

STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN ACCESSING LEARNING HIGHER EDUCATION DURING COVID-19: CASE OF A UNIVERSITY IN MALAWI

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, the world experienced the unexpected as the COVID-19 pandemic ravished countries across the globe. This led to major disruptions in people's day to day lives. Within the education sector, schools and other institutions of learning were forced to shut down. One way of regaining some semblance of normality involved teaching and learning taking on a different format as institutions migrated to online teaching. Alongside this transition came major adjustments that both institutional staff and students had to make. While the transition from face-to-face learning to online was argued to have been an uphill struggle, the situation varied from country to country and region to region, with most countries especially in the Global North, to a large extent, transitioning with reasonable ease. The transition to online learning in response to COVID-19 offered an opportunity to clarify aspects that influence the use of digital technology in teaching and learning as well as to explore the overall student learning experience. The main objective of the article is to explore how students in Malawi, a country in the Global South and one of the poorest countries in the world, coped with this major disruption in trying to access higher education. Using a qualitative approach, data was collected through interviews with both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Data was analysed thematically, and findings presented based on themes emerging from the analysis that were categorised as pre-lockdown, lockdown and post-lockdown experiences. Findings revealed the interconnectedness between the various aspects of student life that affect their learning experiences. It also highlighted how disruption only bring to the fore underlying issues from where learning experiences would either be looked at as positive or negatives.

Keywords: students, learning experience, COVID-19, university, Malawi, access

BACKGROUND

The COVID-19 pandemic started in Wuhan, China towards the end of 2019. It was caused by a virus called the coronavirus. By the end of January 2020, The World Health Organisation director, Dr Tedros Ghebreyesus, made an emergency alert, referring to the Coronavirus as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) and by middle of March 2020, the coronavirus was declared a pandemic and had spread into 114 countries. Based on such rapid

spread of the virus, measures were put in place to ensure control of transmission, including wearing of masks, observance of social distance and general hygiene measures including frequent washing of hands. These measures were later followed by stringent regulations that affected the entire world resulting in major shifts in the way the world had always operated. The concept of life, living and existence took on a new meaning. For the first time in many years, the world almost came to a standstill, with people confined to their homes following the enforcement of lockdown rules that varied in intensity from place to place. Activities that had always been taken for granted became illegal, with curfews in place and permission for only the most necessary movements of people. The result was a rethinking of how countries could preserve a balance between saving lives from COVID-19 and saving lives from economic depression because the declaration of emergency regulations led to the closure of many businesses with the consequent loss of jobs. A continuation of some semblance of normality within the economy was crucial to human survival. This balance was later to be referred to as the “new normal”.

Among the institutions affected by the COVID-19 disruption were those servicing the education sector. Education has always been considered not only as an intellectual exercise but also a social set-up in which interaction and, in particular, physical interaction was the norm. As a result of the lockdown measures instituted in countries around the world, learners could no longer enjoy the luxury of going into institutional campuses or classrooms. Instead, educational institutions resorted to remote learning using technology. This article thus seeks to establish the students’ experiences in accessing learning in higher education during this pandemic period, using Malawi as a case study. The article seeks to answer the following questions:

- What was the experience of students in accessing learning with the unexpected changes made in their teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What challenges did they encounter with this change? What opportunities were created by the COVID-19 changes?
- How have students’ experiences affected their lives?

For purposes of this study, the learning experience was conceptualised as the acquisition of facts, skills and methods that can be retained and used as necessary (Ramsden 1992, 26). Part of the use of the acquired facts, skills and methods being either for intrinsic purposes, where learning serves the purpose of self-enjoyment for its own sake or extrinsic when seen through

successful progression as well as ability to use these when required to (Lin, McKeachie, and Kim 2003, 252). The following section presents the general experiences of students during the COVID-19 period.

LEARNING EXPERIENCE DURING COVID-19

The abrupt transition from face-to-face learning to remote online learning affected learning in general, although the effects were dependent on several factors (Lemay, Bazelais, and Doleck 2021, 2). Some of these factors included the parts of the world where these changes were implemented; the prior exposure to technology that both the teachers and students had; ownership of technological devices that would permit the use of this platform of learning; and the availability and affordability of the internet and access to connectivity.

