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South African Academics' Perception of the Impact of Work From Home (WFH) on Effective Teaching and Learning in Universities

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Abstract

This study utilized a qualitative research approach using specifically phenomenological case study research design in a sample of 28 university lecturers in Gauteng, Free State, and Eastern Cape Provinces of South Africa. Qualitative data were collected using a validated interview schedule. Data collected were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study showed that faculty of education academics perceived working from home orchestrated by COVID-19 as a negative development for the fact that it drained them mentally and thus affected negatively their teaching and learning. Besides, the research participants reported that working from home stalled their academic productivity due to distractions arising from home demands. Conclusively, WFH impacted negatively on effective teaching and learning in universities in South Africa. It was thus recommended that an adequate online learning platform should be put in place always to avoid the repeat of this negative impact of WFH in the future.

Keywords: Academics, effective teaching and learning, impact, work from home

Introduction

Statement of the problem

The face-to-face classroom interaction that has been in practice before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic was put on hold and that caused both the teachers and learners to operate from homes. As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools, institutions, and other learning

spaces have been closed down and such closure has impacted more than 94% of the world's student population [1]. This situation resulted in the practice of virtual learning via work from home (WFH) practice by university lecturers across the globe. According to [2], the Covid-19 pandemic has spread over the whole world and significantly disrupted the education sector which is a major determinant of the economic future of any country. The covid-19 pandemic and its attendant shocks in both economic and education sectors are likely to reshape perceptions of individuals about work and occupations [3]. This new working condition can be uncomfortable and have an impact on the quality of teaching and learning in schools [4]. The covid-19 pandemic has brought a significant change in the education sector thereby imposing several challenges in higher education globally [5].

Before this condition of working from home, many lecturers were not proficient in teaching using internet technology [6]. [7] noted that as the COVID-19 pandemic upended the 2019–2020 school year, there was little or no available data on how school closures may impact learning. According to [8], while some academics were partially working from home at the heart of the pandemic, mainly for research purposes, most teachings were done in loco. Besides, COVID-19 preventive control measures led to a situation that made WFH instantaneously mandatory with little or no planning [8]. Based on the foregoing, the researchers sought to ascertain the academics' perceived impact of WFH on effective teaching and learning within the theoretical framework of Person-Environment-Occupation Theory (PEOT) by Law, 1996.

Theoretical background

PEOT consists of three components, namely; the person (P), the environment (E), and the occupation (O), and these three components interact, they will result in occupational performance (Law, 1996). The interaction between person, environment, and occupation which determines the

occupational performance is emphasized by this theory. The components of the person domain are role, self-concept, cultural background, personality, health, cognition, physical performance, and sensory capabilities. In this context, the person is a unique being whose responsibilities are many and are inseparable from contextual influences. The person brings to the workplace, a set of attributes, skills, knowledge, and experiences. This theory relates to this study for the fact that it enabled the researchers to understand the academic engagements of lecturers during the WFH situation.

Review of related empirical studies

The experience of WFH caused a lot of challenges which resulted in a reduced classroom engagement and disrupted learning opportunities [9]. Academics perceived the amount of work involved in preparing for an online teaching and learning environment to be greater than required for face-to-face delivery and thus, were negatively impacted by the WFH situation [8]. [10] found that the WFH condition as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic affected many things including the educational life of both teachers and learners as well as the learning process. WFH caused decreased work motivation as a result of electricity and internet costs, and such impacted negatively the effective teaching and learning [11]. The WFH condition which was caused by the COVID-19 pandemic has proved to be a constructive disruptor to effective teaching and learning at different levels of education [2]. Disruptive events occasioned by WFH have a long-lasting impact on work arrangements in various sectors including education [12]. [13] revealed that WFH caused University education several challenges in terms of online delivery, assessment, examination, supervision of the project/thesis/dissertation, and carrying out practical tests via online mode. According to [14], the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic which led to many workers working from home has radically affected every aspect of human lives globally especially

the education sector. Due to the WFH situation, most students developed a high degree of anxiety owing to the negative impact of the situation on their learning. [1] opined that online learning has no available pedagogy similar to the one used for face-to-face learning and such impacts teaching and learning under WFH condition negatively. [15] revealed that since many students lacked appropriate devices for online teaching, WFH impacted negatively the effective teaching and learning.

