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To cite this article:

Dankers, P., Stoltenkamp, J., & Donson, T. (2022). The perception of digital academic literacy tutors during the COVID-19 pandemic at the University of the Western Cape. *International Journal of Technology in Education and Science (IJTES)*, 6(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijtes.318>

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The Perception of Digital Academic Literacy Tutors during the COVID-19 Pandemic at the University of the Western Cape

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Article Info

Article History

Received:

18 August 2021

Accepted:

30 November 2021

Keywords

eLearning

Tutors

Connectivity

Data

COVID-19

Abstract

The abrupt transition in teaching and learning styles and the challenges faced by online tutors as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic are increasing areas of research. At the University of the Western Cape (UWC) preparing for the transition had an impact on tutors who had to make major adjustments to their tutoring. The research presented here investigated the perceptions of tutors and the challenges they faced by restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic as they adapted to teaching remotely, and the limitations of access to online resources. A mainly qualitative approach with an element of triangulation was followed, in which qualitative and quantitative methods were applied. All participants agreed that the abrupt transition to online teaching and learning highlighted the type of conversations that should take place to fast track processes and provide greater online resources and support for tutors. These findings agreed with research conducted by international scholars. More research that focuses on tutors and how they were affected by the abrupt transition to online teaching in relation to the provision of data is necessary.

Introduction

Tutors play a pivotal part in face-to-face (F2F) and remote teaching and learning practices at universities, and they provide students with valuable support as they create a communication bridge between students and lecturers. Tutors are generally valued, but their voices are often not heard. The move to online teaching and learning during the contact restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is a point in question, as tutors had to learn new skills, often with little support from their institutions. Much is being researched on the effects of lockdowns and isolation during this time, however, little research has considered the restraints experienced by tutors in online programmes, especially as regards the need for online resources necessary for tutors to perform their duties. The assumption of the researchers in this study was that unless limited access to online resources is addressed, tutors will not be able to support students as envisaged by the ‘#NoStudentWillBeLeftBehind’ and ‘#UWCDataLyteTeaching’ campaigns launched at UWC.

The primary objective of this research was to assess the perception and challenges tutors faced as they adapted to teaching remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. The focus of this research was to capture the tutors’ voices, particularly about their endeavours to support other students. In order to increase their understanding of

the tutors' responses the researchers also analysed the support tutors received after they had completed the Digital Academic Literacy (DAL) programme offered by Centre for Innovative Education and Communicative Technologies (CIECT) at UWC. The research was conducted via an online questionnaire from the point of view of CIECT at UWC.

This research was necessary to add value to CIECT's effectiveness in providing support to students and staff at UWC, as no such research had previously been done. It provides a critical analysis of the perception's tutors have of the support they receive from the DAL programme. The tutors' responses highlighted which conversations should take place, and the type of changes that should be implemented to provide greater online resources and support to tutors and students. The research also supported CIECT's continual research on the support it gives to tutors in the DAL programme.

The theoretical framework in this study was derived from a review of related literature. The main research question was: *What are the perceptions of tutors concerning their need to adapt to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic?* A sub question was *What challenges did the tutors face in the process of tutoring online?*

Background

At UWC, teaching and learning has undergone a major transformation due to the rapid transition from a face-to-face (F2F) teaching to eLearning caused by the restrictions imposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a change is often accompanied by an 'info-demic' of misleading content, associated with the value of digital literacy or lack thereof. Although internet and information technologies were in place at the university before the pandemic, new eLearning tools had to be developed and the existing tools refined. UWC's DAL programme, used by tutors to develop their computer literacy, was further developed to improve the blended approach to teaching, and to train them in the use of eTools in the institutional Learning Management System, (LMS), iKamva.

In 2020 the Senate of UWC adopted a blended teaching and learning approach in line with the recommendations from the Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology. The inclusive online #UWCDataLyteTeaching approach and #NoStudentWillBeLeftBehind fundraising campaign were launched to facilitate the transition. In May 2020 approximately 11000 students and 880 undergraduate tutors received data bundles from the university (UWC Announcement, 28th May 2020). This underpinned the CIECT's mission to promote blended-learning approaches and support tutors as they moved from traditional F2F to remote teaching and learning. In addition, CIECT provided ongoing support to tutors regarding the usage of e-Tools and strategies to facilitate the support they provided to their peers.

