

REFLECTIONS AND EXPERIENCES OF MENTORS, TUTORS, AND WRITING CONSULTANTS ON ENHANCING STUDENT LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of mentors, tutors, and writing consultants in the execution of their roles during unprecedented times, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic, remain insufficiently explored and inadequately documented. This article, which adopts a qualitative research methodology with a specific focus on a rural-based comprehensive university in South Africa, delves into the experiences and reflections of mentors, tutors, and writing consultants in the course of their duties during the COVID-19 pandemic. We contend that providing safe spaces for mentors, tutors and writing practitioners to share their experiences on their roles not only during the pandemic should be central to all student support initiatives. This fosters a sense of reflection on their practices which in turn results in professional growth and development as reflective practitioners capable of enhancing student success in higher education. In assessing their work, data was gathered from a population comprising seventy-two selected mentors and tutors (referred to as MenTuts), as well as writing consultants affiliated with the Academic Development Unit (ADU) of the institution. Content and thematic analysis were employed to examine the data after coding. The reflections and experiences of MenTuts and writing consultants were both positive and negative. They expressed enthusiasm for their roles during the COVID-19 pandemic but also conveyed feelings of being overwhelmed by the challenges they faced. This underscores the need for exploring alternative approaches to mentoring, tutoring, and writing consultancy to enhance effective student learning and success in higher education during both present and future unprecedented

times. Given the plethora of recent unprecedented events, higher education institutions in South Africa as well as in Africa should start undertaking innovative radical approaches for student support initiatives that are centred around engaging with mentors, tutors, and writing consultants to ensure that they are able to reflect on their experiences to enhance student learning.

Keywords: reflections, experiences, mentors, tutors, academic development, writing consultants, Covid-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The “White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education” proposed the necessity of student academic development, often referred to as “student support services”, as a crucial mandate for each higher education institution to effectively address issues of epistemological access and success (RSA 1997, 17). Unfortunately, these student support services were primarily intended to assist learners who had experienced a decontextualised education and were now pursuing their studies at higher education institutions. This is explicitly outlined in the “White Paper on Education and Training in a Democratic South Africa, First Steps to Develop a New System”, which highlights the fact that a considerable number of higher education institutions are grappling with students who received subpar secondary education (RSA 1995).

The “White Paper on Education and Training in a Democratic South Africa, First Steps to Develop a New System” (RSA 1995) also acknowledges that underprepared or decontextualised learners face a variety of challenges when admitted to higher education institutions. These challenges include deficiencies in language skills, science, mathematics, and the “limited range and often inappropriate combinations of subjects they bring to their choice of tertiary programme” (RSA 1995, 30).

Against this backdrop, student development programmes such as Mentoring and Tutoring (referred to as MenTuts hereafter) and Writing Consultants programmes were established to enhance epistemological and ontological success for a diverse student population in higher education. Both MenTuts and Writing Consultants, who have excelled academically themselves, are therefore considered ideal for assisting and guiding mentees and tutees on their academic journey as undergraduates.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The new democratic South Africa has ushered in numerous changes in the country, and the higher education (HE) sector is no exception. Universities in South Africa are obligated to broaden access to a diverse population of students in response to national education policy directives, such as the white paper policies. Moreover, universities are required to grant access

to all students irrespective of their socioeconomic background, gender, race, or religion (RSA 1995). The call for expanded access has led to the presence of students in universities mainly hailing from impoverished backgrounds and underprivileged schools, representing various cultures, languages, and educational experiences, including poor teaching and limited prior knowledge. Some are also facing social and economic challenges (Clarence 2018).

Given their disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds, these students are often labeled as underprepared for higher education. In agreement with this assessment, Machingambi and Wasango (2012) affirm that these students often lack critical thinking skills, language development, conceptual knowledge in specific areas, and general life skills necessary for success at the tertiary level.

