

POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES DURING COVID-19 AT AN OPEN DISTANCE LEARNING INSTITUTION

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ABSTRACT

Students' research, interactivity, experiences, and exposure have increasingly become important indicators of quality in higher education, however these expectations declined during COVID-19 pandemic. While studies have been conducted on postgraduate students' experiences during their studies, there is lack of empirical evidence on their experiences during COVID-19 pandemic, specifically at open distance learning institutions (ODLs). To bridge this identified gap, qualitative exploratory research was conducted to explore the experiences of postgraduate students registered in master's and doctoral programmes at the Department of Health Studies, University of South Africa, during the pandemic. Non-probability purposive sampling was used. Online interviews via Microsoft Teams were used for data collection. The interviews were recorded and the data obtained were analysed thematically. Findings revealed both positive and negative experiences. Anxiety, exhaustion and frustration due to sickness, death of family members, poor communication from the university, inadequate resources and poor internet access affected students' studies. Some participants reported lack of supervisory communication and support, while others applauded the continuous support of their supervisors and the university's improvement of its electronic communication linkages. Microsoft Teams was newly adopted. Working from home also gave them an opportunity to accelerate their studies. In conclusion based on the findings the researcher recommended that the university continue to improve academic support and address the mental health of students to prepare them to accept current and future unforeseen circumstances positively. Strengthening collaboration with national and international partners to enhance continuous online communication between the university and the students should also be considered.

Keywords: COVID-19, experiences, higher education, Open Distance Learning, postgraduate student research, supervisors.

INTRODUCTION

Since the introduction of democracy in South Africa (SA) in 1994 a wealth of postgraduate programmes has been introduced to address the social, economic and political needs of the country. "This has led to an increase in the number of students enrolling for postgraduate

programmes in South Africa. Some students successfully complete their studies, while others eventually drop out without attaining their chosen qualifications owing to various factors they encounter on their academic journey” (Maphalala and Mpofo 2018, 109).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted many sectors of the economy, including education, with residential and open distance learning (ODL) universities pressured to suspend their academic activities (Baber 2020, 285). One of the student groups affected by the pandemic was postgraduate students (PGSs) (Khalid et al. 2021, 1). Yet, it remained imperative for PGSs to continue advancing their knowledge in their respective fields during that unprecedented time of upheaval (Aydemir and Ullusu 2020, 428). Rather than allowing the pandemic to hinder them, they needed to leverage the period to their advantage.

The pandemic occurred when the world, specifically the education sector, was moving forward on the fourth industrial revolution journey. The usual way of doing things required abrupt modification, causing anxiety among all people. Both undergraduate students and PGSs, as well as academics, were adversely affected, resulting in the need to revise and extend academic calendars. Many institutions were compelled to identify and implement several strategies to sustain the academic project, including engaging in emergency remote learning and teaching; arranging for staff to work from home; finding alternative ways of supporting students; and reallocating budgets to address emerging needs (Du Plessis et al. 2022, 1).

Research plays a vital role in the development of any nation, and institutions of higher learning provide a platform for that through their postgraduate (PG) studies (Costa 2018, 4, citing Okoduwa et al. 2018). PG studies are critical in the discovery and creation of new knowledge through investigating phenomena and providing strategies across wide contexts in our socioeconomic and political landscape (Costa 2018, 1). The resolution of challenges in health and education thus requires consideration.

As a higher education institution in South Africa, the University of South Africa (Unisa) contributes towards research through its PG activities, hence this study. It should be noted that, in SA as at other higher education institutions around the world, a concerted effort is made to increase the numbers of successful PGSs (Manyike 2017, 1–2). However, PGSs in SA, as is the case in other parts of the world, particularly in developing nations, struggle to complete the research component of their studies. Consequently, SA faces low throughput across the entire higher education system, as many PGSs fail to finish their studies (Costa 2018, 5). In 2020, the situation worsened because of the outbreak of COVID-19 that affected the supervision of PG research; the meeting of study output targets and deliverables; the submission of new grants for the next cycle of study; and the meeting of study funding across all higher education institutions (Hedding et al. 2020, 1). As a PGS supervisor, the researcher noted a

definite decline in the completion rate concerning PG studies. The broader impact of the pandemic on PGSs is, therefore, of concern.