At UWC the eLearning approach employed both audio and video formats in an asynchronous learning mode via iKamva, meaning that instruction and learning occurred outside the constraints of time and place. As Bueno (2020:15) states, 'asynchronous learning is the key feature of successful online learning programs'. Other online tools used included video conferencing, and social media networking technology like WhatsApp. Although

these platforms were used, it was not known whether the expectations of tutors were met. As noted above, tutors did not have inadequate technological skills, nor were they faced with delivering ineffective online teaching and learning; on the contrary, they were skilled in delivering effective assistance via the university's online platforms. However, the present research revealed that the impact of the shift from F2F to remote online pedagogy brought about many challenges for tutors in their attempts to deliver effective learning experiences.

The CIECT team collaborated with members of faculties to identify student needs before they designed and developed a DAL programme that offered basic computer literacy to first-year students. The programme was integrated into accredited modules across various faculties including Economic and Management Sciences, Education, Community and Health Sciences, Dentistry, Law, Natural Science and Arts. The LMS was also used as a mode of delivery for the DAL programme. In 2020 the CIECT team trained 3660 students in its DAL programme. In addition, the team implemented the Skills Assessment Manager (SAM), an interactive online training platform, to complement the F2F teaching.

SAM is an online tool that assists students to acquire ICT skills. It hosts an interactive online environment, including simulations, instructional videos and a self-assessment interface. Students are able to view instructional videos on how to complete tasks on the SAM platform and are able to practice skills acquired during the video presentations, before using them online. Thus, it was shown that SAM could be used to strengthen a blended teaching approach, and train and support tutors during the pandemic. Unfortunately, the platform has some compatibility issues, as it works only on desktops, laptops and some tablets, depending on the screen size.

The CIECT team has emphasised a blended learning approach for the delivery of the DAL programme, especially when simulations are used. This approach was considered to be ideal because some students were able to access the resources such as computer laboratories where Wi-Fi was freely available, while others could access it from home. During the national lockdown, classes were delivered online using Google Hangouts. To be cognisant of the availability of data, the CIECT team minimised their number of live classes on SAM and iKamva. All live classes were recorded and uploaded onto iKamva for the benefit of all students. Support for students doing the DAL programme was administered via email, discussion forums on iKamva and WhatsApp. In the latter part of 2020, the following was considered in an evaluation of the DAL programme: computer literacy skills, response to online learning, challenges faced regarding connectivity, ease of navigating course material, availability of a support system, preferred platforms and ease of their usage, preferred teaching mode, and whether discussion forums and assessments were concise and useful.

In March 2020, UWC decided to determine students' needs for data and device resources to enable their engagement in online learning. A survey to discover data and device availability was conducted to determine the number of students who would need to have laptops and data to be provided by the university. A total of 7 699 students responded, requesting devices and/or data. By mid-September 2020, the university had provided data bundles to 58% and laptops to 28% of students (Pather, Brown & Lawack 2021).

In April 2020 South African academics drafted a plan, proposing a social pedagogy to be implemented in public universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. The proposal stipulated key requirements and conditions with a call for an immediate cessation of the roll out of formal online programmes, because most academics felt that the move to eLearning and online teaching ignored ‘the realities of the majority of students, teaching staff and their communities’, and that no consideration had been given to those ‘marked by inadequate spatial and living conditions, lack of proper infrastructure, reliable electricity, data, technology, and access to food and water’ (People’s Coalition 2000).

At the same time, South African researchers responded to the COVID-19 pandemic differently. A research team consisting of 11 participants from a range of South African higher education institutions initiated a research project to ‘allow praxis to inform policy by outlining the courses of action that institutions are implementing in South Africa’ (Jappie 2020:4). The researchers understood that the ‘reality of each institution is unique’, and they envisaged that their project would ‘highlight issues of governance and management during these times as we all continue to learn while the COVID-19 situation unfolds’ (Jappie 2020:4). The researchers provided insights into the use of online instruction and online tools and resources during the lockdowns caused by the pandemic. Jappie (2020) concedes that South African higher learning institutions face challenges in their attempts to move towards online learning. These challenges are exacerbated when ‘students from lower socio-economic backgrounds do not have access to the internet due to lack of network coverage, or cannot afford access, even though universities have made data available’ (Jappie 2020:7). Motaung and Dube (2020) and Motala and Menon (2020) also reacted intensely to the unequal access to the Internet as they see it as being indicative of societal inequality.