To address the expanded access in HE, the South African government initiated the establishment of Teaching and Learning (T&L) centres within higher learning institutions to address students' unpreparedness. These T&L centres were set up across South African universities as entities responsible for enhancing the quality of teaching and learning and facilitating students' transition from secondary to post-secondary institutions (Ravhuhali, Mboweni, and Nendauni 2021). T&L centres offer various initiatives tailored for both staff support and students' academic support. Student academic support initiatives include mentoring, tutoring, academic writing, academic literacies, and others. Through these initiatives, students can learn from their peers in disciplinary knowledge and receive guidance from academic development practitioners (AD) in areas such as academic writing, academic literacies, and other educational aspects.

TUTORSHIP, MENTORSHIP AND WRITING CONSULTANCY DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

In the context of academic mentoring, Du Preez, Steenkamp, and Baard (2013) defines it as a process characterised by reciprocity and equal status between the mentor and the mentee. It involves the exchange of knowledge, ideas, support, and mutual interest, benefiting both parties (Du Preez et al. 2013). Furthermore, Masehela et al. (2014) define academic mentoring as an informal, face-to-face communication process that occurs over a predetermined and sustained period between a person perceived to possess greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person perceived to have lesser knowledge (the mentee).

Utilising tutoring and mentoring by peers has proven to be an effective strategy for retaining vulnerable students. Consequently, most universities and colleges have developed mentoring or tutoring programs to support academically vulnerable students. Mentees, and to a larger extent, universities, have greatly benefited from mentoring programmes in higher

education. Campbell and Campbell (1997) reported that students who attended mentorship sessions showed improvement and performed better academically. Universities benefitted from reduced student dropout rates as mentees improved in their academics. Similarly, mentors gained valuable experience and the satisfaction of assisting their peers in lower levels of study. Mentorship and tutorship programs in universities have traditionally been conducted face-to-face, allowing for personal student interaction in smaller tutorial sessions.

In addition to mentoring and tutoring programmes, another crucial initiative aimed at improving students' success in higher education is academic writing. This is because, for students to succeed in higher education, they must be able to write in a scholarly and academically acceptable manner, demonstrating a good understanding of disciplinary discourses. Therefore, many higher education institutions have established Writing Centres to assist their students with academic writing. While students enter tertiary institutions with varying writing abilities, teaching academic writing has been shown to enhance student success. Archer (2008) emphasises that "writing is one of the primary means of assessment in tertiary institutions, and helping students with writing could improve their overall academic performance and ensure their progression to graduation". Additionally, a study by Yeats et al. (2010) indicates that academic writing centres contribute to increased student achievement.

Recognising the importance of these initiatives, it became imperative that as learning and teaching transitioned to online platforms due to the Covid-19 pandemic, academic support programs for students should also adapt. Sangrà et al. (2012, 152) cited in Gyampoh et al., (2020) define online learning as "an approach to teaching and learning that incorporates electronic media and devices as tools to improve access to training, communication, and interaction, facilitating new ways of understanding and developing learning". This definition underscores the necessity for universities to be well-prepared in terms of electronic devices, training on their use, network, and internet accessibility, and more (Gyampoh et al. 2020). While most universities in South Africa attempted to transition to online and remote teaching immediately after the president announced the first lockdown in March 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic (Mhlanga and Moloji 2020), this migration presented significant learning opportunities but was often implemented haphazardly in many universities.

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND DISRUPTION OF TEACHING AND LEARNING PRACTICES

As previously mentioned, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the normal course of daily life. Universities, too, had to re-evaluate their pedagogical approaches in response to social distancing measures aimed at curbing the virus's spread. In the case of a rural university under

study, lectures had traditionally taken place primarily in a face-to-face setting due to students' lack of access to online learning tools and the university's insufficient resources and infrastructure. However, with the emergence of the novel Covid-19 virus, a significant shift was necessary, and teaching and learning had to transition entirely to an online format. This entailed the transfer of all forms of teaching and learning, including lectures, mentoring, and tutoring, to online platforms, adopting what Pokhrel and Chhetri referred to as "education in emergency" (Pokhrel and Chhetri 2021) through various online platforms.

The measures recommended by Gyampoh et al. (2020) to combat the spread of COVID-19 made the traditional classroom setting untenable for both students and educators. Unfortunately, this posed a challenge for many students in rural areas who were unfamiliar with online learning and learning management systems. Dube (2020) further highlights that online learning and teaching present greater difficulties for disadvantaged communities due to their lack of access to electricity, reliable network connections, and expertise, all of which are essential components for successful and effective online teaching and learning.