Location factors

The most observable difference in the adoption of online learning globally was the already existing divide between the Global North and the Global South. While there were some teething problems with the move from face-to-face learning to online learning, most countries in the Global North managed this transition better than countries in the Global South. In institutions where digital transformation had not yet reached an advanced stage, this abrupt transition was a challenge and most of the online learning that took place during the pandemic was reduced to translating face-to-face material and pedagogy for online use. This resulted in challenges as face-to-face and online teaching approaches differ considerably (Hassan 2021, 44). On the other hand, the scenario in most of the First World, Global North countries tell a different story mainly because of the progress that had been made with migrating towards digital platforms in teaching and learning even before the pandemic took root (Aristovnik et al. 2020, 8).

Socioeconomic factors

The migration to an online teaching and learning approach did not come without a cost. As has been discussed above, implicitly, the determining factor behind the smoothness in adoption of online teaching and learning from the traditional face-to-face lay in the socioeconomic status of communities both at macro (region, country, institution) as well as at micro (individual) levels. Because of advancements in both economic and technological development, the Global North had an edge with regard to transitioning to online learning both by students and instructors. On the other hand, because they lag in both economic and technological development, the transition took a toll on most countries in the developing Global South. COVID-19 exposed the underlying existing digital gap between students from Global North

and those from the Global South (Malet et al. 2021, 1). Key among these differences were issues of affordability and access to digital technology which for the most part was not guaranteed in the Global South.

Prior exposure to digital technology

Digital technology is not a new phenomenon. With the advent of the internet, many human activities that require a physical presence could be replaced by digital alternatives. Likewise, education delivered via digital technologies has developed over time. The rate at which the development has occurred, again speaks to the location, levels of development and to some extent, age cohorts. For instance, the above sections have pointed out the advantage that Global North had in terms of accessing and adopting digital technology in learning but, interestingly, a study conducted in the UK shows a generational gap with regard to exposure to digital technology that leaves the older generation struggling with coming to terms with the shift to the digital dispensation (Autry and Berge 2011, 461; Olphert and Damodaran 2013, 565). In a study on degrees of precarity in UK academia during the COVID-19 pandemic, it was noted that senior academic staff struggled with the transition to online teaching and required support from the younger colleagues (Kınıkoğlu and Can 2021, 7). These authors observed how the older generation, mostly educators, experienced challenges due to their limited exposure to digital technology. They are sometimes referred to as “digital immigrants” as opposed to the young people that are more conversant with technology, referred to as “digital natives” (Prensky 2001, 3). The transition thus also created some level of unease in the Global North in this context. In the Global South, the situation was relatively similar in terms of the generational gap in digital technology, although within the south, socioeconomic status also played a role in determining who among the young people would qualify for the label “digital native” or “digital immigrant”. For young people, socioeconomic status also plays a role in determining one’s position either as a digital immigrant or a native, with those coming from less privileged backgrounds finding digital technology alien to them (Jenkins 2007). The subsequent section provides context to the case from which this study was conducted.

CONTEXTUALISING MALAWI

Malawi categorised as one of the least developed countries within the southern part of Africa. Having no mineral reserves, Malawi relies on agriculture for its economy with tobacco as the main export. Over the years and with the global restrictions on smoking, the tobacco market has suffered, resulting in the devaluation of the country’s currency (Malawi Kwacha). The population of the country is just above 18 million; its poverty levels are as high as 51 per cent

of the population, with 45 per cent of the population being young people below the age of 15, implying that a large section of young people come from deprived or disadvantaged backgrounds. According to the Human Development report (UNDP 2020), Malawi is ranked at 174/189 countries globally. With a development index of 0.483 in comparison with the highest global ranking country, Norway, at 0.957 and at regional level with South Africa's index at 0.709, Malawi's poverty levels are on the lowest side. Malawi has a Gini inequality index of 45 per cent that reflects discrepancies between those that have and those that do not have. Only 18.2 per cent of the population, mainly urban dwellers, have access to electricity. As of 2019, 15.5 per cent of the population were registered internet users and the internet bandwidth per internet user measured in kilobits/second, according to 2016 data, was 4.24kb/s compared to the global average at the time which was at 151.10kb/s (Global Economy, 2016).

It is, therefore, against this backdrop that this article sought to understand the students' learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic period.