In his research on online instruction in 21 South African universities, Chaka (2020) found that while learning management systems (LMS) and video conferencing platforms were the most widely used online tools, they too had constraints. Of the 21 institutions in the study, 11 offered students free data via free institutional websites, three were negotiating for data deals with mobile network providers, and one university was in the process of conducting a survey to ascertain student needs. Not much more seems to have been done since the conclusion of this research and the provision and cost of data remains a constant area of discussion and research.

Despite the various reactions to the pandemic there still remains a gap in research to understand the ongoing impact of the pandemic on the online infrastructure of higher education institutions. The pandemic has impacted lecturers, tutors and students alike as they struggle to adapt to the current demands of eLearning and teaching in their institutions. This phenomenon brings with it many different dynamics that are being addressed by researchers. One such dynamic that has precipitated much concern is how to create fair technological opportunities for everyone. In a case study on tutoring practices to determine whether technology drives pedagogy Chuang (2013), suggests that in creating a fair technological opportunity for everyone, restrictions of region, education, and economic status must be removed.

In providing public access to ICT the digital divide can be narrowed, especially as it is a cost-effective method of providing support to students. However, Chuang (2013) concludes that the technological proficiency ‘does

not guarantee good online teaching', but that 'proficient technical skills' should be used as the springboard for pedagogical and content knowledge to be blended. With regards to tutoring using the technological immediacy online platforms, Chuang (2013) states that it creates a 'togetherness of geographically-distant persons connected through a telecommunication medium'. Songca, Ndebele and Mbodila (2021) go on to suggest that 'at a strategic level, the use of technologies should be integrated in the teaching and learning ecosystem of education', and that this type of technical support for tutors and students 'should form part of student success initiatives'.

Initially, students thought that online teaching would be less-time consuming than F2F teaching, but recent studies indicate that this is not the case, in fact, it is more time consuming. Hadiyanto, Wilyanti and Supian (2021) conclude that time management and technical competence are vital skills for successful online learning at university. However, it seems that universities' approach to online teaching and learning allow a lack of time management and flexibility to hamper progress. In investigating how students cope during COVID-19, Rotas and Cahapay (2021) found that students tended to extend the time they spent on remote learning, using the extra time to complete assignments. Additionally, students used self-regulating strategies like time management and flexibility to self-motivate and study successfully. However, they also found that stable internet connections were absolutely necessary for eLearning to be successful.

The emphasis of the study reported here was to investigate how tutors adapted to the eLearning and teaching ecosystem of the university during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent analysis of the role of tutors in eLearning and teaching ecosystems reveal that students tend to struggle using the Internet because it is new and strange (Omodan & Ige 2021). These researchers established that students lacked the devices to cope with their eLearning tasks. At the same time when students were given devices they often needed training to use them. In support of this finding, Dube (2020) found that students who are most successful online learners are those who are already competent users of connected devices, technology tools and online resources to support their learning. In general, these students also have access to adequate bandwidth, and are supported by their family and peers. Another problem identified by Omodan and Ige (2021) was that some students struggled with time management and could not adequately adjust to unstructured work hours. Other students seemed to believe that, since all their sessions took place on online platforms, they could attend sessions at any time, thus their progress was hindered.

Apart from the physical aspect of access to infrastructure, stress can also be a challenge when people are exposed to sudden and significant change or threats. People use diverse strategies to cope with stress and reactions can be physical, emotional, behavioural, or even psychological (Bosanac & Luic 2021). In formulating a stress reduction model for the stress induced by the COVID-19 pandemic, Khosravi (2020) concludes that the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as an originator of stress. Limited social interaction, isolation and social distancing can cause psychological problems. This author suggests that online interaction like video chats and group calls can alleviate stress of isolation.

Another dynamic considered in the present study was the preparedness of tutors as they transitioned from F2F to eLearning and teaching. In a study comparing the perceptions of students' learning and teaching relationships with tutors before and after the change from traditional teaching and learning to eLearning Nyawo (2021:220) recommends that tutors need to have suitable ICT skills to 'ensure the successful implementation of online education technologies' and that tutors and students should engage with one another so that they can discuss their learning materials. In addition, learning can be enhanced, and specific skills learned with the support of tutors. However, many students preferred traditional F2F tutorials to the online tutorial systems brought about by the COVID-19 restrictions. Dube (2020) reports that prior to the pandemic, tutorials had been presented in a dedicated venue where both tutors and students were present, but when contact classes were suspended tutorials had to be conducted online. During this shift both social and economic inefficiencies needed to be considered, the most challenging being the lack of internet connectivity in the rural areas of South Africa.

