement because it raises many disruptions, especially for areas characterised with poor internet access. Slightly different from the results of research conducted by Ponelis and Holmner (2015) before the Covid-19 pandemic indicating that students have a good perception of e-learning, this is influenced by the knowledge and experience of students in using e-learning.

Interpretation

The research findings attested to what the literature said about rural-based students' perceptions for preferring the old face-to-face classroom learning rather than blended learning. Most students indicated that the digital environment for learning is ushered with poor internet access, interruptions and delays which makes learning to be challenging, they were concerned about the disadvantages that has been posted to them by BL. Most students indicated that they use to have resentment towards the students at institutions where there was online learning, the only concern was that usually students who used online learning were not studying on a full-time basis and such courses take time to complete. All students indicated that BL is a good approach and method of teaching but unfortunately in a rural terrain the digital era is challenged. According to the transitional distance theory success in BL is determined by the level of infrastructural and student support services, if these factors are not carefully considered students become reluctant to the transition. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted to rural-based students being negative about the transition from a mono-learning to a dual method because the online part seemed challenging than the face-to-face methods

of learning. In the case of rural-based students, poor network connections and signal was a major concern that seemed to lack prioritisation in the universities and government. Most students indicated that more needs to be done to prepare the rural environment to be conducive for online learning. Issues like load-shedding and poor network connections are the obligation of the government, unfortunately, most of the rural-based students were prone to these induced challenges.

5.1.1.5 COMMUNICATIONS OBSTRUCTIONS

Research findings

Most students indicated that poor network connectivity was a major disruption in communicating with their lecturer and classmates. Most students indicated that they use to experience late responses and delayed received messages from their instructors and classmates. Some students indicated that they used to experience various technical difficulties. Incompatible devices were another major cause of technical issues, most students also indicated that they had incompatible devices when BL was introduced, and it took them time to buy the required one. Most students indicated that the digital communication is ushered with many challenges which hinders and obstruct effective student-lecturer communication.

Consulted literature

A previous study by Babu (2020) found out that restrictions on social gatherings and extension of contact classroom gatherings have disrupted the communication because of the shift from face-to-face to blended learning. Those who rely on others struggle as communication is done virtually, and this requires a lot of resources. In the case of rural based students, load shedding and poor internet connectivity negatively impact on the interactions and communication among students (Thomson, 2010). Favale, Soro, Trevisan, Drago and Mellia (2020) confirmed that E-learning has certain loopholes in the sense that it hinders and reduces the lecturer-student communication by reducing direct communication and human interaction. Students can face many technical difficulties that hinder and slow-down the communication which is also a disadvantage (Favale et al., 2020).

Interpretation

The research findings attested to what the literature said about rural-based students' experiencing poor network connections which obstruct communication between them and their lecturers. Another major cause for the disruption of student-lecturer communication was load-shedding. All students indicated that occasionally either from an urban or rural area they experienced load-shedding, and these had a negative impact on them communicating with their lecturers and classmates. Most students also did not have the required devices for BL, they stressed that it took them time to buy the required devices so there was a time when they could not communicate with their instructors and other students. The transitional distance theory stipulates that there is a transaction that occurred between the teachers and the students. The transition that we call distance education occurs between an environment, the teachers, and the students. As a result, most students had to relocate to their respective homes, most of these students stay in rural areas where it became hard for them to communicate with their educators and classmates, most rural areas are not conducive for online learning. Most of the challenges that students were experiencing resulted to them not being able to communicate with their educators and classmates, this had a very bad impact on the communication and academic performance of the students. Obstructed communications can result to issues like miscommunication, lack of participation and missing important deadlines and meetings.

5.1.1.6 DELAYED VIRTUAL CONSULTATION RESPONSES

Research findings

Most students indicated that virtual methods of communication had a potential of delaying messages due to issues of poor network connections. Most students indicated that they used to receive responses from their lecturers after 24 hours. Students were concerned about the delays that they experienced, they stressed that emails were unreliable. Some students stressed that they used to get confused if they send a message and not get a reply because they would not know what to do. All students indicated that the digital communication method is not effective in a rural and developing country like South Africa which has poor network connections in most rural areas.

Consulted literature

Songca, Ndebele and Mbodila (2021) maintained that the closure of public places including Africa universities campus created a lot of difficulties for rural-based students as they could not consult their lecturer physically but rather relied on digital platforms which is ushered with network delays resulting to delayed communication between students and lecturers. Educators used a blend of audio, videos, and text to reach out to their students during the time of crisis (COVID-19 pandemic) to interact with their students during lectures failure to do so hampered a cooperative and interactive online learning environment particularly rural-based students who face challenges with network connectivity (Mark and Semaan, 2020).

Interpretation

The research findings attested to what the literature said about the digital methods of communication divides which post delays for students to receive responses from their lecturers. Most students indicated that they used to experience poor network connectivity in rural areas as a result they used to receive the responses from their lecturers late. Late responses were a major concern for some students, they stressed that lecturers also receive large traffic of consultation emails from students from classes with large number of students which slow down their response rate. Load shedding also can be a cause for lecturers to respond to students' consultation emails later, all students indicated that load-shedding was common in their homes. Transitional distance theory alludes that the separation of the teachers and the students affects communication in a negative way in a manner that it delays communication. Most students who had no access in the university during the lockdown found themselves suffering greatly, communicating with their teachers was not effective and reliable considering the challenges of load shedding and poor network connections from their respective homes.

5.1.1.7 PROMPTNESS OF THE LECTURER'S REPLY

Research findings

Most students indicated that they were not satisfied with the responses they used to receive from their instructors. They asserted that some of their teachers lacked support and assistance, most responses were irrelevant. Most students stressed that even after the response they would be confused and still not addressed. Some students argued that it was because they are from a huge class and if many students are consulting at once the lecturer has a lot of emails to respond to which takes time. All students indicated that the traditional ways of consultation were much better compared to the digital methods where it's hard to make follow-up for clarity which complicate things.