THEORETICAL FRAMING – HUMANISTIC LEARNING THEORY AND CAPABILITIES APPROACH

Over and above the factors that describe the transition to online learning experience, this study took a holistic approach to understanding the experiences that students had in their learning during the COVID-19 disruption. This study uses the lens of concepts drawn from the humanistic learning theory and the capabilities approach. Both theories focus on the means and ends of achieving a given goal.

Abraham Maslow is considered the main proponent of the theory of humanistic learning. The theory focuses on the growth and development of a holistic person. According to Maslow, human needs are arranged in a hierarchical order where the fulfilment of basic needs that he described as physiological is key to reaching the next level in the hierarchy, which in return will propel one to go higher up the hierarchy as the various needs at lower levels are met (Simons, Irwin, and Drinnien 1987, 1). For Maslow, the ultimate need for human beings is self-actualisation but, until the environment is conducive, humans cannot develop to their fullest potential. The acquisition of education is an element of attaining self-actualisation. In this study, the aim was to explore what the learning experiences of students were like during the COVID-19 period which was a major disruption in human progress.

On the other hand, the capabilities approach by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum focuses on the extent to which human beings can fully attain what they want to be and do (Walker 2021, 506–507). For capabilities to be realised, resource(s) must be available from which these capabilities can translate into functions. The theory also touches on the role of

conversion factors that can either be positive and foster realisation of capabilities or negative and hinder the realisation of capabilities. Lastly, the capabilities approach focuses on the role that freedom of choice plays in the achievement of capabilities, which Sen (1999, 75) underscores as an important prerequisite for the full translation of capabilities into functions. In this study, the quest was to explore whether the resource of education was able to be translated into the capability of learning by students within the restrictions laid out during the COVID-19 period. Furthermore, if translated, the question is whether learners benefited from online learning and thus delivered the satisfaction (self-actualisation) that education is expected to bring about.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative methodological approach to collecting and analysing data. The choice of this approach was based on the nature of the research questions and the ability of this approach to dig deeply into social phenomena. By focusing on a smaller sample, researchers engage in an in-depth manner to extract the exact information that they seek to explore. If conducted well, qualitative research finds data that is rich (Creswell et al. 2007, 251). In this study, the ideal means of appreciating the students' learning experiences during the COVID-19 period was to engage them in open-ended questions that did not limit the scope of their responses, unlike with the quantitative approach where the questions are more restrictive and are only able to explore a phenomenon to a limited extent.

A case study design was implemented as the students that participated in the study belonged to a single institution of higher education in Malawi. The sample comprised 16 students who were identified using snowball sampling combined with purposive sampling. The former relies mainly on “networking and referrals” (Parker, Scott, and Geddes 2019, 4) but these referrals are based on predetermined criteria – the purposive element. For this study, the eligibility criteria were gender and level of study (postgraduate and undergraduate). Table 1 depicts the breakdown of respondents based on these criteria.

Table 1: Sample selection

Gender	Level of Study		Total
	Postgraduate	Undergraduate	
Female	4	4	8
Male	4	4	8
Total	8	8	16

Data for the study was meant to be collected through WhatsApp interviews, but, because of

connectivity problems, an open-ended survey was sent to respondents via email. Following the preliminary analysis of the survey, follow-up questions and further probes were later done through WhatsApp interviews. The use of a semi-structured interview schedule allowed respondents to freely express their feelings and perceptions on the questions presented. Data collected from both the survey and follow-up interviews was analysed using thematic analysis where codes were generated from the responses that addressed the research questions and referred to the theoretical framework that underpinned the article.

The data collected was transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis, where data was read and re-read to gain a deeper understanding of it, the later categorised into codes that were later merged into themes from which this article was generated (Terry, Hayfield, Clarke and Braun 2017, 17-37).

The process of data generation adhered to ethical procedures where permission was granted to work with students and consent was obtained from the students after detailing the aim and objectives of the study as well as their rights as respondents to accept, decline or discontinue along the way if they wished to so (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2010, 65–67).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The data that was collected and analysed brought to light some of the learning experiences that students encountered while studying during the COVID-19 period. The findings were categorised into three main sections of the COVID-19 period (pre-lockdown learning experience, the lockdown learning experience and the post-lockdown learning experience). It is within these three broad categories that respondents shared their personal learning experiences.