Although this literature review suggests many hindrances that could deter efficient implementation of eLearning and teaching experiences of tutors, it is still assumed that tutors are valuable as they tend to explain concepts simply and clearly, sometimes better than lecturers. They also tend to give relevant examples because they are closer to the students and understand their contexts (Adebola 2021). This rings true at UWC, since tutors have completed the DAL programme and gained experience both as students and tutors, their confidence level has been enhanced, their communication skills have improved, and they have increased in student achievement output. Thus, tutors are seen as valuable assets to F2F and online teaching, provided they receive adequate appropriate training and access to data and online resources.

Method

Research Design

As mentioned above, this study investigated the perception of DAL tutors at UWC to further understand the effects of the #UWCDataLyteTeaching online teaching and learning practices and the #NoStudentWillBeLeftBehind campaigns. The design of this research was mainly qualitative and used a mixed-method approach that included an online questionnaire and observation of tutors' online interaction with students. Triangulation was employed by including both closed and open-ended questions in the questionnaire.

The study was exploratory with the intent to identify salient data that could assist in answering the research questions. This data collection technique was a useful way to observe the tutors' online engagement and evaluate whether their tutoring practices were aligned with the DAL programme. This means that both the quantitative and qualitative data were analysed independently to see whether they yielded similar results and could be mutually corroborated. Themes were identified and collated from the answers provided in the questionnaire.

This data gathering technique allowed the researchers to observe the tutors' participation and challenges they experienced. This could be done by analysing their interaction with facilitators and students in relation to queries on iKamva discussion forums, assistance required with their own online classes, assistance given to

students with DAL-related queries (for instance class registration), assistance given to facilitators during online classes, for example, managing questions and the daily register, and dealing with students. This research design was effective in laying the foundations for future studies on remote/online teaching and learning practices. It also allowed researchers to assess the efficacy of the technologies offered at UWC and how these technologies contribute to the challenges faced by tutors in their online tutoring. Therefore, the purpose of our research was to explore tutor's participation in online teaching and learning and their responses to related challenges, especially those brought about by access to devices and data.

Sampling Procedure and Ethical Considerations

Convenience sampling was used to identify 21 tutors who had completed the DAL programme and had provided student support during the pandemic. As the tutors had been selected in 2020 and the first semester of 2021 from students across various faculties, they provided responses from their experiences as students and tutors. The dual nature of their responses gave insight into the interventions and support offered by CIECT.

Ethical considerations included voluntary participation and the assurance of anonymity. The researchers ensured that the participants were properly informed about the nature of the study and what was required of them. Participants were given the opportunity to pose questions via Google Meets prior to the commencement of the study. In addition, the researchers obtained informed, signed consent forms from all the participants and undertook to protect their anonymity. Each participant was given a pseudonym, and every effort was made to ensure that the data gathered could not be traced back to participants in any subsequent reports, presentations or other forms of dissemination.

Results and Discussion

This section focuses on the findings from the questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to capture information from participants as tutors and as students, and aimed to gather information about the tutors' psychological, physiological and sociological aspects that affected their morale during the pandemic. The physical and emotional challenges tutors faced in the transition to online learning, the institutional support provided to tutors and students during this period, and the technological support offered to tutors and students were also investigated. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the open-ended questions, namely, emotional and sociological perceptions of tutors, challenges related to access to data and devices a result of the transfer to online learning, tutors' learning and organising mechanisms, and online support and personal challenges.

Data derived from written, verbal or visual information requires a type of analysis that can provide context and understanding of the subject. Content analysis is such a method and is often used in qualitative research (Elo & Kynga, 2008). In their content analysis of the data in the present research the researchers categorised, tagged and implemented thematic analysis of the qualitative data. They combined the results of the analysis with the behavioural data gathered for deeper insights. When performing the content analysis, they identified a

hierarchical set of themes that they used in coding the qualitative data. As the tutors' names were not to be disclosed, a number was allocated to each, namely T1, T2, T3, and so on.