Consulted literature

Preceding research indicated that due to this unprecedented situation, the transition from classroom teaching to blended teaching has posted challenges for some faculty members (instructors) regarding their capability to give students the full support and assistance they always need during lockdown (Sahu, Mishra and Lal, 2020). Moreover, some instructors were also struggling with the change which made them to truncate answer of emails during consultations due to high traffic of inbox messages during the early days of the lockdown (Tamrat and Dmatew, 2020). Such incidences can have a negative impact to students as the consultation methods are compromised and seem to be less effective.

Interpretation

The research findings attested to what the literature said about the students not being satisfied with the responses that they used to receive from their instructors. Most students stressed that they were usually not addressed after receiving the responses from their lecturers. Some of them argued that some lectures truncated responses due to vast traffic emails. All students indicated that some instructors were also struggling to cope with the changes which made them to be unproductive. All students indicated that during face-to-face learning methods students had an opportunity to make follow up if they misunderstood the lecturers' responses which is not the case in BL. According to the TDT unfortunately the "forced movement" of students from their campus residences led to them experiencing miscommunication issues. The separation of students and lecturers resulted to them having to rely on emailing as a mode of communicating, this methodology is hampered with technical issues and delays. Another concern is that students are not autonomous when it comes to using emailing as a mode of communicating. Most undergraduate students cannot even write an email accordingly, this delays things because the educator first need to get clarity before answering the message.

5.1.1.8 UNDERSTANDING THE LECTURER'S CONTENTS NOTES

Research findings

Most students indicated that they had difficulties in understanding some lecturers' course content notes. Most of them argued that information was truncated, as a result they needed more elaborations on most courses. Most participants stressed that they were given more work with short deadlines. Some students noted that due to poor network connections they missed lessons, and this made them to miss some important information during the lectures. Other students in the other hand stated that they had no struggle understanding the lecturer course content notes. Some students also stressed that when they did not understand the course content notes they used to search for more information on the internet to gain more insight.

Consulted literature

Li and Lalani (2020) argued that e-learning offers students an opportunity to revise lecturers' notes because sessions are recorded so that students will be able to study at their own pace and go back to listen to recorded lectures and re-read the presented slides. However, Tamrat and Dmawet (2020) elucidate that BL did not make the students to understand content notes as much as classroom learning because much time was lost, and assessments were piling up.

Interpretation

The research findings attested to what the literature said about the students struggles in understanding online course content notes. Most students indicated that they were from rural areas where there are poor internet connections that used to make them to miss most classes. Most of the students stressed that they had a lot of work to understand with little times, they were concerned about time management and whether they would be able to adapt and cope under the new circumstances. Meanwhile, some students argued that they had to devise strategies to understand information e.g., group discussions and searching for more information on the internet. According to the TDT dialogue and structure is very essential in BL, the lecturer must give simple and easy lessons, by doing so it automatically means that the student will find it easy to understand and respond to what the lecturer is assessing them on. Some students found the notes to be difficult because the teacher was not lenient when designing the course content notes and difficult and bombastic words were used.

5.1.1.9 NETWORK CONNECTIVITY ISSUES

<p>Research findings</p>
<p>Most students asserted that poor network connections were a major challenge in the rural areas. All students from rural areas stressed that poor network connections make BL to be ineffective, they were more concerned of how inconvenienced they were by these new changes of teaching and learning. However, some students argued that they are from urban areas and as far as they are concerned, online learning was doable in an urban terrain. All students from rural areas stressed that poor network connections made it hard for them to adapt and cope during BL resulting to failure and low poor academic performances.</p>
<p>Consulted literature</p>
<p>According to Mahlomaholo (2020) online learning in its nature is entirely dependent on the internet, instructors and students with bad internet connections are liable to be denied access to online learning. Kgomotlokoa (2020) argued that in South Africa challenges of network access by students in higher education was identified as the biggest challenge that required intensive infrastructure. Most rural-based students did not have laptops and lacked internet connectivity. It was challenging for students residing in deep rural areas where there is poor internet connectivity to adapt and cope in with online learning.</p>
<p>Interpretation</p>
<p>The research findings attested to what the literature said about the rural-based students complaining about poor network connections which made the transition from classroom contact learning to BL a bit challenging. There were few students who argued that they were from urban areas and their responses were different, they indicated that BL for them was doable and more effective as a method of teaching and learning more than face-to-face contact learning. Meanwhile, all rural-based students indicated that because of poor network connections they were inconvenienced, and these had negative implications for them. Most of the respondents indicated that the traditional face-to-face learning methods were less problematic than BL which is entirely dependent on the network to take place. Transitional distance theory explains the separation that occurred between the students, campus and the teachers resulting for them losing the free WIFI that was available to all registered students. Going home in most rural areas meant that some students were prone to poor network signal strength, this made it challenging for most students to actively take part in online sessions.</p>

5.1.1.10 DATA ISSUES

Research findings

Most respondents indicated that they had issues with data running out, most emphasis was that the allocated 10gigs is not sufficient to last the whole month. As a result, they indicated that there were times when data used to run out. Most students stressed that they did not have the means to buy extra data, as a result they used to miss classes, fail to submit assessments, or take part in any online academic related activities. Some students argued that they are from less privileged families that cannot afford to buy the required extra data for them to take part in online learning.