PRE-LOCKDOWN EXPERIENCE

This accounted for the period just after the coronavirus had begun to spread across the world from the initial Wuhan cases to the point when the government of Malawi made an announcement to discontinue face-to-face learning in March 2020. In those first four months, respondents reported having to attend classes as normal but feeling abnormal. There was visible unease and anxiety among respondents based on what came out in the news and social media. One of the respondents put it as follows:

“One of my friends sent me a video clip that had gone viral on how people were falling like flies from this virus. It scared the life out of me. I knew as a student, I had to attend lectures but the thought of being infected affected my level of concentration in lectures ... was kind of present in the flesh but absent in every [other] sense of the word.” (UG#2F).

Using the conceptualisation of learning as provided in the introduction of this article, learning means being able to retain and use what individuals acquire through knowledge, attitude and skills (Ramsden 1992, 26). From the reactions of respondents and their admission about lower levels of concentration, it could be questioned whether the ultimate intention of learning was achieved. It could also be disputed from a capabilities' standpoint whether the availability of resources, in this case, online learning, translated itself into the capability to learn that would manifest itself through the functioning of being able to retain and use the knowledge, skills and attitudes when needed.

Part of the experience from respondents entailed how everyone in the lecture room was presumed to be infected and likely to infect others, which made interactions problematic.

“Coughing became a serious crime that led to alienation. I was alienated before for sneezing and am not innocent of the same, as I made sure to distance myself from anyone seeming to look sick. We could not socialise as we used to.” (PG#4M).

The feeling of anxiety that respondents expressed was an emotional reaction reflected in other literature (Akdeniz et al. 2020, 3; Elmer, Mepham, and Stadfield 2020, 18). Findings from these studies show how the initial onset of COVID-19 before countries enforced lockdown measures took a toll on students' emotional and mental wellbeing, affecting their academic abilities to learn. Using Maslow's motivational theory as a lens, the main concern of these students was their basic need for safety that was threatened by this unheard-of virus that was on a killing spree around the world. It was the failure or uncertainty to meet this need that led to one respondent's admission of “physical presence in lectures but absence in every sense of the word”.

In some of the cases, this feeling of unease was not only about the respondents themselves but also for their loved ones. The fear of catching the virus and infecting loved ones was another experience that was mentioned often. Especially among the postgraduate students, most of whom had their own families, the thought of the guilt they expressed if they carried the virus to their families affected their ability to devote themselves fully to their studies. One respondent put it this way:

“Upon losing a family member to COVID-19 (one of the very first cases), I had to decide on what was more important for me and my family ... my education, or my health and that of my family ... It was at this point when I decided I would stay away from lectures. Lucky enough, hardly a week into making this decision, government announced the shutting down of institutions.” (PG#1F).

Again, concurring with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, while learning was considered as a means of self-actualisation, the danger that COVID-19 posed to the physiological, safety and psychological needs of the respondent resulted in their choosing to forego their higher order needs in exchange for the lower, basic needs (Simons et al. 1987, 1). In this case, although the opportunity to learn was presented in the form of online learning, the experiences of respondents indicated a gap in the achievement of the intended outcome of the resource provided because of the unfulfilled lower order needs that were perceived as being under threat.

LOCKDOWN EXPERIENCE

Following the announcement of the government of Malawi to shut down the country in March 2020, students had to leave their institutions for their homes where learning was to occur via online platforms. The development was met with mixed reactions from the respondents, both positive and negative.

The positivity towards lockdown learning for most of the respondents was based on the sense of relief that they had from the fear and anxiety of catching the virus while in the institution's environment where they felt trapped, as one of the undergraduate students put it:

“Part of me was relieved to have been sent home. Being on campus felt like a prison where you cannot leave because it would cost you your education; on the other hand, the desire to go on learning in this set-up was running the risk of losing one's health or even life to the virus.” (UG#3M).

There was a general feeling of being liberated and free to have one's right to decide how they would look after themselves and their loved ones with the announcement for students to leave the institutions. The sense of freedom to be and do is what capabilities are about (Walker 2021, 509). Nonetheless, Sen (1999, xi–xii) argued that freedoms can either be qualified or constrained by social, political and economic factors. For the respondents, the social disruption caused by COVID-19 was a constraining force hindering the realisation of students' capabilities to learn.