Theme 1: Tutor Perceptions (Emotional and Sociological)

As mentioned above, stress can result from periods of isolation, such as those that resulted from the COVID-19 lockdown (Bosanac & Luic 2021; Khosravi 2020). The participants were asked what their overall feelings were as tutors during the lockdown. It was important to determine their well-being during the pandemic as this information would shed light on their emotional state during this time. It was evident from the responses that the tutors' well-being was challenged as the term of the lockdown grew. This had affected them adversely as they seemed to find it hard to cope with their duties.

Most participants admitted to anxiety, exhaustion, and feelings of hopelessness. Participants T3, T6 and others said they were anxious, but T6 went further to state a feeling of being overwhelmed and unable to concentrate, while T11 admitted that the uncertainty of things '*returning to normal*' induced feelings of stress and depression. It seems as if the lack of F2F contact with peers and faculty staff weighed heavily on those who found the change to online teaching and learning challenging (T16). Having no access to campus facilities like libraries added to the feelings of isolation (T12). The adverse effect of isolation on productivity was also mentioned.

The overwhelming majority of the responses indicated that the shift from F2F to online learning had affected their psycho-social well-being. It seems as if some students were able to cope due to their privileged environments, while it seems that disadvantaged students had deal with more psycho-social factors. Some tutors confirmed this reality as shown in the statements below:

T1: It was hard being a student during the lockdown. The environment which I lived not conducive for anyone to study in. There was loud music being played by neighbourhood, having to conduct household chores while attending lectures. With all that happening, I failed my first year in Masters.

T2: I can't study at home. We don't have a study room. I have two children and they make online learning a nightmare as they keep on distracting me, neighbours and their loud music.

The above statements show that tutors with added stressors are more likely to be frustrated and this could hinder their academic success, which substantiates research findings of Khosravi (2020) and Jappie (2021) discussed above that the level of these stressors and pressures are marked by cramped living conditions domestic responsibilities and the lack of proper infrastructure.

Theme 2: Challenges Experienced by Students in the Move from F2F to eLearning

Many challenges presented themselves when universities adopted the 'new normal' of making the complete transition from F2F to online learning. While this move was inevitable, many tutors in rural areas have limited access to the university's LMS and online resources. Often this is not due to a lack of infrastructure, but more to a lack of Internet access, data and technological challenges. It appears that the transition from F2F to online

learning favours those in urban areas with better infrastructure. When tutors were asked how they moved from F2F to online learning, both positive and negative opinions were expressed. Some negative responses were that the change was 'not easy' (T3), 'very difficult' (T6) and even 'a nightmare' (T1). Participant T1 even threatened to de-register and to drop out of university. However, the positive responses showed that tutors are resilient and willing to make an effort to adapt to the changing learning environment. Participant 3 overcame the initial difficulty by being open-minded and focused, as well as creating time to master the new way of teaching and learning. Those participants whose responses were positive seem to agree that having the appropriate infrastructure helped them to make the transition to online teaching and learning, but that more assistance was needed.

These findings agree with those of MacDonald (2017) who suggests that students face various limitations caused by the personal environments as well as a lack of competence and self-confidence. Obsolete hardware and software, inadequate access to data and online facilities, unstable internet networks, and physical isolation from peers, were seen as the overriding reasons for the negative experiences of the participants. In addition, lack of self-discipline, lack of privacy, time management and costs of data were also noted as negative factors that had to be dealt with. The above-mentioned tenacity shown by tutors in facing up to their challenges contributed to the success of easing some into the new teaching mode.

The participants noted that many students needed to be taught how to use the hardware and software they needed for eLearning, but that they, the tutors, did not know how to do that online. Added to this was the imposition made on the tutors when students used the WhatsApp platform to ask questions at inopportune times. Dube's (2020) claims that education as well as the dissemination of and access to information is inhibited when there is a lack of connectivity, was corroborated by the responses of the participants in the present study. Such inhibiting factors were consistently observed in this study, probably because connectivity and access to the Internet and data are limited across social and geographical demographics of South Africa.

Theme 3: Tutor Learning and Organising Mechanisms

A key component of asynchronous eLearning is the flexibility of time, place and pace of students' learning activities. The move from F2F to eLearning presented tutors with challenges related to their learning and living spaces as well as balancing their work and personal time. According to Omodan and Ige (2021) universities believe that students can attend classes at any time of their choice when lessons are posted online, but this proved to be another challenge the participants had to face as they tried to fulfil their duties. When tutors were asked how they managed eLearning and online tutoring, some reported having innovative coping strategies. Most participants said that it was difficult at first, but that they had overcome the problem by keeping diaries (T4, T7, T16, T17), being disciplined (T1), having good time management skills (T2, T3, T5, T7), staying focused on their goals (T3, T12, T18), and being flexible (T14, T16). These findings are in keeping with those of Hadiyanto et al. (2021) and Rotas and Cahapay (2021) mentioned above.