Consulted literature

According to Demuyakor (2020) rural-based students from Ghana indicated that one major challenge of online learning was the high cost of internet data because the data they had been offered for BL was not sufficient for the whole month. This researcher also cited students with data problems that as a result student found it difficult to follow instructions posted on the course announcement section. Fishbane and Tomer (2020)'s research outcomes on what students with no internet access are to do during this Covid-19 pandemic noticed that the level of poverty had increased in rural areas, there is an unreliable internet connection consequently, students with no or low socio-economic means to afford WIFI connection are most vulnerable to miss sessions or encounter additional challenges to participate fully and cooperate in online learning.

Interpretation

Research findings attested to what the previous researchers said about the students complaining about data during BL. Most students indicated that the data that was allocated to them by the university was not enough and when it ran out, they had to buy or miss sessions. Most of them stressed that failure to take part in learning was caused by them not having data at that point in time. Some students stressed that because of COVID-19 their parents lost employment so they cannot help them to buy the required extra data package. Others argued that they are from less privileged families and there is no way they can afford to buy extra data to take part in BL when the allocated one runs out. The TDT argues that separation of the students with their teachers due to the COVID-19 restrictions led to students relying on data to attend online sessions. What is unfortunate is that most students were denied access to the university where they can access free WIFI. Most students expressed feelings of sadness that the financial effects of the COVID-19 impede the family members to assist them buy data as some of them were not allowed to go to work.

5.1.1.11 TIME MANAGEMENT ISSUES

<p>Research findings</p>
<p>Most students indicated that they had trouble managing the time because in BL students have more control on their learning environment and routine. Most students argued that during BL time management is entirely dependent on them to make things work. Most students asserted that they lacked time management skills because they were not oriented. Some students argued that the digital environment had many interruptions which sometimes make it hard to focus only on the academic activities while they waste time e.g., video games, entertainment, and any other non-academic related online activities. Lack of orientation open vulnerability of the students not to be focused and independent on their learning by managing time efficiently.</p>
<p>Consulted literature</p>
<p>According to Joosten and Cusatis (2020) For a proper transition from face-to-face to BL students must set time limits and reminders to make them alert, active and focused. Efforts to organise and create a personal timetable enables efficient time management in the learning process to the best extent possible. Time management workshops to students enables them to cope easily adapt in the digital learning environment. According to Dube (2020) rural-based students in South Africa had challenges to manage time efficiently after lockdown as too much time was wasted, and students did not receive training on online time management skills.</p>
<p>Interpretation</p>
<p>Research findings attested to what the previous researchers said about the students complaining that they were not oriented and as such they lacked the skills that would enable them to adapt and cope under the newly changed methods of teaching and learning. Most students stressed that because of not receiving online training, it was hard for them to manage time in an online environment. They stressed that students needed to be enlightened about the advantages and disadvantages of effective time management and how to go about it. Lack of training was a major concern for the students to pose that they could not adjust and cope under the given circumstances. The TDT place emphasis on the notion that an education program should accommodate to each individual needs. Failure of the government and university to thoroughly train the undergraduate students resulted to them suffering to adapt to the transition.</p>

5.1.1.12 LACK OF PARTICIPATION

<p>Research findings</p>
<p>Most students indicated that BL has the potential of reducing the students' participation. All rural-based students stressed that lack of participation in class was caused by poor network connections. Most rural-based students argued that they experienced challenges that hindered them to actively take part in BL. Most students were concerned that some courses cannot be carried out online without contact or interactions, as a result they argued that participation has been affected dismally. Some students argued that BL discourages students' class participation because they can use network or any challenge as an excuse not to attend. Some students indicated that they do not feel comfortable engaging on a digital environment rather they prefer the traditional classroom learning.</p>
<p>Consulted literature</p>
<p>Although some modules involve practical sessions the nature of the learning processes of online leaning cannot grasp its full potential during the COVID-19 period because students are prohibited to practice what they learn. Under the given circumstances, online content is all theoretical and does not allow students practical learning (Owusu-Fordjour, Koomson and Hanson, 2020). Online learning impact class participation because of issues like poor internet connections and some students may not be comfortable to engage digitally which also negatively impact students' class participation (Leszczyński, Charuta, Łaziuk, Gałązkowski, Wejnarski, Roszak and Kołodziejczak, 2018).</p>
<p>Interpretation</p>
<p>Research findings attested to what the previous researchers said about BL having the potential to reduce students' class participation. Some students asserted that by nature online learning limits interactions and contact which has a negative impact on students' class participation. Most students were concerned that certain courses cannot take place without practical sessions. All rural-based students indicated that poor network connections were also a cause for them not to actively participate in an online class. Some students argued that they were used to the traditional classroom methods of learning, and they were not comfortable to participate online as they are shy. According to the TDT the physical separation that occurred to most students resulted to a decline in class participation as they found it impossible to participate in an online session due to interruptions and technical glitches.</p>

5.1.1.13 FINANCIAL CHALLENGES

<p>Research findings</p>
<p>Most students indicated that they faced financial burdens of having to buy the required device or buying extra data when the allocated data runs out. Most students stressed that the COVID-19 pandemic had hit the economy hard, and things were hard, some were worried that their parents had lost their employment and as such they could not assist financially. Some students indicated that finance was also a major cause of stress during the academic year 2020. Most students stressed that BL disadvantages the less privileged students because data is expensive.</p>
<p>Consulted literature</p>
<p>Favale et al., (2020) contended that some students do not have access to a desktop, laptop, or smartphone to carry out with BL. There are students who are not wealthy and belong to families with less exposure to technological devices with deprived financial resources; therefore, they lose out when classes occur online because of the heavy costs associated with digital devices and internet data plans. This digital divide widens the gaps of inequality (Crawford et al., 2020). Previous research indicated that BL requires developed infrastructure that makes it possible for the process to occur, in the context of most developing countries in Africa obtaining such devices like laptops and smartphones is a challenge to the underprivileged. For instance, in Nigeria, data are expensive, and the poverty rate is very high (Punch, 2020). As a result, for the poor families in rural areas getting the required device for effective BL is problematic (Omotayo, 2020).</p>
<p>Interpretation</p>
<p>Research findings attested to what the previous researchers found out about the COVID-19 pandemic resulting for many people losing employment. Most participants were stressed that their parents cannot assist financially, because of lockdown restrictions many services were stopped from operating so many people were not working until further notice. Most students indicated that there was a gap that was opened wide between the poor and the rich. Some rich students did not experience financial constraints because of the transition, but they were few, most of the students argued that they did not have the financial means to actively take part in BL. The TDT posits that the distance methods of doing things are convenient for a developed country that is characterised with reliable and proper infrastructure with advanced technologies (Moore, 1993). In the case of South African students this is not the case, most universities are in rural-based territories.</p>