In response to the novel virus and its associated restrictions and regulations, higher education institutions had to embrace and utilise various online platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and social media platforms like WhatsApp, Twitter, and Facebook to ensure that all students can access learning materials. Similarly, these changes offered opportunities for lecturers and students to familiarise themselves with technology, increasing their knowledge and creativity. While class attendance was already a challenge with traditional teaching methods, the transition to online platforms exacerbated this issue. Consequently, mentors and tutors had to employ creative strategies to maximise attendance.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS: THEORY OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT AND PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY OF DRIVES

Astin's (1999, 518) *Theory of Student Involvement* primarily concerns the amount of time and energy students invest in their academic experiences. This theory describes how desirable outcomes can be achieved within universities and how students undergo change and growth through their engagement with the curriculum. Consequently, a highly involved student is one who expends substantial energy on studying, spends extended periods on campus, actively participates in student organisations, and frequently interacts with faculty members and peers. Conversely, an uninvolved student typically neglects their studies, spends minimal time on campus, refrains from extracurricular activities, and has infrequent interactions with faculty members and peers. Astin (1999, 519) argues that student involvement occurs along a continuum, signifying that students may exhibit varying degrees of involvement in different

aspects at different times.

Furthermore, student involvement in academic tasks, such as mentoring and tutoring, can be quantitatively measured by assessing the number of hours dedicated to these activities. Qualitatively, it encompasses whether students are committed to ensuring that their peers grasp the material being mentored or tutored and share their knowledge effectively. The personal and professional gains derived from their roles as mentors and tutors are also associated with the level (both in quality and quantity) of their involvement in mentoring and tutoring programmes. Astin (1999, 519) further contends that the effectiveness of educational policies and practices is directly linked to how these policies and practices foster increased student involvement and participation.

In addition, Astin's *Theory of Student Involvement* is linked to Sigmund Freud's *Psychoanalytic Theory of Drives* (1923) which posits that the involvement of students (in their roles as mentors and tutors) necessitates both psychological and physical energy. This involvement aligns with the Freudian concept of "cathexis", which is an investment of energy in a thing, a concept, or a person (Freud 1923). In this article, it means an investment in individuals, in this case, students (mentees and tutees), and objects (the tutoring of specific modules or courses and the exchange of various ideas to help mentees and tutees succeed in their studies).

Drawing from and integrating the *Psychoanalytic Theory of Personality* (1923), Sigmund Freud has one of the central components of the theory, which is the "id", which suggests that an individual may be driven to action by two factors: biological needs and psychological needs. In this context, it can be argued that students engage in their roles as mentors and tutors because of their desire to assist others in learning while also receiving stipends. Thus, both biological and psychological needs contribute to enhancing student learning, ultimately supporting their academic success.

THE STUDY CONTEXT

On the 16th of August 2021, the Academic Development Unit (ADU), a department within the university under study, hosted an online workshop. This workshop was critical dialogue specifically designed to engage with and gain insight into the experiences of the university's mentors, tutors, and writing consultants as they carried out their mentoring, tutoring, and writing consultancy responsibilities during the Covid-19 pandemic.

According to Pérez-Jorge et al. (2020), the tutor-student relationship is characterised by a high degree of collaboration, communication, sincerity, trust, security, closeness, identification, empathy, and mutual acceptance. These qualities are cultivated through ongoing interaction

among peers. Furthermore, Pérez-Jorge et al. (2020) emphasise that tutoring has become increasingly vital as it allows for the personalisation of teaching and plays a pivotal role in students' development and the prevention of dropout.