Yet, despite global conditions academic supervisors of PGSs continue to do their utmost efforts to ensure that their students complete their studies successfully. However, irrespective of supervisory efforts to interact, motivate and encourage students online and give timely feedback, timeframes are, unfortunately, often prolonged completion of their studies, which frequently leads to attrition. Muthukrishnan et al. (2022, 51) maintained that high attrition and low completion rates among PGS are significant threats to the university system's key performance area. Their study confirmed that research skills, institutional support and self-management skills enhance students' motivation to graduate on time considerably, but their findings also demonstrated that supervisory practices towards ensuring timely graduation among students do not support either students' research skills or motivation to graduate on time (Muthukrishnan et al. 2022, 59). They, nonetheless, stressed caution in the interpretation of the latter.

The concerns about PG studies and the broader impact of the pandemic on PGSs resulted in several studies considering aspects affecting the PG online learning environment, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study of Mtshali et al. (2022, 89) carried out in SA, investigated the experiences of PGSs with learning management systems at a nursing education institution in KwaZulu-Natal. However, the study was not conducted at an ODL institution. Furthermore, it was not specified whether it was conducted before or during the pandemic (Mtshali et al. 2022, 89).

Internationally, Guiamalon and Boquia (2022, 520) conducted a study at Cotabato State University in the Philippines investigating the experiences, issues and concerns of PGSs during COVID-19 disruptions. That study was also not conducted in an ODL context. This lack of empirical evidence on the experiences of PGSs during COVID-19 in an ODL context created a gap in knowledge and warranted research.

According to Dawood and Van Wyk (2021). the pandemic-imposed restrictions on movement demanded a shift to online interaction. However, the researcher in this current study being a supervisor of PGS noted that the rate of interaction between ODL PGSs and their supervisors slowed down tremendously during the outbreak of COVID-19. Student use of interaction by using WhatsApp, telephone and e-mail tremendously declined. It was no longer the way it was before the pandemic. That resulted in concern that, that could lead to a further drop in the completion of their studies and longer retention on the university registration system. Furthermore, the PGSs in the Department of Health Studies at Unisa are health professionals whose services are of great importance, especially during events such as the pandemic. Hence,

supervisors are under pressure to turn out successful PGSs, as highlighted by Manyike (2017). But no matter how practical a distance-learning system may be during challenging times, it may not be as efficient as direct teaching and learning and may need further technical development and be ready to be always used (Beltekin and Kuyulu 2020, 1).

During the pandemic, elements of constructivism, interactivity in transactional distance and connectivity were missing among students and supervisors. That resulted in this study being underpinned by the theories of transactional distance, constructivism and connectivity. These theories address connection through interaction between students and supervisors to support learning through research in an ODL context.

Connectivity seeks to be the 21st-century solution to perceived gaps that exist in traditional ideas about learning, particularly those concerned with the use of technology. It is regarded as a learning theory of the digital age. It attempts to close the gap between traditional learning and the use of technology and demonstrates that technology warrants looking at learning through a new lens. It builds on established theories to propose that technology is changing what, how and where we learn. The focus on student interaction with peers, supervisors and the environment around them provides fascinating possibilities for the future of learning where the use of technology can promote connection between the student and supervisor (Huezo 2017).

According to the transactional distance theory, distance is not simply geographical; it is also a pedagogical phenomenon. If students and supervisors are not physically present at the same time, they are separated by distance. Thus, it becomes necessary to introduce an artificial communication medium that would deliver information and provide channels for interaction (Moore and Kearsley 1996, 1). Interaction between students and supervisors, the design of courses and the organisation of human and technological resources are important (Moore and Kearsley 2012, 209). WhatsApp messages, e-mails and cell phones bridge the interaction and distance gap between supervisors and students. However, as pointed out earlier, students seem to no longer be interacting even online, which presented a premise for this study.

The constructivism theory supports learner-centred learning as it focuses on the way individual learners gain understanding of a phenomenon (Vygotsky 1978, 56–57). Learning is student-centred and instructions are interactive during the construction of knowledge. As such, a supervisor must guide the students during supervision and provide them with an opportunity to explore knowledge. In that context, the approach is student-centred.

For this study, PGSs were students registered for master's and doctoral programmes in the Department of Health Studies at Unisa during the COVID-19 period in 2020. The research foci of the students were health services management, health sciences education, public health and

clinical courses They are expected to research challenges specifically related to health, resolve them and suggest recommendations. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore their experiences as postgraduate students at an ODL institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research question was the following: “What are your experiences of being a postgraduate student at an ODL institution during the COVID-19 pandemic?” The aim was to share the findings of the study with university management and to submit recommendations based on those findings. That could assist in strengthening the support provided to postgraduate students in an ODL context during and after COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

Design and setting

A qualitative exploratory design was used. The setting was online via Microsoft Teams.