Prominent among the postgraduate students was the moral obligation that came with protecting themselves not only for their own sakes but for that of their families and those close to them. For some of them, there was a willingness to go as far as putting their studies in abeyance, if it meant securing their own lives and those of their loved ones. Similar sentiments were observed in the study by Akdeniz et al. (2020, 4)

On the other hand, the lockdown announcement exposed some of the students to

unexpected inconvenience in their learning that they had not anticipated. Most of the students, especially the female postgraduate respondents, reported that the home environment affected their learning. The following response was given by one of the female postgraduate respondents:

“While coming back home helped in lessening the concerns of catching the virus, my learning suffered due to the responsibilities that I have as a young mother with two children who are at home 24/7. I could not balance my role as a wife, mother and student. As a result, one had to suffer, and this was me as a student.” (PG#2F).

Worth noting though is that unlike the female respondents, none of the male respondents alluded to such struggles of having to juggle their schoolwork with familial responsibilities. These sentiments have been widely alluded to both in the developed and developing countries on how gender variations resulted in differing experiences between men and women, with women having to balance their studies, run the home and supervise the home-schooling of their children (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2021, 274).

Another postgraduate respondent expressed the sense of regret that came with applying for the postgraduate programme that coincided with the lockdown:

“I had not been in formal school for almost four years and schools were closed two weeks after opening. I was already having struggles bringing myself into the school mood and shifting to online made it more difficult for me. I really believe the school environment could have helped me cope up faster with the fact that I was a student again ... I found it difficult to concentrate in places where it was just me, my mind wandered a lot and I struggled to follow through the material. In short, I despised the experience and, on several occasions, regretted my decision to start a programme and almost withdrew.” (PG#3F).

Alongside the negative experience regarding the struggles to cope in the home environment and how un conducive it was for learning amidst the lockdown, inequalities among students were exposed. This was mainly the case for those that had to return to rural or remote areas where online learning would be a struggle because of lack of access to the internet. During the interviews, one of the undergraduate respondents lamented on how the arrangement affected their learning in a significant way:

“Where I come from, one has to go to a particular hilly area that is about 5km away from my home to access reliable internet connection. This was a huge inconvenience for me as even after walking such a distance, connection was never a guarantee, resulting in my missing much of learning.” (UG#4M).

Studies on the online learning experience during COVID-19 reveal similar trends regarding the

challenges that students had to deal with to access learning. To a large extent, the students that experienced these challenges were those from low socioeconomic backgrounds and those residing in remote areas where connectivity was inaccessible. A study conducted in West Bengal highlighted how the shift to online learning was discriminatory to poor and marginalised students (Kapasia et al. 2020, 2). Du Preez and le Grange (2020, 92) refer to the digital divide that characterises South Africa and how the transition to online learning not only brought this truth to the fore, but also exposed the inequalities in the forms of both formal as well as epistemological access (Morrow 2009, iv); the latter refers to the ability to navigate the learning process. Moving to online learning thus only benefitted those students that had the digital devices, access to internet and the technological knowhow to navigate the learning experience.

In the findings from this study, while all the respondents reported being in possession of a device that enabled them to learn online, the extent to which this learning occurred varied based on access to internet connectivity from home and how conversant they were with the use of technology as a learning tool. From the findings, the respondents that experienced such struggles to navigate online learning due to lack of exposure were mainly postgraduate students. One respondent stated the following:

“The pressure of logging in and working online got to me because for the first time, I got to appreciate why young people as so into technology devices, of which during my time, we did not have that luxury. Seeking assistance from the young ones was tricky under the lockdown as we were confined to our homes.” (PG#2M).

The expression resonates with Beaunoyer, Dupéré, and Guitton’s (2020, 2) observation of how digital learning differentiates the digital natives (mostly young middle-class people who through exposure to technology have mastered the art of using technology) and the digital immigrants, mostly the older generation as well as socially and economically disadvantaged group who either missed the opportunity during their youth to acquire digital technological skills or had no access to the devices at all. Prior to the lockdown announcement, such inequalities existed but were not as apparent because of the use of traditional face-to-face education for the most part. Additionally, these inequalities became more visible, in the case of access to the internet and the unreliability of electricity, as these tended to be situational and locational. Students living in rural and remote areas suffered the most whereas such inequalities were unnoticed while on campus prior to the lock down. When looked at through the capabilities approach, the mere presence of inequalities in the acquisition of education is considered a barrier to freedom and thereby “antithetical to education as a capability” (Walker 2021, 509).

