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**STUDENT EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF REMOTE TEACHING
AND LEARNING AT A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY**

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ABSTRACT

Background: Over a year after the first case of COVID-19 in South Africa, efforts are being made to roll out a mass vaccination programme that should contribute to achieving herd immunity. While the vaccination drive is underway, the higher education sector has resorted to online remote teaching as a way of saving the academic year and saving lives.

Objectives: This study examined the experiences and perceptions of ten undergraduate students on remote teaching and learning at a university of technology. It considered their perspectives on aspects such as the affordances of various digital platforms used for teaching and learning, as well as academic and personal challenges encountered by students in the remote learning sphere.

Method: The study is grounded in Moore's 1993 Transactional Distance Theory, which suggests that the quality and intensity of the interaction between the learner and the learning environment influences performance within distance learning environments. Data was collected using questionnaires, Semi-structured interviews, and an analysis of the various digital platforms (WhatsApp, Blackboard etc) used for remote teaching. The data was analysed using Tesch's steps of qualitative data analysis.

Findings: Drawing on the data from these sources, the paper argues that the move from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning occurred in a challenging context which partly reflects broader societal challenges. Teaching and learning in this university like others, faced the 'new normal' way of teaching and learning. The study reveals that, in fragile times such as in the period of the pandemic, lecturers need to be more creative and innovative in their online teaching in order to promote effective and efficient teaching and learning.

Conclusion: The study recommends that both the lecturers and management must put some strategies in place to enhance remote teaching and learning during situations such as the Covid- 19 pandemic.

Keywords: Remote teaching and learning, COVID-19, Teaching and learning, Experiences, Perceptions, Technology

**INTRODUCTION AND
BACKGROUND**

The first case of COVID-19 was confirmed in South Africa on 5 March 2020, followed by an exponential growth in the number of infections and fatalities. In response, the South African government declared a

national lockdown to flatten the curve of infections (Abdool Karim 2020). The lockdown impacted significantly on all sectors, including the education sector. Faced with the crisis, the Department of Higher Education and Training promoted the vision of saving the academic year and saving lives. In line with this vision,

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higher education institutions had to rethink the delivery of their content, switching from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning (Iivari, Sharma, and Ventä-Olkkonen, 2020).

In remote teaching and learning, the students and the educator/lecturer are not physically present in a traditional classroom environment. Information is relayed through technology, such as Teams, Blackboard, WhatsApp, Facebook and video conferencing and assessments are online (Kenan, 2015, Ngandu, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent lockdown has resulted in a proliferation of online instruction with integrated web-based instructional tools at colleges and universities (Rodriguez, Ooms, and Montanez, 2008). The abrupt and emergency switch from face-to-face to online teaching and learning had the likelihood of exposing the higher education sector to major problems such as: the inappropriateness of some of the online platforms selected for teaching and learning, the lack of devices and internet and generally, the possibility of lowering the quality of education and further entrenching of inequality in an educational system that was already faced with the problem of gross inequalities. In considering the problems highlighted here, the study considers a number of questions posed by Song, Singleton, Hill, and Koh (2004). They asked: What do students think about online learning?

What makes students successful in online education?

What can be done to improve access for students in online environments?

Answers to these questions should help to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of online education.

This paper examines students' perceptions and experiences of remote teaching and learning at a university of technology by engaging with students' reflections on:

- the affordances of the different digital platforms and the opportunities and challenges associated with each of the platforms that may have enabled or inhibited effective and efficient remote teaching and learning
- how remote teaching and learning was experienced, in comparison to face-to-face teaching and learning
- whether remote teaching and learning contributed in widening or narrowing or, at the least, exposing the inequality gap between students
- how remote teaching and learning might have impacted on students' first year experience and the transition from high school to university
- how the institution contributed to ensuring either a pleasant or an unpleasant remote learning experience for student

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The findings of this study highlighted challenges and opportunities associated with remote teaching and learning. Considering the mass switch to remote teaching and learning under COVID-19 lockdown conditions and aware of the fact that this is likely to be a normal mode of teaching and learning even beyond COVID-19, it is important to explore ways in which efficient and effective remote teaching and learning can be accomplished. The study offers valuable insights that should contribute to building the capacity of lecturers and students by addressing the pitfalls experienced in remote teaching and learning. The study should also inform various higher education stakeholders on how to implement remote teaching and

learning in ways that add value to the learning but also, the teaching experience. It is in this backdrop that the study examined students' perceptions and experiences of remote teaching and learning at a university of technology.