Population

The study population comprised all postgraduate ODL students registered for master's and doctoral programmes in the Department of Health Studies at Unisa during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Sampling and sample

Non-probability purposive sampling was used. The sample consisted of 22 purposefully selected participants and was further determined by data saturation. Inclusion criteria were master's and doctoral students older than 18 years registered for postgraduate programmes in Unisa's Department of Health Studies during the outbreak of COVID-19 in 2020. Their research focused on health services management, health sciences education, public health and clinical specialities.

Data-collection

A recruitment letter, informed consent form requesting participation to the study and recording of the interviews and interview guide were attached to the recruitment e-mail. The main question, “What are your experiences of being a postgraduate student at an ODL institution during the COVID-19 pandemic?” This was followed by probing questions. Demographic details were requested from the participants by including relevant information for completion in the interview guide. That assisted in providing background information about the study participants. It included age, residential area, type of study, year of enrolment and race for descriptive purposes, and was only reported at an aggregate level to ensure anonymity. Each

participant indicated dates for data collection based on the researcher's request. Data were collected via individual online interviews through Microsoft Teams during all levels of the pandemic. Interviews were recorded by using Micro-soft Teams. Because of inaudibility of four participants, which was noted during transcription of recording in preparation for data analysis they were excluded for data analysis and out of 22 participants 18 were considered for analysis.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance (90167694 CREC CHS 2021) was granted by the university's College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Committee. The registration department provided all contact details as the targeted participants were ODL students. The researcher signed a confidentiality binding form. Informed consent, including consent to record, which was signed was obtained from each participant before an interview. That was submitted to the researcher by e-mail. To maintain anonymity, codes were used during the interviews as follows: P for participant, followed by a number instead of a name.

Data analysis

The steps from Tesch's inductive, descriptive coding were applied for data analysis purposes (Creswell and Guetterman 2019). Voice recordings were transcribed verbatim to allow thorough exploration of the collected data. All transcripts were read carefully and repeatedly and ideas were noted as they emerged. Afterwards, the coding was rationalised to determine concepts or the frequency of concepts by listing and analysing all topics from the interview sessions. Similar topics were clustered together with abbreviated codes next to the appropriate segments of text; non-associated topics were clustered separately. Topics were differentiated during concept coding to include all meaningful instances of a specific code's data. Themes and categories were grouped from coded texts to reduce the number of categories. The results were analysed to determine meaningful key and codes. Transcripts were verified by the co-coder.

Rigor

The services of a professor with experience in qualitative studies were employed as co-coder to ensure credibility and confirmability. To further ensure credibility, the researcher participated in the interviews. Confirmability was further promoted by using ideas of the participants. Dependability was ensured as all interviews were listened to with the support of a research assistant, while transferability was assured by providing rich and complete data for utilisation in similar contexts.

FINDINGS

Demographic details which was not for data analysis purposes provided background information on the participants. The 18 participants comprised nine males and nine females ranging from 26 to 55 years old; 10 participants were from urban areas, seven from semi-urban areas and one came from a rural area. Fifteen were African and three were Indian. Their postgraduate enrolment periods ranged from 2017 to 2020; six were studying towards their master's degrees and 12 were doctoral students. Finally, 17 were health professionals and one was not (refer to table 1). Two main themes and 10 sub-themes were identified, as presented in the findings.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants (N=18)

Demographic characteristics	Classification	Frequency N	Percentage %
1. Age	20–25	0	0
	26–30	2	11.1
	31–35	1	5.6
	36–40	6	33.3
	41–45	2	11.1
	46–50	2	11.1
	51–55	5	27.8
	56–60	0	0
	61 and older	0	0
2. Gender	Male	9	50.0
	Female	9	50.0
3. Residential area	Urban	10	55.6
	Semi-urban	7	38.9
	Rural	1	5.6
4. Race	African	15	83.3
	White	0	0
	Coloured	0	0
	Indian	3	16.7
5. Year of enrolment for postgraduate programme at the ODL institution	2016	0	0
	2017	3	16.7
	2018	4	22.2
	2019	5	27.8
	2020	6	33.3
6. Level of enrolment	Master's	6	33.3
	Doctoral	12	66.7
7. Health professional	Yes	17	94.4
	No	1	5.6
TOTAL		18	

THEME 1: PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES AS PGSs AT AN ODL INSTITUTION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Participants narrated their experiences at the ODL institution during COVID-19, identifying those experiences that caused distress on multiple levels, as well as experiences that were positive. Some participants were diagnosed with COVID-19, which not only affected their families emotionally, but also had a significant impact on their studies. On the positive side, the impact of COVID-19 improved online communication and support was provided from multiple stakeholders, including supervisors. Information communication technology (ICT) platforms were found to be user-friendly. The following sub-themes that emerged support these accounts.