5.2 THEME 2: STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES OFFERED BY INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING AND GOVERNMENT TO RURAL-BASED STUDENTS DURING BL

5.2.1 FACULTY STUDENT ONLINE SUPPORT SERVICES

<p>Research findings</p>
<p>Most students indicated that they received massive academic support from their respective faculties, they indicated that the assistance they received helped them to adjust and adapt with the new changes. Most students indicated that they use to receive various support services including technical support, ICT services, advising services and eligible lecturers. Some students indicated that faculty help also proved to be effective because they resulted to students yielding positive outcomes regardless of the changes that they were facing. Most students expressed signs of satisfaction with the type of lecturers they had who did more than just “teaching” but also supported the students throughout the plague.</p>
<p>Consulted literature</p>
<p>According to Blanksein (2020) during the pandemic, students received more faculty support in areas of financial and academic assistance (Blankstein, Eisenberg, 2020). Prior research suggests that the response to the virus had improved support for online students as well as for face-to-face students. These findings add to the literature by enlightening the wide gap between the student support services offered to face-to-face students and online sessions (Barr, 2014; Beaudoin, 2013; Brown, 2017; Forrester & Parkinson, 2006; Hicks, 2016; Jones & O’Shea, 2004; and Ozoglu, 2009).</p>
<p>Interpretation</p>
<p>The research findings attested to what the literature said about rural-based students’ receiving academic support from their faculties during the use of BL in institutions of higher learning. All students indicated that occasionally either from an urban or rural area they found themselves in need of their lecturer’s help during the use of BL. They expressed satisfaction with the eligibility, support and availability of their instructors and tutors, they felt that the support that they received assisted them to cope and adapt with the new changes that were posted by BL. The TDT postulates that online learning is the physical distance that must be overcome by the students and the teachers, during some of the challenges that students were experiencing in BL the university devised a continuity plan to remedy the situation. The lecturers were also trained to do more than just instructing, that assisted students to cope during some of the challenges that they were experiencing.</p>

5.2.2 FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Research findings

Other participants posed appreciations for getting the R350 Unemployment Social Relief Distress (USRD) grant which was a great advantage for them. Other students felt that the 20-gigs that was allocated for all students also played a vital role of ensuring that all students took part of their online academic related activities. Some students indicated that their historical debts were settled by their different bursaries and financial stakeholders. Most of the students were happy that their institutions of higher learning and the government made efforts to remedy the data issues and incompatible devices. All NSFAS beneficiaries who were doing first-time-entering level in the academic year 2020 indicated that they received free tablets which made things easier for them.

Consulted literature

It was established that the free twenty-gigs allocated to students played a central role in bridging the financial distress that was experienced by the students and their guardians during the academic year 2020, although some students stressed that the data was not enough, at least they were granted a chance of partaking the online courses (Shikulo & Lekhetho, 2020). From the experiences of UNISA, Dube (2020) noted that most South African undergraduate students were fortunate to receive financial assistance from the South African Social Services Agency (SASSA) which provided unemployed citizens with a R350 Social distress grant, they stressed that the grant played a huge role of bridging the loopholes that were created by the pandemic as many people lost their jobs.

Interpretation

The findings have attested to what prior research indicated about South African students receiving various financial assistance during the academic year 2020. All NSFAS loan holders who were doing first-time entering level received free devices for BL. Some students expressed great approval of the R350 social relief distress grant which served as one of the incomes they knew they can rely on during the lockdown periods where restrictions were tough. According to the TDT the separation of teacher and learner affected students and consequently the government started to device financial aid to students. Students received gadgets and grants so that they can be able to also attend online classes. Lack of compatible devices and data challenges were hindering students to actively partake online courses, such assistance assisted the less privileged students to attend academic online sessions.

5.2.3 EMOTIONAL ASSISTANCE

<p>Research findings</p>
<p>Most students indicated that they experienced stress due to the challenges that were posted by BL. Some students indicated that they received various psychological and career services from the academic development unit. Other students' expressed gratitude towards the emotional support that they received as some of the skills they acquired are life-long-skills. Some students indicated that after they had received emotional support it was easy for them to deal with some of the challenges that they were going through. Other students indicated that if it wasn't for the assistance that they received from the career development unit, they don't know how they were going to cope during those tough and trying times.</p>
<p>Consulted literature</p>
<p>According to Munyaradzi and Addae (2019), Paulette & Cartwright (2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic undergraduate students received various psychological services that ensured that they would cope with the emotional side of learning, these includes helping students to advance their learning motivation; improve self-confidence; and find ways to manage the pressure in learning, specifically assessment stress. Raphael (2016, 199) argues that since in distance learning interaction is affected, there are detachments between students and the lecturers, students had to be invited for a face-to-face effective communication that provided enough support to bridge the gap and an increased feeling of isolation. Traumatic events, poverty, and related environmental risk factors adversely affect students' developmental trajectories" (Reardon, 2011).</p>
<p>Interpretation</p>
<p>The research findings have attested that during the academic year 2020 some undergraduate students received emotional and psychological support which assisted them to cope with the BL challenges. All students indicated that occasionally during the academic year 2020 they found themselves under a lot of strain and they needed the psychological and psychosocial support for them to adjust and cope in a new learning setting. The TDT posits that transitioning from method to method of teaching and learning in an unprecedented way like the COVID-19 can frustrate and stress the students. There were many challenges and students were panicking and frustrated as a result, emotional student support services were necessary for students to cope and adjust effectively. For effective BL transition to take place.</p>