The cost of accessing online learning featured as one of the dominant factors that impacted the students' learning experience. Most respondents admitted to struggling to afford internet services that were often unreliable. In some cases, respondents acknowledged receiving a starter pack data bundle for the online learning. With this, they were assured of making progress in their learning as one respondent commented:

“Due to the cost of living and my family background, sourcing internet data would have been impossible for me but the little I received from our department, enabled me to attend some, not all online lectures. Once data ran out, I had to depend on friends to share what they got from the lessons. This really pulled me back in my progress as I consider myself to be an above-average student, but this was not reflected in my end of year results. I am still dealing with the after-effects of that lag.” (UG#1M).

The United Nations set a benchmark price for internet access for countries based on levels of affordability (UNCTAD 2021, 13). While sub-Saharan African countries have had some decreases in costs of internet bundles, they still fall short of the UN target. This has resulted in Sub-Saharan Africa having the highest cost of internet data compared to other regions of the world. In spite of these high internet costs, the quality of internet provision in Malawi remains a significant challenge (Zozie and Chawinga 2018, 220). Similarly in South Africa, one of the hindrances to students reaching their full potential during the COVID-19 period was the high cost of the internet infrastructure, which included cost of Wi-Fi, digital devices and lack of bandwidth. At the centre of these challenges were students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Mpungose 2020, 7).

The lag referred to by the respondent was not only an experience of the Global South. It was shown in a study in the United States by Dorn et al. (2020, 5) who observed long-term effects on the performance of students mainly from racial minority and socioeconomically marginalised communities. Such loss was attributed, among other aspects, to lack of access to remote learning and the quality of it. They observed that such learning loss would not be erased or regained within the short term.

On a slightly different level, there was an outcry about how the learning experience during COVID-19 was adversely affected due to the absence of physical and social presence. An appreciation of the learning process as not being restricted to academic or intellectual development but also incorporating the social and physical sphere was highlighted. For the most part, the nature of higher education learning is independent learning. While this is the case, most of the respondents expressed how working in a community of practice with fellow students acted as a motivation for them to invest more in their learning. Students commented on the value of working groups that they worked with in their respective courses. The abrupt change

from face-to-face to online learning in a lockdown condition threw most of the respondents off balance. One respondent commented:

“Working from home, on my own was one of the hardest things that I had to endure as a student. Amidst the dreadful stories and losses that Covid-19 brought with it, learning was the last thing on my mind. If only we were in the campus set-up, I believe I would have drawn strength from my working group. I have had to repeat a year not because I am dull but could not cope with having to learning in solitude.” (UG#4F).

The need for learning in the traditional face-to-face set up was evidence of the role that institutions played in socialisation. With the need for online learning occasioned by the lockdown, a void was experienced by the respondents as even social media platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and even phone conversations could not replace the impact of physical and social contact. In a study carried out to investigate students’ perspectives on learning during COVID-19 in the USA, students revealed an appreciation of the social dimension that learning brought with it (Harris et al. 2021, 11). In the initial stages of the lockdown, there was some excitement about the prospects of working remotely and online but with the passage of time, the seclusion took a toll on some of the students with Harris et al.’s (2021) study showing an almost 20 per cent increase in the appreciation of the social role that the traditional face-to face learning experience plays in education.

The deprivation of the ability to socialise that came because of the COVID-19 lockdown, could be considered as a conversion factor (positive or negative) which “conveys personal, social, and environmental conditions that form the individual life experience” (Sen 1992, 33). It is these factors, according to Sen, that entail the extent to which individuals can translate resources available to them into capabilities (Vecchio and Martens 2021, 835). The social deprivation degenerated into a psychological toll that respondents in this study reported to have experienced. In one instance, an undergraduate student reported developing suicidal thoughts:

“At some point, I completely failed to cope with the loneliness coupled with the load of work that I had to do away from my buddies. These thoughts of despair began to come to me, and this is when I realised that what drives people to taking their own lives is more what goes on in the mind than the experiences as they happen. I needed to talk to someone, not by phone or social media but in flesh ... And this, I was denied” (UG#1F).