Sub-theme 1.1: Paradoxical experiences during COVID-19 that caused distress on multiple levels and affected PG activities negatively and positively

Participants reported various experiences that caused distress on many levels during the pandemic, particularly the need to balance their workload as students while simultaneously carrying out their duties as frontline health workers during the pandemic:

“It was a very difficult time during this COVID-19 and there were lots of adjustments; new adjustments that we had to like. You know, attend to personally and at work and with my commitment of being a student and all of that.” (P2).

“Yes, it was very difficult during the COVID-19 and also, I think the challenge that I have experienced was looking also balancing the workload as well as the being a student at an online distance learning institution it was very difficult.” (P7).

Some participants nonetheless accepted the situation and adjusted to it:

“I think the experience was, I wouldn't say that hard, but it was a new incident that we never thought that it will affect us as students. I would say it wasn't so very well taken but I think we did manage to adapt to the kind of situation we are in now.” (P5).

Some indicated that, irrespective of the pandemic, their negative experiences were caused by the loss of interaction with the university, colleagues and fellow students:

“I'll start with the university to explain that experience. So, the experience is so strenuous, because there is no longer face-to-face interaction with the supervisors or with other students. And we are unable to access the library. We have to do it online and sometimes, due to most of the staff members. I think they're working from home. So, the phone rang for a long time without a response. So, it's difficult from our side.” (P4).

“I can say that it was very difficult, it was very difficult moreover that I was a student and an employee. Having to do distance teaching as an academic of distance education institution and as

well as being a student here. I was not coping because there was a lot of issues about support that I used to get from the colleagues and also from my fellow students and also from my mentor and my supervisors, because they were not there.” (P22).

There were also those who had good experiences and others with mixed feelings. Improved communication because of the introduction of online tools enhanced distance interaction and ensured a measure of connection, which supports the connectivity theory. Some personally even perceived the pandemic as a blessing:

“I couldn’t say it was a challenge but a blessing in disguise to say that when my wife got COVID, got infected then I had to isolate also from work. So, meaning that for the whole week of seven days or so I needed to be staying home and not reporting for duty, which I used it as a time to collect every information that I would require, so that I can finish up with my studies”. (P5).

“The good experiences. I’ve found that the university has improved its electronic linkages with students, particularly for myself when it used to be quite difficult to communicate with the administrators who would not necessarily be available.” (P6).

Some participants considered their experiences as good, since their supervisors continued to support them academically. The librarian was identified as someone who responded readily every time assistance was requested from the library:

“... And with the with the librarian, to be honest, I did not struggle, even if I had to order books online, or ask for study’s, they will definitely respond in time. And I’m grateful for that assistant, my supervisor as well, he would respond very quickly.” (P22).

As an ODL institution, Unisa has students from different countries. Some were not in their home countries during the pandemic and had no family support, which was a difficult experience for them – students always consider family support as important:

“I would say it was a very difficult time. Anyway, I don’t know how it is because I was a PGS during Corona times; I wasn’t a postgrad before Corona. So my experiences during Corona I would say it wasn’t an easy journey for me. It was very difficult and worse; I am being far away from home like being out of the country; it wasn’t as easy.” (P3).

Sub-theme 1.2: Explanation of negative experiences

Most participants mentioned that they experienced feelings of fear, anxiety, depression, demotivation, exhaustion, disappointment and frustration resulting from sickness and deaths among family and friends; being in the health profession; poor communication; fear of contracting COVID-19; and going to health facilities for data collection. That affected progress with their studies:

“It’s not only that I had to focus with my studies, but [I was] also exhausted with everything that was happening with the family deaths, deaths of neighbours and friends, and my also being in the nursing profession.” (P2).

“Yeah. Some of the challenges were the stress and anxiety created and the second one unable to move to libraries and work areas.” (P14).