In June 2021, South Africa reverted to level 4 restrictions, compelling most students to conduct their classes online. Consequently, mentors, tutors, and writing consultants had to explore alternative methods for delivering their services to students. These alternatives included, but were not limited to, the use of platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and WhatsApp groups. This prompted both mentors, tutors, and writing consultants to utilize the online platforms to execute their roles in supporting their tutees and mentees. It is within this context that we felt the need to create spaces to engage our mentors, tutors and writing practitioners to reflect on their journey of executing their roles during challenging times and also share their overall experiences thereof. Our approach was largely influenced by Van Louw and Waghid (2008) who propose and argue for deliberative engagement which has three forms. Firstly, Van Louw and Waghid (2008) propose *mutual attachment* which is deliberative engagement that entails doing things together. In this case, our continued engagement with mentors, tutors, and writing practitioners is informed by the quest to be there for them and support them throughout their journey as they execute their roles. Through our engagement with our mentors, tutors, and writing practitioners we are able to listen with interest and to learn from their experiences and for our future experiences as AD practitioners.

Secondly, being and becoming mutually harmonious with one another. As AD practitioners, in engaging with our mentors and tutors, we assume the role of mentors, and therefore, are able to relax our boundaries and engagement in deliberations on how they experienced their roles and how best we can support them to execute their roles effectively. As Van Louw and Waghid (2008) would note, a safe environment is set for them to feel that no one is judging them.

Thirdly, drawing from Louw and Waghid (2008) our engagement is centred around engaging ourselves in matters that are relatively new, thus, it is new to us as AD practitioners, and it is also new to our mentors and tutors. This engagement becomes more of a learning opportunity and trying to come up with alternative ways of ensuring that students' learning is enhanced.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research methodology to gather data concerning the reflections and experiences of MenTuts and Writing consultants during the Covid-19 pandemic. This research focused on a case study conducted at a rural-based comprehensive university.

Munhall (2001) asserts that the qualitative approach provides a unique appreciation of the reality of experiences by offering richness and depth of description. The choice of the qualitative research method was guided by its emphasis on the dynamic, holistic, and individual aspects of the human experience, striving to capture these experiences comprehensively within their contextual framework, as noted by Polit and Beck (2004, 16). Additionally, this approach allowed researchers to deeply engage and interact with MenTuts and Writing consultants, facilitating the generation of rich data pertaining to their experiences while conducting consultations online during the Covid-19 pandemic period.

The study population consisted of writing consultants, mentors, and tutors (referred to as MenTuts) who are integral to the student development program. A total of 103 writing consultants and 15 mentors participated in the focus group interview, which was conducted through Microsoft Teams. These participants play a crucial role in providing academic and social support to first-year students to ensure their success in their studies.

MenTuts and Writing Consultants are themselves students who have excelled in their courses, possessing the necessary experience to assist their peers (tutees and mentees) in succeeding academically. Therefore, the study employed a purposive sampling method to select participants. A combination of simple random and purposive sampling was used, targeting sixty-two (62) MenTuts and ten (10) Writing consultants who conducted online classes or sessions during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The choice of purposive sampling was preferred and adopted because it is effective when studying a specific cultural domain with knowledgeable experts, as is the case with mentoring, tutoring, and writing consultancy (Tongco 2007; Devers and Frankel 2000). Purposive sampling ensures that selected individuals or groups can communicate their experiences and opinions articulately, expressively, and reflectively, as noted by Etikan, Musa, and Alkassim (2016). As we have noted earlier, our approach to engaging our mentors, tutors and writing practitioners in dialogue or conversational sessions is drawn and influenced by a radical humanistic perspective proposed by Van Louw and Waghid (2008) which is largely grounded on the deliberately democratic notion of mentorship. This approach incorporates social justice elements as well as viewing our mentors, tutors, and writing practitioners as critical colleagues and partners capable of reflecting on their practices (Ravhuhali, Mboweni, and Nendauni 2022).

The MenTuts and Writing consultants who participated in the study possessed in-depth knowledge and experience in conducting online consultations with students during the Covid-19 period, making them valuable sources of information related to the phenomena under discussion. Furthermore, purposive sampling allowed for a smaller, more focused sample, ensuring that the researcher gained a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and

challenges faced by MenTuts and Writing consultants when conducting online consultations during the Covid-19 pandemic.