5.2.4 ACADEMIC SUPPORT

<p>Research findings</p>
<p>Most students indicated that when they faced challenges during BL their rural-based institution devised academic online student support services which enabled them to effectively take part in learning. Other students alluded that they realised a rise of e-tutorial services who also offered massive academic assistance, these e-tutors offered students information regarding assessments guidelines, advice, sessions, and revisions. Some students indicated that the e-tutors provided them with organisational skills that guided them on how to write and reference their assignments as well as face-to-face tutorials on Saturdays.</p>
<p>Consulted literature</p>
<p>Limkokwing (2020) revealed that rural-based students received academic support from their lecturers and tutors, these services included discussions of learning engagement, attendance and participation, inspiration, and grades. Facilitation of distance learning, coordinators the support was explicitly provided in student support. Ngema and Lekhetho (2019) alluded that tutorial services risen because of the BL implementation, they emphasized that it was an opportunity because they were also receiving a stipend which was an advantage for them. Huang, Liu, Tlili, Yang and Wang, (2020) suggested that when students receive companionate instructors or tutors who offer them with tips in assessments guidelines like how to write and reference their assignment, it also improves their academic performance, motivation, and satisfaction.</p>
<p>Interpretation</p>
<p>The research findings attested to what the literature said about rural-based students' receiving academic support from their lectures and tutors. Some participants indicated that e-tutors assisted them with revisions and tips of how to write and reference their assignments. Other students indicated that they were able to receive assistance and tutorials even during the weekends and holidays. Some students indicated that they were at the fourth level of their studies and qualified to be tutors for the academic year 2020, they stressed that it was more advantageous to be an e-tutor because of the increase in the stipend that tutors used to receive prior the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of them alluded that they used to work hard because they felt motivated and aspired by the remunerations. The TDT alludes that the separation of teacher and learner resulted to universities giving students' academic student support services to help them when they cope with BL issues.</p>

One of the variables of BL to consider before implementation is support from the institutions to the employees and students. Students who receive academic support stand a good chance of transitioning effectively and yielding positive outcomes. Most students who stated that they received academic support services also stressed that their transition from face-to-face to BL became efficient and their academic performance improved.

5.3 THEME 3: STRATEGIES THAT RURAL-BASED STUDENTS DEVICED DURING BL CHALLENGES

5.3.1 CONSULT WITH RETURNING STUDENTS

Research findings

Participants indicated that they relied on returning students who did the courses they were studying on the previous year(s). They indicated that online learning was not being launched for the first time and some students had insights what it was all about. Most of the students indicated that returning students had prior knowledge about online learning which make them suitable mentors. All first-time entering students indicated that they received tremendous assistance from returning students when they faced difficulties during BL. Students indicated that they found it easy to be taught by their mates compared to when they are instructed by their lecturers. Most students indicated that the help of returning students made their experience of BL interesting and at the end of the academic year(s) they were passing, and their grades were higher compared to the face-to-face method of teaching and learning.

Consulted literature

Smedley 2010 argued that online learning as a method of teaching and learning has an advantage for students as it enables flexibility interactivity in their own self-pacing, he indicated that students usually consult with the students who were doing the course in the previous year(s) for assistance when they are encountering difficulties. According to Manfuso (2020), Greg Flanik, proved that in Wallace University at Ohio, returning students had more insights about online learning platforms than first-time entering students and they also assisted their fellow classmates when they encountered issues during online learning issues.

Interpretation

The research findings also proved that it is not the first time that BL get to be used for learning and teaching in institutions of higher learning, only that now the method is being applied holistically and obligatory to be used globally and not only for part-time students. Returning students once used BL for some time in their studies, they have prior knowledge what it is all about. The research findings also brought to light that during the transition from face-to-face to online learning returning students helped first-time entering students. Other research findings suggested that having prior knowledge was identified to be an advantage in online learning. For students during the COVID-19 returning students assisted the first-time entering students because they had no idea what BL is. Moore (1993) added that autonomy is an important element that is required of the students, who are expected to have the ability to work independently. Students who only depend on their instructor's academic assistance require additional support. In this case, rural-based students opted to go to returning students for assistance. For most first-time entering students, the belief was that rural students were exposed to Blackboard which placed them in a better position to have a bit of light on what online learning is all about. It is one way to practice autonomy when students had to devise coping strategies of consulting with returning students so that they can yield their challenges of computer illiteracy and unfamiliarity with the used Apps for online learning like Moodle and Microsoft Teams.

5.3.2 LEARN INDEPENDENTLY

Research findings

Participants indicated that the introduction of BL made them to realise the vitality of being autonomous in their studies. Most students indicated that they were alone and had to take charge of their studies. They indicated that they had an opportunity to make decisions and plan things in a way that would make the transition from face-to-face to online learning simple and effective. Most participants indicated that BL posted more learning responsibilities, as such they had to be more active and focused even to the extent of doing more than what they used to do before as a student.

Consulted literature

Abdullah, Mohd-Isa, and Samsudin (2019) asserted that during online learning the students must not permanently dependent on the teachers for their learning, because they will not always be there, main emphasis was that it was important for students to be autonomous. Van Lancker and Parolin (2020) also attested that during this COVID-19 pandemic students entered new approaches in their education where they have been given more responsibility for their learning than usual, this has been attained by many students as they had no other option but to devise strategies for adaptation and coping under the newly used methods of teaching and learning (BL).