Sub-theme 1.3: Support experienced through multiple ICT platforms versus lack of support by non-responsive supervisors during the COVID-19 pandemic

As part of academic support, ODL supervisors and students are expected to communicate actively and continuously online. That supports the interactivity, connectivity and constructivism theories. However, some participants said that they experienced a lack of support from their supervisors and that their supervisors were non-responsive and/or delayed responding to communication. Participants ended up relying on their peers for support:

“In this pandemic you don’t know whether a person is still alive, you don’t know what’s going on because we are hearing of people falling off everywhere in all the parts of the world. So, you don’t know if my supervisor is still alive. Why are they not responding? As a postgrad student the importance is like I say, we have a separate group as students that doesn’t involve our supervisors. We are chasing time; we all want to finish within a certain period.” (P3).

Some of the participants suspected that non-responses or delayed responses from supervisors resulted from poor internet connectivity, because communication between supervisor and student was constant before the pandemic:

“Yeah, at some point my supervisor was not available. For almost half a year or about six to eight months, there was no communication. Then, as I said because of the blockage of internet in the country, as well as the stay-home where internet access is very limited. So, for these the reasons I didn’t communicate with my supervisor at all.” (P14).

“Yeah, is it become a difficult thing because as physically you are there with the supervisor, some of the things it becomes easy as you want clarity. Even being online, firstly we need to invite each other to have the discussion, or we need to arrange via the e-mail, and we wait for the response. You find that the supervisor is busy, so it takes time to even get to each other in terms of understanding.” (P21).

However, despite the lack of supervisory support during their studies highlighted by some participants, one PGS applauded the continued support she received from her supervisor during the pandemic: “I was very much satisfied because when we communicate, he would definitely give substantive feedback.” (P22).

Sub-theme 1.4: Support versus lack of support experienced from various stakeholders involved in PG studies

For a PGS to collect data, support is expected not only from supervisors, but from various other stakeholders as well. Those include librarians, health facilities, government departments, co-coders and statisticians. Concerning online communication, participants indicated issues such as delayed responses, no responses and unfulfilled promises of assistance, while physical communication resulted in participants being ignored. All of that delayed data collection and analysis. The following narrations confirmed the frustrations:

“Not much support would be received from people who used to help us to say you go that way you go that route; everybody was just busy under pressure at her corner. And even my supervisor was very much under pressure of many, many things around what he was doing that time with many students that are looking at him. So, I think the whole thing was just chaos.” (P22).

“Failure to go to the general centre library to get books. When you want to go to the library, you have to make an appointment and it's difficult sometimes to get an appointment because you find that they don't respond to e-mails, the phone they don't answer. Even in the hospitals, I must collect data. I must go to one hospital today and I have to go three times because you find out that there are actually three shifts because they don't meet. I need to go to the same work several times per day. And I have to delay collecting the focus group discussion and the interviews due to these restrictions.” (P4).

As postgraduate student support is not from the supervisor only. Other stakeholders are also involved. Participants also mentioned the difficulty experienced in obtaining permission to conduct their research after having received ethical approval and connecting with a responsible statistician and experts to assist in validating their research strategies. Connectivity suffered in this context:

“One of the problems I faced was getting permission from the ministry and getting hold of the corresponding peoples.” (P11).

“Although I was nearly at the end of my study, but somewhere I needed some experts at the end to validate my strategies.” (P15).

“Now that the pandemic came, I'm blocked because you can't go ahead now and get the people like the statisticians.” (P20).

Sub-theme 1.5: Problems experienced by family and significant others were mentally exhausting and influenced progress with postgraduate activities

Participants felt that their study progress was hindered by health issues that affected friends, family members and even colleagues at work. Health-care professionals were at the forefront during the pandemic, which was exhausting and impacted on them moving forward with their studies. Workplace activities were hectic since they worked with limited staff who,

individually, were also affected by the pandemic. Everything was in turmoil, which was exhausting and made it difficult to focus on studies – they were not coping:

“Continuing with my studies, as the future seemed so uncertain and there was COVID-19 death rate on an increase daily, these were friends, family members, loved ones. We were experiencing COVID-19 deaths from every angle, and it was new to us, and I was anxious. I also found it very difficult with my studies. I felt it very difficult to focus on my work.” (P2).

“I had said that even in the workplace, you’ll find that on that number, which is on duty, you find that maybe you have three maybe two people booked off sick. So only three must remain with the shift. So, it becomes hectic, it becomes very hectic to come back home and open the laptop and start with your studies.” (P4).