SPECIFIC OBJECTIVES

The specific objectives of this study are to:

- examine the different digital platforms that were used for remote teaching and learning.
- determine the opportunities and challenges that respectively enabled or inhibited effective and efficient remote teaching and learning.
- describe remote teaching and learning experiences as compared to face-to-face teaching and learning.
- assess the institution's contribution in ensuring a pleasant or an unpleasant remote learning experience for students.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that guided this study are:

- What are the affordances of the different digital platforms that were used for remote teaching and learning?
- What are the challenges and opportunities encountered in the remote teaching and learning process?
- What are the main differences and similarities between remote and face-to-face teaching and learning?
- What are the mechanisms put in place by the institution to ensure effective and efficient remote teaching and learning?

RESEARCH METHODS

Design: The study is qualitative in nature and covers a population of 50 students in a selected year one course that one of the researchers teaches. Focusing the study on a cohort of first year students allows for a deep understanding of in/effectiveness of remote teaching and learning and the impact that remote teaching and learning might have had on the transition from high school to university as well as on their first- year experience in general. The researchers randomly selected 10 students from the population.

DATA COLLECTION TOOLS

The study utilised three research tools to collect data from the respondents.

A questionnaire was administered, and this made room for respondents to reflect deeply on the themes that they were responding to and in so doing, offer deep and insightful responses on how they experienced and perceived remote teaching and learning.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted telephonically in order to maintain social distance during the COVID-19 pandemic. This data collection method allowed respondents to share their thoughts, feelings and opinions and enabled the researcher to probe deeper into some of the issues covered in the questionnaire that may require further clarification.

A Content analysis of the various digital platforms (WhatsApp, Blackboard, Facebook, emails, etc.) used for remote teaching was done. This entailed analysing the content and various other usage trends on the platforms. A combination of the data collection methods as well as relevant literature that gestures towards the issues highlighted in the primary data sources

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allowed for a deep and a comprehensive study.

MEASUREMENT AND ANALYTICAL APPROACH

The study is grounded in Moore's (1993) Transactional Distance Theory. The Transactional Distance Theory suggests that the quality and intensity of the interaction between the learner and the learning environment influences performance within distance learning environments. Moore's 1993 transactional Distance theory was used to assess the interaction among students, instruction given to students and course content online. Transactional Distance Theory engages with a method of teaching and assessing the students which differs from the traditional face-to-face method of teaching and assessment. In Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, the variables for the interaction in teaching and learning are dialogue, structure and learner autonomy; where dialogue is the interaction between teachers and learners; structure embodies the elements of course design or the ways the teaching program is structured, and learner autonomy has to do with ways in which students share the responsibility for their own learning process (Sivula 2019). The pedagogy is completely different from the traditional or face to face teaching and learning where the teacher does more of dishing out the instructions, directs the teaching and learning, makes sure the environment is conducive for effective teaching and learning and that the resources are available. The Covid-19 pandemic has changed teaching and learning delivery to on-line platforms (education access through the Internet) and distance education (interactive learning). This move from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning exposed some of the students to some challenges while other students felt

that it has provided some advantages over the traditional teaching methodology. knowledge delivery pedagogy changed, which made the students and lecturers experience learning and teaching differently but also, to become more innovative. Moore's Transactional Distance theory explains the interaction among learners, teachers, and course content.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Ethical clearance to conduct the study was obtained from the Faculty Ethics Committee. All ethical issues including giving informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, beneficence and non-maleficence were addressed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In this study, the students shared their experiences and perceptions of remote teaching and learning at a University of Technology, in South Africa. The respondents were able to express themselves and give their perceptions concerning the various digital platforms used, the challenges they faced both academically and personally and what needs to be done to improve this mode of teaching and learning.

Digital platforms used: The students were asked which digital platforms were used to teach them during the remote teaching and learning. The respondents indicated that online teaching was the primary mode of remote teaching and learning during the Covid-19 lockdown period. This view is also shared by Mishra, Gupta, and Shree, (2020). They identified the following platforms that were used in conducting online teaching and learning, highlighting the affordances of the various platforms.