Interpretation

Research findings also proved that BL requires students to be more autonomous. When students are autonomous it makes them to be able to cope in an online learning environment. The research findings also brought to light that even the responsibility that the students must take is huge in an online terrain, things are done individually but online learning in its nature is a collaborative approach. The more the student is self-directed, the more they can be able to cope and adjust when they are learning online. Also, the more accountable the student is, the more they can be able to focus and manage their education independently without heavily relying on their lecturers for assistance. According to the TDT students who are open in character are unlikely to go through difficulties during BL transition because they are autonomous. Students who took responsibility and went an extra mile to adapt and cope during online learning issues during BL found the experience to be enticing and excellent. BL requires a student to oversee their learning and keep updates so that they do not miss deadlines and sessions.

5.3.3 GO TO SPOTS WHERE THERE IS A STABLE INTERNET CONNECTION.

Research findings

Participants indicated that another strategy they came up with to have access to a reliable network connectivity was moving to places with a higher coverage of internet connections. Most students indicated that they experienced poor network connections particularly those who came from rural areas. Some students indicated that they used to go to campus, for those who stay in other neighbouring villages transport fees were required so that they can get to campus. Some participants indicated that there were public places that were open where they went and found a stable internet connection like the garage, malls, and shops.

Consulted literature

According to Demuyakor (2020) the reality that lockdown has brought forced many students of higher learning to be at their respective homes as they switched to online learning where there are poor network connections, as a result some students used to go to campus where they can access a stable internet connection. Apart from going to campus, some students went to public places where they could have access to reliable WIFI connectivity i.e., Garage, Parks, and Stores. Although some public and private services were closed, other essential service providers like the garage never closed during the lockdown (Crawford et al., 2020).

Interpretation

Research findings indicated that students went to search for places with free WIFI or stable internet connections. BL is entirely dependent on internet connectivity to take place, students who are residing in places with poor network connections are likely to struggle in actively taking part and excelling in their education. Research findings also brought to light that most students went to campus so that they can have access to a reliable internet connection. Those staying far from campus also had to search for public places that had free WIFI like the garage, parks, and stores. Some researchers have also proved that during lockdown not all public places were closed so some students used these places to gain more internet connections. According to the TDT success in BL mainly relies on improved transitional distance tactics that result with the improved learning experience (Moore, 1993). That is, students who were not willing to come up with new ways to cope and adjust were likely to experience online learning in a challenging manner. Autonomous students always sought for new ways to save the academic year(s), when students had to go to other places so that they can have a reliable internet connection it shows that they were not entirely dependent on the WIFI that the university used to provide for them to utilise in any online academic related matters.

5.3.4 VISIT UNINTERRUPTED PLACES FOR THE DURATION OF THE ONLINE COURSE

<p>Research findings</p>
<p>Participants indicated that the nature of lockdown had placed them in geographical places where there were interruptions that are not conducive for learning. Most respondents indicated that they ended up deciding to relocate to their relatives who live in urban areas where there is a stable internet connectivity. Most of them indicated that most set up of families in rural areas are overcrowded and not encouraging for learning. Most of them indicated that being in an urban area made the transition from face-to-face to online learning easy and more effective.</p>
<p>Consulted literature</p>
<p>To yield efficient academic outcomes, rural-based students had to relocate and visit their relatives who are residing at urban areas until the end of the online course, it is beneficial for a student to have a reliable internet connection as it increases their chance of actively engaging and take part in BL (Lee, 2020). Wu (2020) asserted that in distance learning, a reliable networking is compulsory for learning and teaching to occur, students also must be in an environment that is conducive for them to learn. Interrupted learning environment is not encouraging for a student to learn rather it also hinders the interaction between teachers and students or among students which makes it challenging for students to participate and excel in their education (Dube, 2020).</p>
<p>Interpretation</p>
<p>Research findings indicated that most rural-based students relocated to urban areas where they can have access to a reliable internet connectivity. Research findings also brought to light that internet is a requisite for online learning to take place. Previous research also indicated that most rural-based students found themselves relocating to places with more internet network connections. Some researchers noted that when a student is in a place that is ushered with interruptions, it hinders the interaction between them and their teachers and discourages participation resulting to a decline to students' academic performances. In TDT during BL challenges autonomous students devise solutions that can assist them in coping and adjusting in the new methods of teaching and learning. During the COVID-19 lockdown most students were told to vacate the university residences leaving them with no other option but to go to their respective homes. For those who opted to relocate to an urban area for academic reasons, now that is independence. It also shows that some students are not only depending on the university for a comfortable and conducive learning environment.</p>

5.3.5 ATTEND IN GROUPS OR WITH FRIENDS

Research findings
Participants indicated that to ensure that they are not left out with important information that related to their learning they usually attended in groups. Most students indicated that group work made things easy for them to actively take part in learning. Some participants asserted that the use of group work encourages student participation and increases students' teamwork skills. Most students indicated that through group attendance they were able to attend all classes and submit in time as they also had group chats on what's App. All participants indicated that group work allocation also reduced the workload for them and their lectures and increased the time that lecturers had to address the inquiries of the students thereby also encouraging student-teacher engagement.
Consulted literature
According to Montacute (2020) the potential for future crisis situations that require the implementation of remote classes is high. Therefore, it is time to prepare online learning where students can actively participate in a personal and group level. Teamwork amongst students has also proved to be effective during the pandemic (Hodges et al., 2020). François van Schalkwyk (2021) asserted that group works make it easy for lecturers to manage the students if they are from a large class, giving them more time to teach and assist students whenever they are in need.
Interpretation
Research findings has attested to these findings that group work has the potential of addressing some of the challenges that students experienced during BL. Some researchers also brought to light that some student did not have access to compatible devices and a reliable network connectivity making it hard for them to actively take part in learning in an individual basis. Some research findings also argue that group work encourages student class participation and has the potential of increasing students' academic performance. Others asserted that group work also equip students with teamwork skills and that it reduces lecturer' workload while encouraging lecturer-student interaction.