Sub-theme 1.6: Contracting COVID-19 while studying was traumatic and slowed down study progress

Some participants contracted COVID-19, which was extremely traumatic and impacted negatively on their families and their studies. Families were left for isolation purposes and communication with supervisors became problematic as the places of isolation had no Wi-Fi:

“I was actually a victim of COVID-19 and then there was also a matter of family members at a personal level; it actually impacted on them negatively.” (P19).

“Okay, it was only COVID-19 with all the sicknesses maybe those are the thing because I was infected with a virus so I could not pick up with my studies at a pace that I wanted to put in. I had to relocate, left my children and went to some place to isolate myself. Network was poor.” (P8).

Sub-theme 1.7: Improved online communication during the COVID-19 pandemic was commendable

Participants indicated that the pandemic improved their online communication with the university, the library and their supervisors and peers. Microsoft Teams, e-mails, cell phones and WhatsApp were used:

“I think the good thing was the fact that I still had my supervisor checking up all the time to say ‘how far, what’s going on? Do you need any support?’” (P7).

“We did manage. I would say having a supervisor that is forthcoming like mine, we had a group as students, we had a WhatsApp group. We had Microsoft Teams, we had WhatsApp, we had e-mails, we had phone calls.” (P3).

THEME 2: EXPERIENCES WITH DATA COLLECTION DURING COVID-19

The participants narrated how COVID-19 impacted their collection of data negatively. Due to restrictions, original methods of data collection were changed and that required re-application

with the Research Ethics Review Committee, which caused delays. Furthermore, lockdown levels were dictated by the Presidency. These experiences are addressed and supported in the sub-themes below.

Sub-theme 2.1: Anxiety about beginning data collection because of uncertainty about changing situations

The ability to collect data was influenced by the restrictiveness of the lockdown levels communicated by presidential announcement. Thus, several participants were uncertain if data collection would be possible, while others experienced outbreaks when they were supposed to be collecting data. Some had to re-apply for ethical clearance because of changes concerning data collection, which also had financial implications. One participant indicated that 2020 was a wasted year and all participants pointed out that the adjusted lockdowns with associated restrictions caused delays in data collection:

“When COVID happened, it really caught me at a time when I was supposed to collect data for the quantitative aspect of my thesis, which needed me to have quite many students and staff in order for me to collect that data and because of the restrictions I was unable to continue at that time, which prolonged my time with the institution for registration because I had to wait for eight to 10 weeks whilst we were waiting for the President to lift the restrictions at the [inaudible] bit so that we could continue with mass gatherings under the restrictions that were highlighted by the Corona command council, and this impacted my finances negatively because I had the finances in 2019. I had to now re-apply to the institution ethics committee to explain myself, how I am going to protect the respondents against COVID-19 while collecting data. That also added time that I didn't anticipate along my studies.” (P10).

“There was a delay in collecting data. Because of the increasing numbers of people who are infected with COVID-19 and these restrictions because today we are free to go around, we are in level two or three, the next day we are in level five, we are restricted to move around.” (P4).

Sub-theme 2.2: Different modes of data collection were used during the pandemic with associated advantages and disadvantages

Participants spoke about their different modes of data collection and the negatives and positives involved in how they managed because of the COVID-19 restrictions. One participant said it was easier to collect data, since no contact with study participants was required:

“It was very difficult to have access to the records. Because of Corona, we were not allowed to move from one place to another and there was a time also where the university sent a message to say all PG studies were supposed to be on hold. Luckily, I wasn't interacting that much with the study participants, so I was doing a retrospective study. So really, I would say COVID-19 made our lives very difficult as open distance learners.” (P3).

Participants believed the number of restrictions and the movement of their study participants prolonged data collection. They needed to collect data quantitatively, which required large numbers of study participants. Due to the restrictions, questionnaires had to be converted to online and participants who had to conduct interviews indicated that they had to apply different strategies:

“I had to collect data in the hospitals. I must go to one hospital today and I must go three times because you find out that there are actually three shifts. Because they don't meet, I need to go to the same work several times per day. And another thing: I have to delay collecting data from focus group discussion and the interviews due to these restrictions.” (P4).

“But what made it a bit difficult was when one had to contact your participants. Because when you had to conduct interviews, one had to come up with different strategies to do the interviews, as COVID-19 restrictions were already on.” (P15).

Sub-theme 2.3: Data collection during high-risk periods

Participants mentioned that it was especially risky to collect data during the higher levels of precaution implemented during the pandemic. Although the situation was global and affected everybody irrespective of setting, that was of great concern to them as ODL students:

“I would say COVID-19 made our lives very difficult as open distance learners. In the institutions you must take all these extra precautions to avoid contracting the disease, to avoid spreading the disease in case you were sick.” (P3).