DATA COLLECTION TOOL

In collecting data, the study employed the focus group semi-structured in-depth interview technique. The focus groups were categorized into two groups, namely “MenTuts” and “Writing Consultants.” A total of 11 focus groups were conducted over a period of five (5) days. Fifteen (15) Writing Consultants participated in the study, while 103 MenTuts were part of the focus groups. Milena, Dainora, and Alin (2008) assert that the in-depth interview is a method designed to capture a vivid portrayal of participants’ perspectives on the phenomena under investigation. Consequently, the researchers provided five open-ended questions as a framework for comprehending the experiences of MenTuts and Writing Consultants during the COVID-19 pandemic. Punch (2014) suggests that in-depth interviews are an excellent means of accessing individuals’ perceptions, meanings, and interpretations of situations, as well as their construction of reality. Through the focus group in-depth data collection technique, the researchers gained insights into participants’ experiences and viewpoints regarding online consultations during the Covid-19 pandemic. The study employed open-ended questions, as Cresswell (2012) affirms that such questions allow participants to share their personal experiences and responses to inquiries by the researchers.

DATA ANALYSIS TECHNIQUE AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATION

The study employed thematic analysis (TA) to make sense of the collected data. Thematic analysis is a method used to describe data, but it also involves interpretation during the processes of code selection and construction (Kiger and Varpio 2020). Thematic analysis was conceived as a means of categorising qualitative data into themes, providing an illustration of the participants’ interpretations and meanings of the phenomena under investigation (Omodan 2019). Thematic analysis was deemed more suitable for data analysis as it permits researchers to examine the power dynamics that shape reality and engage in emancipatory investigations that value the voices of oppressed populations. Furthermore, it is a potent method for understanding a set of experiences, thoughts, or behaviours across the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). The entire process of thematic analysis involved the systematic organisation of data to enhance understanding and facilitate comprehension by others (Ary et al. 2010). This was particularly relevant to this study as researchers could analyse the data, categorise and code it based on each guiding research question:

- How is your relationship with the module lecturer?
- What kind of support are you receiving from your department in your role as a tutor/mentor/consultant?
- What has been exciting about tutoring/mentoring during Covid-19 times?
- What challenges have you encountered with tutoring/consulting/mentoring online?
- How can the academic development unit (ADU) or division support you in making your journey as a tutor/mentor/consultant more exciting?

The data analysis process began with familiarising ourselves with the transcribed transcripts. This involved reviewing the guiding questions and comparing the two transcripts from different focus groups to gain a better understanding of the points raised within the data. Kiger and Varpio (2020) note that becoming familiar with the data provides valuable orientation to the raw data and serves as a foundational step for all subsequent stages. After this initial familiarisation with the data, we proceeded to generate codes from the raw data. Kiger and Varpio (2020) suggest that coding helps organise data at a specific, granular level. We took notes of the data, guided by the research questions, and assigned labels to segments of interest. This process was carried out for both transcripts, searching for comparisons and other noteworthy information for report writing. At this stage, the research questions were revisited. This stage was closely linked with stage 4, ensuring that themes were extracted from all the significant chunks of data gathered from the transcripts and organised within a chart for ease of reference. This enabled us to move on to the final stage of mapping and interpretation, where we utilised the chart to compare data and identify themes for the study. These themes were aligned with the research questions used in the focus groups.

Furthermore, ethical considerations were diligently observed throughout the research to ensure the protection of participants against any harm that may arise from the study's results. Dooly, Moore, and Vallejo (2017) emphasise that as researchers, it is paramount to fully disclose the data processing procedures to the participants before commencing data compilation. In compliance with the POPI Act, all participants were informed that the interview results would be anonymised. This measure was taken to safeguard the identity of participants. Therefore, to protect the identity of all respondents, pseudonyms such as T1 and WC1 were assigned when reporting the final study findings for this article. This approach ensured compliance with the POPI Act in the study.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To comprehend the experiences of MenTuts and Writing Consultants, ADU formulated

questions that guided the dialogue, leading to the emergence of various themes. The following themes became apparent:

Thriving through a strong working relationship with the module lecturers

The initial question was designed to uncover the relationship between MenTuts and the module lecturers. This question was deliberately broad, as the nature of the relationship between MenTuts, Writing Consultants, and the module lecturer significantly influences the success or failure of the module. Hence, the module lecturer's engagement with students and MenTuts plays a pivotal role in achieving a higher pass rate. MenTuts and Writing Consultants expressed that they enjoyed positive relations with the lecturers, with one of them remarking:

“I am getting support from The Module lecturer with the content. I get any new material that the lecturer discovers and sometimes once a week he workshops me about the next week chapter or topic he is going to cover so I fully understand what the topic or chapter is about and if ever there is a new question, I come across from students that is new to me he is always there and willing to help.” (Tutor N).