Theme 4: Tutor Online Support and Personal Challenges

While they were on campus before the pandemic, most tutors were dependent on the university's resources to access online platforms like the LMS, Internet connection, and available devices. However, participants in the study reported that they had to provide their own resources to conduct their duties online when they worked remotely. It seems as if the university did not know how to create fair technological opportunities for everyone. This supports Jappie's (2020) warning that South African universities would be challenged to ensure that all students had adequate access to data.

The present study determined that there were disparities in tutors' access to devices and the Internet to enable them to use learning platforms. Although it could be argued that these disparities were related to class and race, this was not the case, because all the participants had access to devices, as well as the necessary time and space, data and support. However, they often experienced connectivity problems. The disparities expressed by tutors are indicative of a number of challenges that were caused by some specific factor. The participants complained about their home environments that were not conducive to learning, a lack of self-discipline and constant distractions. Not being able to work in laboratories and have ready academic support from lecturers was missed by some, while others bemoaned the fact that much of their tutoring time was spent helping students to use the iKamva and LMS platforms or trying to use certain features when there were insufficient students online. Nonetheless, most were grateful that they could continue working while being kept safe from the spread of COVID19.

When tutors were asked about their personal challenges the dominant responses were related to the inconsistency of their Internet connectivity and staying motivated. Most participants in the present research agreed with Motaung and Dube (2020) that good and consistent access to the Internet is necessary for eLearning to be successful. T11 claimed "*The only personal challenge regarding online learning is not having consistent internet connection*", while T13 complained "*Some of our lectures do not believe when we tell them about the network conditions that hinder us from attending classes*".

It is true that universities are striving to balance the different aspects related to the shift from F2F to eLearning proportionally, but the success of their efforts will depend on the level and quality of digital access provided to tutors. Universities should guard against further entrenchment of a culture of social exclusion (Motala & Menon 2020). Although the logistics related to the shift from F2F to eLearning is far from over, this study found that students preferred F2F to online teaching and learning. This finding agrees with Nyawo (2021) who also found that students preferred traditional learning to that offered online. Figure 1 below illustrates the participants' response to the question, "What is your preference, Online or F2F learning?" It can be seen from this result that a very small minority of participants (5%) preferred to study online, while an overwhelming majority (67%) preferred F2F. A significant percentage (28%) could see the benefit of a blended approach in which online and F2F components were used.

What is your preference? - Online vs F2F Learning

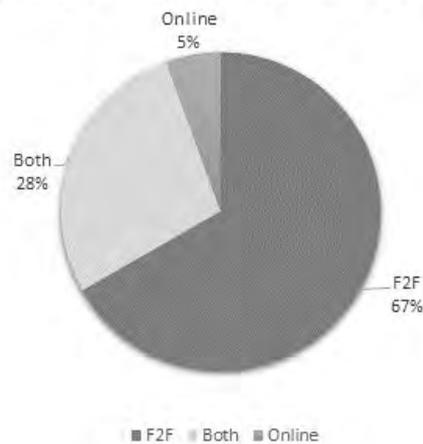


Figure 1. Student Preferences about Online and F2F Learning

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that the pandemic and subsequent lockdown caused by the COVID-19 virus had a negative impact on teaching and learning. The study also reflects the perceptions and challenges of participants in their response to having to use learning technologies to tutor various programmes. This paper highlights the challenges tutors faced by the abrupt change in teaching and learning styles and reveals that the provision of data and limited access to the Internet are interrelated, and that together they negatively affected the way the participants could perform their duties. It also agrees with various researchers that being competent users of computer technology and online applications allows tutors to carry out their duties with greater efficiency (Dube 2020).

The research reported here adds to a growing body of literature on the understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced remote teaching and learning, especially when Internet access and data availability are limited. In addition, the study contributes to information on how departments and/or faculties in HEI's can further contribute to the discourse by considering the perceptions and contributions of tutors. More research on tutors and the challenges they face as they perform their duties is necessary.

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