“Because of the increasing numbers of people who are infected with this COVID-19 and these restrictions because today we are free to go around, we are in level two or three, the next day we are in level five, we are restricted to move around.” (P4).

DISCUSSION

This study explored the experiences of PGS during COVID-19 at an ODL institutions. The literature indicated that students worldwide faced problems following the closure of educational institutions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, other studies deemed necessary to investigate PGSs' experiences, issues and concerns during the ensuing disruptions. The study established a variety of issues and concerns among the students participating in the research based on the reality that they needed to enrol in postgraduate programmes to remain competitive and differentiate themselves concerning competence when seeking promotion or preparing for work opportunities (Guiamalon and Boquia 2022, 520).

The study of Fathoni and Retnawati (2021, 233) on the challenges and strategies of PGSs concerning online learning during the pandemic confirmed that students had varied experiences. For example, students experienced negative physical and psychological impacts,

including challenges with data reception; devices; interaction with lecturers; and independent study and learning activities. However, they pursued various strategies to deal with the obstacles and negative impacts of COVID-19. Their findings are similar to those of this study that explored PG study experiences during the pandemic in an ODL context. The positive and negative experiences of the PGSs participating in this study are discussed below.

Positive experiences

The lessons learnt in higher education, including ODL institutions, during the pandemic signposted the importance of “sense-making” among academic staff. It also highlighted the value of collaboration and team efforts and that it has become necessary to adapt our leadership and self-leadership styles to the new way of operating in higher education institutions (Du Plessis et al. 2022, 1). Some study participants considered the outbreak as a blessing. They adjusted quickly to the new normal and working from home gave them an opportunity to fast-track their studies. Those who had completed data collection could finalise data analysis in the comfort of their homes. Furthermore, online university communication improved with the introduction of Microsoft Teams over and above the pre-pandemic use of e-mails, telephones and WhatsApp.

Negative experiences

Pfefferbaum and North (2020), Guiamalon and Boquia (2022, 520) highlighted that “COVID-19 has brought a variety of stressors into modern life, including fear of contracting the virus, concern for loved ones, economic instability, social distancing and other major lifestyle changes”. During the pandemic, students faced various problems related to depression, anxiety, poor internet connectivity and unfavourable research environments at home (Kapasia et al. 2020, 1).

The findings of this study corroborated with the above previously indicated. Most of the participants indicated that they had feelings of stress, fear, anxiety, depression, demotivation, exhaustion, disappointment and frustration that resulted from sickness; the death of family members, friends and work colleagues; and poor communication that was worsened by network problems. As health professionals, they were fearful of contracting COVID-19, while working under pressure in the workplace because of limited staff, some of whom were infected with COVID-19. It was so hectic and exhausting that it was difficult to focus on studies. These mental health issues contributed to slow down progress with their studies. Ramelet et al. (2022, 165) supported these findings, indicating that postgraduate nurses were caught “between their academic career aspirations and duty of care to patients, families, and the healthcare system”.

Being at the frontline during the pandemic, they experienced fear and moral distress and failed to complete their studies. A study by Moraga (2021, 98) in which all participants were international students, reported similar findings, revealing that mental health issues including anxiety, coping and fear associated with the pandemic; living far away from family and loved ones in a challenging and uncertain situation such as the pandemic; and not knowing when the pandemic would be over added to the stress involved in the already complex journey of distance study.

COVID-19 infection

COVID-19 infection “harmed the mental health status of postgraduate students which resulted in the development of moderate to high levels of stress and anxiety,” mainly because PGSSs could not complete their thesis work in terms of protocol requirements and lowered performance levels among academics (Vempalli et al. 2022, 224). Some participants and their families were infected. Thus, restriction guidelines had to be adhered to. One participant said she was isolated in an area where there was no Wi-Fi, which prohibited any communication with her supervisor. Cell phones needed data and airtime for communication and the participants did not have money since isolation restrictions on movement did not allow them to go to the bank to get money in order to buy data.

Online communication

“Before the COVID-19 pandemic, research supervision mostly followed the traditional apprenticeship or group model approach to supervision, where engagement took the form of face-to-face interactions” (Hendrickse 2022, 98.). The pandemic required social distancing, which necessitated a shift to online research supervision. As such, lecturers and students relied on their mobile devices to communicate using different tools, including WhatsApp (Van den Berg and Mudau 2022, 112). Participants in this research maintained that the pandemic improved online communication with the university, supervisors and peers. The use of WhatsApp messages, e-mails and cell phones continued, and Microsoft Teams was introduced; thus, communication was improved.