“I have a good relationship with my module lecturer in the sense that we do communicate and sometimes she joins the tutorial. She even gives me feedback on my tutorials, like tell me where to improve. If I am not understanding she will even, make use of charts and graphs to explain the topic.” (Tutor S).

The statements demonstrate that lecturers are deeply engaged and supportive of their tutors and mentors. Duran Faroa (2017) asserts that tutorials closely follow lectures on a week-to-week basis to maintain a strong alignment of content with the course curriculum. Consequently, it is essential for tutors and lecturers to maintain a positive working relationship, and it appears that lecturers are indeed fulfilling this requirement. Nonetheless, some tutors have pointed out that certain lecturers are not readily available to provide guidance on the topics they should address with students:

“I thought the lectures were going to guide us on what topics we should cover, but from my side it turns out that I have to choose topics or cover topics that only my mentee asks questions on, but nonetheless, the lecturer is always available to answer questions and also help with challenges.” (Tutor).

Departmental support in executing their roles as tutors, mentors and writing consultants

Participants indicated that their respective departments supported them during the Covid-19 times. Some tutors mentioned that their departments had held marking workshops for tutors:

“The department of sociology, History and Indigenous Knowledge systems and Heritage arranged a workshop for us on how to mark and the standards of marking.” (Tutor).

These sentiments were shared by some writing consultants who indicated that their departments were indeed supportive:

“The department provides us with projectors to assist in consulting with students. The School of Law created a WhatsApp group for all Law consultants, and they share documents like guidelines on how students are supposed to be writing and the students timelines.” (Writing consultant).

However, some MenTuts disagreed with the aforementioned statements, as they conveyed that they have received minimal support and continue to experience limited assistance from their respective departments. They pointed out that this has significantly compounded the challenges of tutoring or mentoring, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“Support was given but due to the circumstances that we were facing due to COVID and online teaching, we didn’t get full support. At times even getting hold of the lecturer or the HOD was also a difficult time at times. I wish they could constantly talk to us and update us.” (Tutor).

Opportunities with online tutoring/mentoring sessions during Covid-19 times

Despite the challenges faced by MenTuts and Writing Consultants, they expressed that they have had positive experiences when consulting with students online. Some MenTuts mentioned that online consultations offered greater flexibility and allowed them to engage with multiple students simultaneously. This observation aligns with the findings of Mushtaha et al. (2022), who emphasised that one of the most valuable aspects of e-learning lies in its flexibility, be it in terms of timing or location. This flexibility affords students more opportunities to interact with both lecturers and their peers. Additionally, to validate their findings, approximately 77.2 per cent of participants expressed support for the level of flexibility offered by online learning. These findings substantiate the theory proposed by Veletsianos and Houlden (2019), which advocates for educational organisations to adopt structures that provide users with greater flexibility.

The sentiments expressed align with those of a tutor from the Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Heritage Department, who stated that a significant number of his students attended his sessions because he used his personal experiences to motivate them. He remarked:

“Students come to my sessions and enjoy my sessions because I share my academic success to motivate them, and they are always wanting to attend the sessions.” (Tutor).

This was something that was encouraged for all MenTuts and Writing Consultants during their

training, emphasising the importance of utilising their own experiences to motivate students as part of their responsibilities.