5.3.6 SEARCH FOR INFORMATION AUTONOMOUSLY

Research findings
Research participants indicated that whenever they felt that information was not sufficient, they searched for more information so that they can have a full understanding of what they were learning. Most participants indicated that the internet and other academic information sources like journals, books and videos were of great help when they had difficulties understanding during BL. Some indicated that BL ushers them with an opportunity to learn more things which also encourages learning. Some of the respondents stressed that to yield positive outcomes, they adapted to the new used method of teaching, and they were eager to adapt and devise strategies that would enable them to cope under the newly used methods of teaching and learning.
Consulted literature
According to previous research among the strategies that students devised during BL in South Africa was to search for more information on the internet and other academic information sources like journals, books, and videos (Songca et al., 2020). Behari-Leak and Ganas (2020) asserted that on an online course students were more technology savvy and had the willingness to search for more information. Punch (2020) argued that during the pandemic students who had the willingness to go an extra mile for their education are the ones who managed to adapt and cope under the new changes, as a result such students performed exceptionally well.
Interpretation
Research findings attested that during BL some students ended up searching for more information so that they can understand more what they were learning. Previous research indicated that apart from the lecturer's course notes, there are many sources where students can access information about various topics. Other researchers also brought to light that the nature of the BL method ushers students with an opportunity to be more technology savvy and autonomous which encourages their learning. Meanwhile other scholars noted that during the COVID-19 pandemic only the students who had the willingness to go an extra mile for their education are the ones who managed to adapt and cope under the new changes, as a result such students performed exceptionally well.

5.3.7 ASK LECTURER TO USE OTHER ONLINE PLATFORMS TO DELIVER LESSONS

Research findings

Participants indicated that when they missed a class or failing to log in Moodle to access any academic related work, they asked the lecturers to use other online platforms to deliver recorded lessons to them. All participants asserted that apart from Moodle they mostly preferred what's App as it is common amongst them and does not require one to log in all the times before they use it. Most participants indicated that they used what's App to receive recorded lectures that they missed online. Most participants argued that recorded lessons also ushered them a chance to revise as they were able to replay the recorded lessons which made them to grasp all the important information that the lecturer wanted them to learn.

Consulted literature

According to Songca et al., (2020) students also used other online platforms that were not part of the Moodle App, they proved that Apps like what's App also have a major role to play in BL as the lecturers can alternatively use them for notices, revisions, and consultations. François van Schalkwyk (2021) argued that students found it easy to use Apps that they were familiar with during BL and lecturers also agreed to switch to the most used Apps like what's App and Imo chatting App. Bates (2020) also attested that in India education was moving to mobile use because of the Covid-19 pandemic and that students preferred using what's App and YouTube as they were already used to them and found them to be easy and convenient.

Interpretations

Research findings attested to what the previous researchers said about the students suggesting to their lecturers to use other online platforms that were less problematic like what's App. Other previous researchers also found out that students preferred to use Apps like what's App for notices, revisions, and consultations. Other scholars also noted that recorded lessons offer students not to miss important information that the lecturer is portraying. Previous scholars also brought to light that BL favours students in a sense that whenever they receive recorded lessons, it is a chance for them to revise the lessons by replaying them.

5.4 RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings the study makes the following policy recommendations to develop online learning and achieve the sustainable goal of ensuring that no one is excluded in equitable education:

Universities must improve and encourage the use of mobile technology because most students own a smartphone. Information communication and technology investments should focus to all students including off-campus students so that everyone should not be limited by free WIFI access that is only found in campus, to take part actively in BL students and lecturers must have access to internet everywhere. Another solution that can help university to fill the learning gap of lack of adequate devices for students would be to provide devices to the needy students.

Universities must propose for a subsidy in internet bundles to internet providers such as Vodacom, MTN, Cell C and Telkom. Additionally, they should place much emphasis on increasing signal strength especially in remote rural areas. Government must also reduce tax levies on internet providers enabling them to develop infrastructure strengthening the signal connectivity in places where there is low network coverage.

Information communication & technology should develop and introduce software's that are less problematic and fast to connect & take part in BL. Software's that are utilised for BL must also be less straining and easy to connect and learn.

Government in collaboration with universities should prioritise training workshops for orientation purposes to students & lecturers. Workshops will enlighten them more about BL and provide them with subsidies to purchase devices for online learning such as laptops.

Educational sector must produce students with computer literacy & critical thinking skills which can be of great assistance in problem solving and adaptability to survive natural disasters like the COVID-19 pandemic. From primary level students must be equipped with autonomous skills that enable and allows for them to learn independently and cope under new circumstances.

5.4.1 FUTURE RESEARCH

BL is set to grow at an escalating rate and if that is the case, more research must be done on a large scale to help improve the methods of teaching and learning in higher institutions of education. Future studies should take a quantitative research design towards the study of undergraduate students' experiences of E-learning platforms across South Africa broadly, and rural-based institutions specifically. As more studies on this subject accrue, more statistically based studies are necessary to compliment the narratives coming out of qualitative work. The combination of the two will serve as a powerful tool for advocating for state intervention and lobbying efforts towards a more equitable education system.

Presently, there exists a gap that needs to be filled. Possibly future research should put more emphasis on quantitative approaches as it enables more respondents to take part in BL studies to guarantee a better representation of the target population of students studying in higher educational institutions through BL.