Gaps in literature

Studies conducted across the globe especially in Europe and America, have shown that WFH had negative impacts on effective teaching and learning in the education sector especially at the university level. It is worthy to note that based on the available literature, none of such studies was conducted in South Africa. This gap in the literature in the South African context necessitated this research on the academics' perceived impact of WFH on effective teaching and learning.

Research questions

The following research questions were answered for the study.

1. What is the level of academics' preparedness to working in a multimodal remote teaching space?
2. What pedagogical practices did you adopt to enhance your online teaching as a result of WFH?
3. How did WFH impact your teaching and learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?

Method

Research paradigm, approach, and design

In this research, the researchers adopted the pragmatic research paradigm. This paradigm is relevant to this research in the sense that guides the research design, especially when a combination of different approaches is philosophically inconsistent. Besides, the researcher adopted a qualitative research approach and phenomenological case study research design. This design is suitable for the study since the researchers explored the essence of the lived experiences of faculty of education academics regarding WFH. This design has been used by [16], in similar study.

Participants

The study was conducted using participants in selected Universities in the Gauteng, Free State, and Eastern Cape Provinces of South Africa. The target population for this research includes All the academic staff in the faculty of education in all the eight (8) universities in the three South Africa Provinces constituted the target population for the study. The sample size for the study was 28 academics in the Faculty of Education of eight (8) selected Universities across the Provinces. The 8 universities were sampled using the purposive sampling technique to ensure that the universities in the provinces were adequately selected. The participants were sampled using a convenience sampling technique. This was to enable the researchers to select the academics who were willing to participate in the study.

Instruments for data collection and trustworthiness

Data were collected using a semi-structured interview schedule which contained probes on the perceived impacts of WFH on effective teaching and learning. The semi-structured interview was face validated by experts in instrument development to ensure that it measures what it is

supposed to measure. The researchers ensured the trustworthiness of the interview schedule by subjecting it to a similar sample on two different occasions.

Data collection procedures

The qualitative data were collected by mailing the semi-structured interview schedule to the email addresses of the participants who indicated to respond to the interview questions. This was the case since the face-to-face interview was not possible because of the restriction in movement orchestrated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The participants were given adequate time to respond to the interview questions and return at their convenient time.

Ethical Considerations

Before the data collection, the researchers applied for ethical clearance from each of the participants' universities. The ethical clearance application was granted accordingly. Besides, the researchers conformed with relevant ethical issues in qualitative research. In other words, the participants were given informed consent forms to fill and sign before the interview started. The selected participants had the opportunity to refuse participation at the outset or withdraw at any time for any reason. The participants' identities were reported under the condition of a pseudonym. Any specific information that could potentially identify the participants will not be included in the reports. The same applies to the identities of the universities participating in the study. On completion, the study team will set up a sharing session with direct participants.

Method of data analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using the thematic analytical approach. This approach involved coding, sorting, categorisation, and transcribing the interview responses of the participants. To ensure quality data analysis, the responses of the participants were read several times to pick points from each of the participants' responses.

Results

The results were presented based on the themes that emerged during the thematic data analysis.

Theme One: Academics' preparedness to working in a multimodal remote teaching space

At the course of the online structured interview sent to the respondents, they were asked to indicate their level of preparedness to work in a multimodal remote teaching space caused by the WFH situation. Below are the extracts from their responses.

Participants in University A had these to say: *“No, certainly not before the Pandemic hit, however, the training webinars in those first few weeks were very good and for the most part helpful. However, a lot of us needed more support and help from each other even after the 'webinar training' (often it was too much to take in and understand in one go) Thus, we still need to learn how to be far more creative and 'multimedia-rish' Some of us do not know how to do Voice-overs or how to make our own YouTube videos (frankly, the thought terrifies us). We also have not attempted to do live, timed tests and exams – it must be our next learning thing because if these are marked for you ... just saying”*

Participants in University B responded: *“We were not ready at all, COVID-19 forced the move into the multimodal teaching. We had to organise crash courses to acquaint ourselves with the relevant and available platforms in our university that can be utilised. We discovered several features that have been available, not utilised and we were able to effectively utilise for remote teaching”.*