Similar findings have been established that linked the deprivation of physical-social contact among students to psychological conditions including depression, anxiety, stress and insomnia (Commodari et al. 2021, 11). Similarly, a study conducted in the UK reported an increased rate among young people who admitted having had suicidal thoughts because of the lockdown,

which gave them the impression of being trapped (Wise 2020, 1)

POST-LOCKDOWN EXPERIENCE

As governments began to relax the lockdown restrictions instituted from around March 2021, one of the most eagerly anticipated experiences of the respondents in the study was getting back to what used to be a normal learning set-up. As with a study in the USA (Harris et al. 2021, 9), respondents in the current study gained a greater appreciation of the role of physically connecting socially with peers. One respondent made the following remark:

“I couldn’t wait for that announcement to get back to campus. More than learning itself, I needed to connect once again with my classmates. Covid-19 made me never to take for granted opportunities we get to meet with friends and just be ...” (UG#2M).

Getting back to class was another highlight in the study. Comments such as the following confirmed this:

“Seeing my lecturers in front and in person was what summed up my feeling of excitement. I just felt like I had gained back my motivation to learn once again.” (UG#2F).

“For the first time since I joined university as a student, this was my first time to speak up in class ... just to be heard by someone in a long time. From then on, I cannot be stopped. I realise the importance of connecting in learning and not shying away from asking or commenting.” (UG#3M).

Looking back at the whole period from pre-COVID-19 lockdown period to the post-COVID-19 lockdown period, some opportunities presented themselves. Chief among the opportunities was the opportunity to deepen their knowledge and skills in digital technology. Overall, most respondents admitted to having gained some level of mastery of the various aspects of digital technology. One postgraduate student commented the following:

“In the midst of all the negative experiences in my learning process during the lockdown, I have come out a technologically savvy person. And these skills will open up opportunities for me.” (PG#4F).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In exploring the students’ learning experiences during the COVID-19 period in an institution of higher learning, the study was guided by Maslow’s humanistic learning theory and Sen and Nussbaum’s capabilities approach. Both theories have within them premises that explain how means can lead to intended ends or be intercepted by other factors, thereby preventing the

attainment of intended goals. In conceptualising learning as a means of making use of the knowledge, attitudes and skills retained and gained over time, the study established how COVID-19 became a disruption to accessing such learning. In response to the first research question on the learning experiences of students during COVID-19, the threat to the basic needs of students including safety and social needs (belongingness) not only hindered their achievement of self-actualisation through attainment of higher education but also affected other dimensions of their lives (psychological). This reflects the connectedness between the needs and the order in which human needs are usually met.

Secondly, the COVID-19 disruption exposed students to challenges which were perceived for the most part as a negative conversion factor to students achieving their capabilities. Despite the provision of online learning as an alternative resource to learning, freedoms that would afford students access such a resource were perceived to have been restricted. Part of the limitation of freedoms was in the lockdown measures that restricted what students could do. Furthermore, the existence of inequalities in the accessing of online teaching alternatives was another constraining factor that affected students' opportunities to realise their capabilities. On the other hand, the COVID-19 disruption revealed opportunities to students' learning experiences. Although admittedly forced unprepared into the technologically-led learning, they were able to gain new skills especially in digital technology. This could arguably be considered a positive conversion factor to their learning capabilities.

Thirdly, as was the case with Dorn et al. (2020, 5), the adverse learning experiences that were undergone by some students would last a period of time to repair. Examples include those that ended up failing a course (s) and having to repeat a year.

In view of the outcome of the study, therefore, a number of points stand out that require interrogating especially pertaining to learning and the role of institutions. In the effort to make up for the inability to continue with face-to-face learning due to COVID-19, governments and institutions turned to online learning to unsure that students were able to access learning amidst the disruption. While access to learning has been looked at purely from an academic and intellectually stimulating point, there is need to acknowledge that such learning as conceived by Ramsden (1992, 26) can only occur with the context of an environment where the objects of the learning process are in a state of balance regarding the fulfilment of their basic need. On the role of the institution, when looked at through the eyes of Tronto (2010, 163), care ought to be central to institutions. Institutions ought to take on a proactive duty of care rather than a reactive. Drawing from the lessons of COVID-19, rather than moving on, institutions need to take a step back and reflect on how access to learning was enhanced or constraints and how redress could be made for future cases.

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