There were some conflicting findings. Some participants indicated that they did not struggle with supervisory communication, nor with the library when ordering books online and asking for articles. In both instances responses were quick. Supervisors were also supporting and encouraging them online, and feedback was given timely. On the other hand, some participants mentioned difficulty in communicating with supervisors and the library, and that they found the lack of responses to calls and e-mails frustrating. In the absence of support from

their supervisors, some participants relied on their peers. Furthermore, poor internet connectivity hampered online communication. Based on the conflicting input from the participants, the theories underpinning this research were supported and, in some respects, not supported.

Experience during data collection

Students who were in the process of carrying out thesis-related work experienced stress from fear of infection and the limitations preventing them from carrying out thesis work, especially patient-orientated data collection and clinical work (Vempalli et al. 2022, 221). Usually, PGSs receive support not only from supervisors, but from various other stakeholders as well. However, the stakeholders who were to be involved in their studies did not respond to e-mails or calls for assistance, or there were delays in responses and unfulfilled promises of help. That included stakeholders like librarians, health facilities, government departments, co-coders and statisticians. Facilities did not respond to their requests for permission to conduct their studies and when physically going to get help, students were ignored. Such issues delayed progress with data collection and analysis.

The disconnection with supervisors, peers and stakeholders involved in data collection failed the theories of connectivity, transactional distance and constructivism in terms of which students in an ODL context are expected to interact with supervisors. According to Van Tienoven et al. (2022, 1), “supervisor support is crucial for the successful and timely completion of the PhD”. The COVID-19 pandemic affected PGSs in that they were forced to miss timelines; found themselves running out of funding and experiencing changes to online team-and-supervisor meetings; were forced to work from home; and were subjected to social confinement.

Without access to participants during data collection, research cannot continue. This statement is supported by the study conducted by Pyhältö, Tikkanen, and Anttilia (2023, 413) on the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on PhD candidates' study progress. Their findings showed that COVID-19 impacted negatively on research progress due to reduced access to data and participants. The participants in this study shared the same sentiments and said that outbreaks happened when they were supposed to collect data. That required them to re-apply for ethical clearance to get approval for changes to their research methodology. Due to interprovincial restrictions, data collection from other provinces had to be halted until such restrictions were relaxed, which delayed data collection from 2020 to 2021. Those who had to wait for lockdown levels to be adjusted therefore experienced further delays, resulting in a need to request extensions for their research projects. That led to their projects taking longer to complete. Those who collected data quantitatively also experienced delays in converting data

online. The pandemic, furthermore, came at a time when some participants were about to collect quantitative data.

Nonetheless, the changes to research design presented opportunities to challenge the main research methods typically used in the discipline, encouraging both the PGSs and their supervisors to adopt new methodologies (Motala and Menon 2020). PGSs transitioned from research that involved face-to-face interaction to conducting alternative research activities such as writing proposals, grants and protocols; simulation and modelling; and statistical analysis (Persky et al. 2020, 697). Participants also viewed the adoption of online interviewing instead of face-to-face interviews as facilitating increased participant recruitment while cutting costs. The skills acquired by the PGSs as they adapted their research methods thus encouraged awareness of their potential to adapt to new research methods positively (King et al. 2022).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have revealed both negative and positive experiences. Connectivity, interaction and constructivism were compromised. Feelings of stress, fear, anxiety, depression, demotivation, exhaustion, disappointment and frustration emerged because of sickness; deaths of family, friends and colleagues; poor communication with others; and poor networks. Participating PGSs lost face-to-face contact with fellow students; the library and supervisors were not always available online to support them; and responses to e-mails, WhatsApp messages or telephone calls were insufficient. Overall, 2020 was considered a wasted year because of the pandemic and delayed study progress. There have, nonetheless, been findings that contradicted the indicated negative experiences of stress and frustration.

The researcher recommends that the university should continue improving academic support while also addressing mental health support for students to prepare them to face current and future unforeseen circumstances positively. Collaborations with local and global partners to enhance continuous online communication between the university and students should furthermore be strengthened. Research should be conducted on the mental health of students irrespective of circumstances, and comparative studies should be conducted across other departments within the same ODL institution and residential universities. A limitation of this study is that it was conducted in only one department of an ODL institution.

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