Participants in University C responded thus: *“No, our university had no online processes in place, no data for staff and students and worse no laptops for students. Firstly, we did not think it would take this long and did not realise the intensity of the pandemic. We did not think far-ahead to the social justice issues faced by individual students, hence there was a protest by students at the beginning of the lockdown so that the university factors in social issues faced by many and to not disadvantage anyone. Also, technically we do not think we were prepared. We often created a presentation for students, knowing that you will not be there physically to explain to students what may not be clear.*

Participants in University D responded thus: *“Most of us, especially from historically disadvantaged universities, were not taking much effort to know about teaching remotely. We were all employed to teach in contact situations. We needed new skills set to teach online. Thus, there are still several areas in which I lack competence”.*

Participants in University E responded thus: *“We were not all clued up with all the E-platforms usage, especially in delivering the lesson. In the unexpected situation that we faced, we encountered ourselves having to make sure we understand the teaching and learning mode that we have to use. This meant understanding the online systems and other modes of teaching that can support the students. This meant for us to be trained on how to use the various online systems at hand. In between the workshops/training, we had to balance the teaching and learning and all our academic expectations.*

Participants in Universities F, G and H responded similarly thus: *We were not prepared, and it was so frustrating because we thought that the lockdown will just for few months but it went on and on. We were not ready to set the online tests and we were given workshops on e-learning and we did not understand it was too much information and to implement at the same time. It was training after the one another but the work was supposed to be done. We got a glimpse of preparing student packages for students during a previous strike, but not nearly prepared as needed. I learned very fast to think differently and smartly about things. We were prepared but not sufficiently. Laptops and data were provided; training was conducted on using emerging platforms eg Microsoft Teams. We were not prepared psychologically though. We were prepared but not in a structural manner, because the institution introduced two years backup software such as Skype for business, using Turnitin, Blackboard, etc. Summarily, were not knowledgeable about the remote learning platforms.*

Theme Two: Pedagogical practices adopted at the course of WFH

The participants were further asked to state the pedagogical practices they adopted at the course of WFH. Below, is the summary of their responses.

Participants in Universities A, B, and C responded similarly thus: *To be honest because one could not see and read the body language of the students if they understood your presentation; we were using simplified language, giving student support and repetition of key concepts. Students were encouraged on cooperative learning and allowed to prepare and present certain topics. Culturally Responsive Pedagogy combined with Critical pedagogy. As all students were in their homes, we could not think of anything else except their social capital. We repeated instructions in various ways and used power-points, announcements, letters to students and WhatsApp reminders, etc. I varied the learning experiences, in other instances I would have a PPT with a voice-over, in other instances, I used the pecha-kucha method.*

Participants in Universities D, E, and F responded similarly thus: *We created Whatsapp groups for each of the courses, where students would ask questions, answer, etc. We also asked students to give me feedback, informally by consulting the class representatives and formally by filling in evaluation or feedback forms. We equally ensured that the prescribed textbooks were delivered to every student*

regardless of where they were. We then select and reduced the planned topics and the content within the topics by 25%. Then narrated PowerPoint presentations were prepared to explain key concepts. These presentations also pointed students to the text or, where relevant, to attached articles on the topic. Students were given tutorial tasks to complete to practice the new concepts. They were invited to ask for clarity or discuss issues on Forums on Sakai or their class WhatsApp groups. They were also invited to communicate directly with their tutors. Two days later the solutions to the tutorials were posted on Sakai for students to check all the while being encouraged to engage on the platforms provided. Assessments were also posted online”.

Participants in Universities G and H responded similarly thus: Mostly PowerPoint slides posted on Sakai and students would then have the liberty to visit Sakai at any time. We gave out the work schedules for the modules, so as they can understand and follow the assessment criteria that are set for them. To tell them that they should respect the due dates and how is it important for them to participate in every activity that is given out for them. We had to post the softcopy of the modules and prescribed books for different particular modules. In case where we did not have a softcopy but the hard copy, we had to scan the important information from the book and post it on the blackboard. When it was time for submission then we reminded them by sending an e-mail to them and inform the class rep to tell them to revisit the blackboard to get the information in trying not to leave any student behind. We mostly allowed students to ask questions as far as possible even on WhatsApp via tutors related to lessons, which they could not understand the content.