Future research must include prioritising all critical challenging situations which may occur so that universities, government, students, and lecturers can plan accordingly. Most studies do not include disabled people as participants, most studies do not put much emphasis on disability as a prerequisite that the respondents must possess to qualify to take part in such studies. Researchers must focus on disabled students' experiences to obtain equitable inclusivity in education.

Researchers must also make more studies focusing on the results compared between public and private institutions of higher learning. In addition, this study only focused on the experiences of undergraduate students, future studies could include students from all levels of study. Future researchers can also make it their priority to focus on respondent's who are dropouts of online learning program to gain more emic data, students with prior knowledge may have different views to first-time entering students.

On the contrary some researchers can place their focus on students who are not struggling with BL, such students can bring different insights. Regarding BL, more research is needed in an African context placing more emphasis on challenges experienced by universities, students, and lecturers. Lastly it is necessary to conduct studies that compares and analyse the different types of online learning platforms to improve BL for now and future pandemics that may arise.

5.4.2 General remarks

The researcher discussed during this mini dissertation that BL was challenging in rural terrains at South Africa considering that some higher institutions of learning still lack the proper facilities and resources for the students to actively take part in online learning. The researcher revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the education inequalities that emanated from the apartheid regime. Undergraduate students from the Thulamela municipality in the Vhembe district, in the Limpopo province reported that BL posted challenges that hindered them from learning. The major concerns were poor network connections in the rural areas, lack of computer literacy skills and compatible devices. The effects of the challenges that BL posted to rural-based students were felt emotionally, physically, educationally, socially, and financially.

This project confronted ideas about the experiences of Blended Learning among rural-based students. In doing so, this thesis reviews some of the encounters that rural-based undergraduate students whined about. Undergraduate students were unable to actively take part in BL because rural areas are characterised with low signal strength. Students were subjected to all kinds of challenges, low internet connectivity, lack of access to data, inadequate devices, and interruptions. Families were also affected provocatively in finances; some are still trying to recover from the damage that COVID-19 caused.

Gender and sex do play significant roles on how social experiences are shaped - from differences in expectations and responsibilities in the household and family, to stark differences in what is required for livelihood and security. These understandings should be brought forward when universities design measures and policies to deal with social realities that affect the academic life of students.

Lack of adequate devices and reliable internet connections seemed to be the root cause of students' inability to actively take part in online sessions. Some instructors also had no insight about BL which also made the transition a bit challenging on their side also. Students believed that there is more that still needs to be done particularly in rural areas so that education can be distributed equally amongst rural and urban institutions of higher learning. The COVID-19 pandemic was a wake-up call to government, institutions of higher learning, instructors, and students that we must always have alternative methods of delivering and receiving education that are inclusive and effective. Previous researchers did attempt to put more emphasis on the gap that exist between rural and urban institutions, finally everyone has come to realised that a vision plan should always be in place to rescue the day should we face pandemics in the future.

5.4.3 Limitations of the study

One significant limitation of this research is the inability to conduct an extensive in-depth comparison of students' experiences across different rural-institutions and across gender lines. Even though such extensive and elaborate comparison potentially provides more insights into experiences of students in other contexts, it falls outside the scope and available resources of the current study. Secondly, by relying solely on a qualitative approach and focusing only on a small number of thirty participants, the study makes generalisation of results for a wider population impossible. The findings can however only be generalised theoretically, more of an analytic generalisation.

5. SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the research outcome in detail the research outcome derived from the experience of undergraduate students regarding BL. Valuation between the research findings and the consulted literature were also made, to gain new insights and perception on experiences of undergraduate students on BL. Recommendations were also made to address some of the difficulties that the government, internet providers and institutions of higher learning seem to be failing these students on. This is because it was discovered that more focus is placed only in urban areas while rural areas are not taken into consideration. The students reported to struggle not knowing where to go.

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APPENDIX: A

PARTICIPANT NO:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR STUDENTS

Dear student, this research aims at investigating your experiences because such issues have been given little attention because universities did not prioritize ODL. Feel free to express your views because the findings of this research project study might be useful for policy formations that assist University of Venda and other similar institution in South Africa to devise effective learning platforms for their students, in times of similar pandemics in the future.

NB!! Most questions are open-ended follow up with 'why' and 'elaborate'.

1. How did you experience face-to-face education compared to distance education in learning process.
2. Are you familiar with online learning?
3. How do you feel about the sudden change from face-to -face to online learning?
4. Did the instructor create an online environment conducive and enjoyable for learning?
5. Does online learning make the communication easier with instructor and other classmates for you?
6. The instructor returns e-mails/posts within 24 hours, if not how long?
7. How well does the instructor respond promptly to questions and concerns?
11. Is it hard to understand and follow the content in lecture notes with online learning?
8. In your experience, what are some of the challenges of online learning?
9. What are the learning strategies that you used to deal with such challenges?
10. What student support services did you receive from your rural-based institution of higher learning?

APPENDIX B:

Informed Consent for Participant

1. I have read and understood the information about the project and my participation.
2. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and my participation.
3. I voluntarily agree to participate in the project.
 3. I understand I can withdraw at any time without giving reasons and that I will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will I be questioned on why I have withdrawn.
 4. The procedures regarding confidentiality have been clearly explained to me, where my name and data will remain strictly confidential.
 5. Where applicable, separate terms of consent for interviews, audio, video, or other forms of data collection have been explained and provided to me.
 6. The use of data in research, publications, sharing and archiving has been explained to me.
 7. I understand that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality thereof.
 8. I do not want my name to be used in this project.
 9. I, along with the Researcher, agree to sign and date this Informed Consent form.

Participant

Signature.....

Date.....

Researcher

Signature

Date.....