Challenges encountered with tutoring/consulting/mentoring online

While ADU is dedicated to ensuring a high success rate among students through initiatives like MenTuts and writing services, it is crucial that we engage in continuous reflection with MenTuts and Writing Consultants regarding the challenges they encounter in their roles of enhancing student success. Many MenTuts have highlighted a major challenge in online tutoring or consulting, which is the low attendance rate among students. They have indicated that this issue could be attributed to various factors, such as the lack of access to data and the students' awareness that tutorials are not mandatory. In an article by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), it is emphasised that one of the significant challenges of online learning is that students with limited or no socioeconomic resources to afford a broadband connection are particularly vulnerable to falling behind or facing additional difficulties in keeping up with their peers in online education:

“With my module, the only problem I have and has had even last year was the attendance problem. Normally I have my classes around 13H00 which is the time that the students chose that we have our classes but when that time comes you only have 50 students or less attending and that interrupts the next class because next classes depend on what we covered previously and now you can't go on because mostly do not understand and my total number of students is 110. With such a challenge, how do you go on about?” (Tutor R).

Furthermore, tutors and mentors within the Mathematics and Statistics department have expressed that online tutoring has presented challenges stemming from a shortage of necessary equipment or adequate training in utilising the available resources. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) underscore that effective online education relies heavily on meticulous planning and instructional design, drawing upon various available theories and models. However, the sudden transition to online systems was prompted by the Covid-19 pandemic. These sentiments align with those of the MenTuts, who have also indicated that they were not furnished with the appropriate equipment for their courses. Consequently, explaining equations online becomes a formidable challenge.

“Tutoring online has been a challenge for modules such as physics, Maths and stats. The department doesn't have devices such as a tablet and pen to make our work easier in sharing the screen with tutees and mentees. We are using computers, but they are not as effective.” (Tutor M).

To support this assertion, a study conducted by Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) indicate that

effective and efficient implementation of online learning may not be feasible in certain academic disciplines, a viewpoint echoed by some tutors in the Department of Mathematics. Furthermore, Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) highlight that students and instructors with limited digital literacy skills are more susceptible to encountering difficulties in online learning.

It is worth noting that online learning was introduced as an emergency alternative to ensure that education continued during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. Many academic departments did not have sufficient time to adequately prepare, including providing suitable materials or training on how to effectively utilise online learning management systems.

However, the challenges experienced by Writing Consultants differ from those faced by tutors. Writing Consultants report that many lecturers often expect them to undertake tasks beyond their designated roles. For instance, Writing Consultants may be tasked with assisting students in formulating research topics, which traditionally falls within the purview of a supervisor's responsibilities. This situation highlights a disconnect between the expectations of students and lecturers.

“Four weeks ago, a lecturer contacted me to assist three Honours students with their proposal, the students had no topic, introduction or any information about the research, and I had to start from the beginning. The lecturer was becoming demanding and too many expectations on the pace of their students. The challenge is that there is no direct communication between the lecturer and the consultant.” (Writing Consultant).

Some consultants encountered the challenge of getting students to assist due to Covid-19, as many students are not allowed to be on campus. Therefore, some consultants do not have students whom they can assist with the research process. The common challenge between MenTuts and Writing Consultants was a lack of data and lousy network coverage. These were the findings from Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), who argue that as flexible online is, there are challenges in its usage depending on the student's location. Most of the writing consultants indicate that their consultations are disrupted mainly by a lack of data, both on MenTuts and students' sides:

“For someone like me who stay off camp, I can say challenge is that before we receive data also as tutors from the university and before the survey we completed as tutors about data. It was costing for me to host Microsoft classes.” (Tutor).

This proves that many students, mainly those already disadvantaged and marginalised, are often ill-equipped with technology, internet, and digital skills (the ability to use digital tools to find, evaluate and compose information through multiple digital platforms) or some combination of these. Onyema et al. (2020) have recommended that all educational organisations, teachers, and

students need to adopt technology and development their digital skills in line with developing universal trends and conditions.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