Theme Three: Impact of WFH on teaching and learning

This last theme emerged from the responses of the participants on the impact of the WFH on teaching and learning. The extracts are the responses.

Participants in Universities A, B, C, and D had similar responses thus: “Poor connectivity, lack of data, poor attendance and participation impacted negatively on our teaching and learning encounter with the students. As a result of WFH, students did not respect the deadlines but will always bring the issues of poor network connectivity, mobile data, and internet access. The main challenge was network because most of our students are from deep rural areas where the network is a big challenge. Additionally, because it was the beginning of the year, NSFAS students’ allowance was not available then and as a result, some students did not have Smart Phone or Computer to enable them to be part of this. Some students in addition to being very needy and demanding, were also rude – at times even saying 'but the other staff member did x or y' (almost like trying to play one 'parent' against another)”.

Participants in Universities E, F, G, and H responded similarly thus: *“WFH affected our teaching and teaching sessions negatively in that most students who struggled with internet access, lack of a suitable study space or family challenges did not keep up with their studies. This situation led to the late submission of assignments and not attending online classes by the students. We were explaining one aspect several times because there were those students who will seek the information and others for our attention. Most students made disturbing comments in the background because we did not know or see them and thus distracted the teaching sessions most times. Moreover, some students did not take their work seriously. Again, some students acted as if they were in Holliday since they attend lectures from home. As a result of that, they considered academic activities less important and they copy and paste from their classmates, plagiarise from each other”*.

Discussion of the Findings

This study revealed the level of preparedness, pedagogical practices, and the impact of WFH on the Faculty of Education academics in the selected universities in the three provinces of South Africa. It was revealed that most of the academics were not academically and psychologically prepared to embrace remote teaching due to the sudden emergence of COVID-19. As a result of that, some of the academics tried adopting some pedagogical practices to ameliorate the ugly situation. However, it was further revealed that many academics suffered so many impediments in the course of discharging their duties of teaching and other academic responsibilities. Effective teaching by the academics was not 100% possible due to poor network connections and lack of data by both the academics and students. Submission of assignments and meeting deadlines for other academic engagements were delayed due to one reason or the other. Due to the WFH situation as a result of COVID-19, most students did not show serious commitments to their academic activities thereby distorting effective teaching and learning. These findings are in line with the findings of similar studies in other countries of the world.

WFH caused decreased work motivation as a result of electricity and internet costs, and such impacted negatively the effective teaching and learning [11]. The WFH condition proved to be a constructive disruptor to effective teaching and learning at different levels of education [2].

[13] revealed that WFH caused University education several challenges in terms of online delivery, assessment, examination, supervision of the project/thesis/dissertation, and carrying out practical tests via online mode. WFH resulted in a reduced classroom engagement and disrupted learning opportunities [9]. Academics perceived the amount of work involved in preparing for an online teaching and learning environment to be greater than required for face-to-face delivery and thus, were negatively impacted by the WFH situation [8].

Working from home has radically affected the education sector negatively [14]. Most students developed a high degree of anxiety owing to the negative impact of the WFH on their learning [17]. Online learning as a result of WFH has no available pedagogy and such impacted teaching and learning under condition negatively [1]. [15] revealed that since many students lacked appropriate devices for online teaching, WFH impacted negatively the effective teaching and learning.

Significance of the study

The study has a majority contribution to higher education teaching and learning in the sense that it has clearly shown the impact of WFH orchestrated by COVID-19 on effective teaching and learning. Thus, the result of this study will help the government of South Africa in making adequate provision for quality teaching and learning in Universities during and after the COVID-19 era.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research has qualitatively analysed academics' perceived impact of WFH on effective teaching and learning in Universities in South Africa. Based on the findings of the research, it was concluded that many factors such as poor network, lack of conducive working space, lack of commitment on the part of the students among others impacted negatively on effective teaching and learning in South African Universities under the condition of WFH. Thus, the researchers recommended among others that;

1. an adequate arrangement should be put in place for effective teaching and learning during the WFH situation of academics.
2. University students should be properly educated on the best ways to learn from home as a result of the WFH orchestrated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conflict of interest

The researchers declared no potential conflict of interest

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