Covid-19 has laid bare the profound vulnerabilities within higher education, a trend evident in both national and international institutions of higher learning. This is underscored by Mashau, Ravhuhali, and Mapotso (2020), who observe that in South Africa, as the Covid-19 pandemic was declared a disaster, the universities were granted full discretion over how students' well-being and education were managed. This proved to be an immense challenge, as many universities were ill-prepared for a crisis of this magnitude, such as the Covid-19 pandemic. The subsequent transition to online learning during the 2020 emergency remote teaching, particularly in institutions that had meticulously planned and provided pedagogical materials and experiences (Kaplan and Haenlein 2016), "exacerbated and accentuated existing disparities in education" (Stanistreet, Elfert, and Atchoarena 2020, 628). Well-equipped universities managed to seamlessly continue online learning, while most rural-based universities suffered significantly due to resource shortages (Universities South Africa 2020, 1). Issues such as the lack of suitable devices, internet connectivity, and unfamiliarity with the university's Learning Management System were common problems across several South African universities, including the university under study (Mashau et al. 2020, 15200). This is particularly challenging, as these universities are predominantly located in rural areas, and their students often come from impoverished backgrounds with limited access to networks, thereby significantly disrupting teaching, learning, and academic literacy support.

Undoubtedly, the pandemic has exposed the fragility of contemporary societies at macro, meso, and micro levels. At the macro level, fragility characterises the social context and has adverse consequences for education, especially in higher education (Stewart et al. 2010). Due to Covid-19, MenTuts and Writing Consultants have had to adapt to new social norms, imposing or assuming behaviors significantly different from those experienced in the last century. They now operate under new regimes of social distancing, which dictate what is permissible or prohibited in terms of people's mobility and access to mentorship, tutoring, and writing services (Bjursell 2020, 673). Nevertheless, the pandemic has unearthed new opportunities for identifying and reflecting on existing inequalities, as well as exploring alternative approaches to address them. This is why Mashau et al. (2020) argue that broadband access should be extended to all parts of South Africa to ensure equitable internet access for everyone.

IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

During a pandemic like Covid-19, questioning why institutions are unprepared may not yield significant insights, as preparedness largely depends on the scale of such a disaster or pandemic. It is worth asserting that governments, especially in South Africa, must ensure that education aligns with sustainable development goals (SDGs), specifically “Goal 4: Quality Education”. This goal emphasises the need to provide inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all. One of the ten (10) targets of SDG 4 emphasises the importance of “building and upgrading education facilities that are child, disability, and gender-sensitive and providing safe, non-violent, inclusive, and effective learning environments for all” (Sustainable Development Goals: Country report 2019, 77). Given the current circumstances, there is a pressing need to revisit and make concerted efforts to expedite this commitment, ensuring that equitable quality education for all becomes a reality rather than a distant aspiration. Mentors, Tutors, and Writing Consultants tasked with assisting other students, particularly undergraduates, should receive the necessary technical support to enable them to fulfill their roles effectively. All stakeholders, including Module Lecturers, Mentors, Tutors, and Writing Consultants, should establish a collaborative partnership in which every member actively contributes to achieving the set objectives. Effective and efficient collaboration among Mentors, Tutors, Writing Consultants, and Module Lecturers would undoubtedly enhance teaching and learning, thereby improving students’ academic performance.

Most importantly, higher education institutions (HEIs) in South Africa as well as in Africa, should provide safe spaces in which mentors, tutors, and writing practitioners are free to reflect honestly and freely about their roles in supporting their peers to do well in their studies. Moreover, HEIs and policymakers in Africa should begin to think about ways in which more investments should be made toward improving digital infrastructure and connectivity. More resources should be allocated to HEIs to bridge the alarming digital divide thereby ensuring that mentors and tutors have unlimited access to the necessary resources needed to support students effectively. Again, it is equally important to explore alternative ways of mentoring and tutoring students by utilising low bandwidth resources such as platforms that require offline materials accessibility.

As this article findings from mentors, tutors and writing consultants from only one university, further research in a similar context could be undertaken to explore the role of module Lecturers in collaboration with Mentors, Tutors, and Writing Consultants to enhance online teaching and learning during future pandemics like Covid-19. Such studies need not focus solely on rural-based universities but should encompass all types of universities,

including universities of technology within the country. Additionally, further research should also be considered focusing on strategies to involve all stakeholders and creating safe spaces for all to engage in alternative ways of enhancing online teaching and learning during a pandemic requires descriptive and exploratory investigations. Furthermore, these studies may also explore effective communication channels between Module Lecturers and Mentors, Tutors, and Writing Consultants

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