Microsoft Teams "was one of the apps we used mostly," commented one of the

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respondents This view highlights a common trend where Microsoft Teams, as indicated by Larry 2020 cited in Shahzad, Hassan, Aremu., Hussain, and Lodhi (2020) has gained great popularity as a teaching and learning platform. Its popularity may be explained by the view by a respondent that Microsoft Teams. "Consumed less data compared to Blackboard Collaboration." Another respondent indicated that: "it was easy to use, it has an excellent quality of sound and video that is why our presentations were heard and seen well." The student perspectives on Microsoft Teams suggest that each platform held unique characteristics, each impacting differently on the learning experience of students. This view was also emphasised by Higgins, Murphy, and Hogg (2020). It these characteristics that make Microsoft Teams the most popular teaching and learning platform. It is important to note that as higher educational institutions moved from face-to-face to emergency online remote teaching and learning, a key factor was the availability of data as many students lacked access to data and internet and universities were grappling with difficulty to ensure that students were provided data. In this context, the popularity of Microsoft Teams is justified as any platform that is deemed by students to consume less data was likely to be popular. An additional significant aspect in the initial stages of the switch to the online remote teaching and learning was the challenge of skilling students to use the online platforms that some of the students would have been exposed to only for the first time at that stage. In that context, a platform like Teams which the students found "easy to use" would have had a greater appeal and contributed to a positive learning experience. These student reflections offer useful insights on qualities that should be considered in selecting a

teaching and learning platform in the context of the selected university and of most South African universities in general – less data consumption, ease of usage and the quality of the sound and the videos. It should however be mentioned that each platform had its specific features and affordances.

Blackboard is reported to have been used by most lecturers to send assignment briefs and feedback to students. One respondent stated: "I would like remote teaching and learning to continue should things go back to normal because every class session is recorded and posted on Blackboard for students to access anytime and the videos are very useful, and they help students with their academic performance." Although the features of Teams as discussed earlier ensured that students had a positive learning experience, Blackboard which is the official Learner Management System of the University was most predominantly used by lecturers for teaching, learning and to administer assessments. Though not the most preferred by students, students see value in the fact that "every class session [could be] recorded and posted on Blackboard for students to access anytime [which is] very useful and assisted students with their academic performance." This perspective seems to highlight the storage opportunities and advantages associated with online remote teaching in the time of emergency remote teaching during the lockdown. Recorded lectures have become the norm, giving students the freedom to listen to the lectures in their own time and at their own pace, making this a valuable feature of any teaching and learning platform. This, according to the respondent improves academic performance. Other features that rank Blackboard favourably as an online teaching and learning platform according to Pinlearn (2020) include: flexibility, the possibility of recording as

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well as storage and usability which enable students to create their own learning experience. It has been suggested that such features encourage greater student autonomy (Hockly and Clandfield, 2010, 89) and contribute to creating teaching and learning environments that are described as unbound, dynamic, and characterised by active learning (Keengwe and Kidd, 2010: 534). When the student respondent indicates that they can continue learning and engaging with the recorded lectures on Blackboard, this illustrates the active learning that the Blackboard platform enables. It is these characteristics of Blackboard that lead one of the students to make a call for “remote teaching and learning to continue should things go back to normal ...”. It is clear from such calls that COVID-19 has brought about a revolution in the sphere of teaching and learning and the new ways of teaching and learning have come to stay beyond the pandemic.

WhatsApp is described by a respondent as “a great platform for lecturers to stay in touch with their students as well as share educational content”. Yet another student respondent indicated that: “Some of my lecturers went an extra mile creating WhatsApp groups and sending us tutorial videos on how we should attack the calculations”. Another respondent explained that: “it is very accessible as almost all the students have WhatsApp”. In a study elsewhere that compared two groups of students who were taught the same topic, one through didactic teaching and learning and the other through WhatsApp, it was found that the group that was taught through WhatsApp performed better. The study referred to here found that “technical, educational and instructional advantages of teaching and learning activities that use WhatsApp out pars disadvantages” (Gon and Rawekar, 2017:

19). These advantages relate to some of the aspects highlighted by student respondents in this study. In their view, the WhatsApp platform clearly holds great value for several reasons. It offers ease of communication or the ability to “stay in touch,” it serves as a valuable space where “tutoring and additional guidance can be offered after the lecture,” “it is easy, accessible and affordable to all students” and “it handles multimedia such as the tutorial videos that are sent.” These advantages are also highlighted by So, (2016) in his study where the participants showed positive perception and acceptance of the use of WhatsApp for teaching and learning and Yulia, (2020). One of the greatest revelations of the move to remote online teaching in the time of the COVID-19 lockdown has been exposure to the affordance of WhatsApp as a valuable platform not just for communication but teaching and learning. A major advantage is that it allows for a combination of media – text, audio, images and video Rambe, and Bere, (2013). This has significant implications on the learning experiences of students if one considers the view that “people remember only 10% of what they read, 20% of what they hear, 30% of what they see and 50% of what they hear and see (Gon and Rawekar, 2017: 19). This should be the case with the student cohort under study, suggesting that the use of WhatsApp contributed to a positive teaching and learning experience that was holistic but also, the possibility of improved academic performance (La Hanisi, Risdiany, Dwi Utami, and Sulisworo, 2018).

Email has always been a valuable communication tool in the educational milieu. Over a decade back, it was already apparent that “a strategic use of email leads to a richer learning experience, by providing an extra medium for communication, and offering a valuable

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feedback database that can, among other things, be used to improve future editions of a course” (Hassini, 2006: 29). The value of emails in education has become even more pertinent in the context of increased remote online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and in a time of improved accessibility to hardware (android phones and computers) and greater access to internet connectivity. Reflecting on the place of email in education, respondents in this study indicated that lecturers were using emails to send work and assignments to them. One of them commented that lecturers allowed “students to submit via email since some don’t have access to black board and also extending time to submit if you had network problems on the day of submission”. It is clear here that the official platform for the submission of assignments is Blackboard. However, due to some of the challenges that may be associated with submitting on the Blackboard platform, the lecturer allows them to submit by email. In this instance, one is exposed to a major factor under the difficult circumstances of remote teaching and learning. This is empathy and flexibility which the lecturers exercise by allowing students to submit by email rather than on Blackboard. Implied here is the possibility that email is not just a valuable tool for communication between lecturers and students but also, an easy-to- use tool, especially for the submission of assignments. In fact, it also holds the value that submissions can be stored and tracked.

Academic challenges of remote learning:

The unprecedented spread of the Coronavirus pandemic forced the Department of Higher Education (DHET) to introduce online teaching and learning as the whole country was on lockdown. The adjustment to virtual teaching and learning came with a lot of academic challenges for

the students as highlighted by Kapasia, Paul, Roy, Saha, Zaveri, Mallick, and Chouhan, (2020) and Hash 2021. The respondents in this study were asked of the academic challenges they faced during online teaching and learning. The students postulated that: “Laptops were distributed late to students.” This posed huge challenges for the students, staying at home, and not having laptops to work with. The late distribution of the laptops meant that some students could not join in the online lectures at the same time with others. The respondents also highlighted the challenge of “Not securing data from all network providers.” This according to students resulted in the fact that “Lectures started late due to logistics; hence students had less time to complete the tasks.” As if this was not enough, some students posited that “the internet was not working at full capacity.” They complained of fluctuations in the connectivity which led to students missing classes and depending on the notes that the lecturers will post. Seeking to mitigate the impact of the challenges envisaged, respondents indicated that the university embarked on the “distribution of course packages to the under privileged students.” However, this did not fully remedy the situation as some of the course packs remained undelivered and were returned to the university. Where they were delivered, the packages were too bulky, and the students studied on their own. For first year students in particular who have not been fully inducted into the ways of studying in higher education, this was a major challenge. Another challenge faced by the students was in the area of their laboratory work as some respondents pointed out that they “Could not complete tasks that needed to be done in the laboratory.” They only did the theoretical part of the course. Clearly, these challenges impacted on efforts to complete the

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academic programme and to an undetermined extent, on the quality of teaching and learning during the period of remote teaching. Pastor, 2020; Mirandilla-Santos, 2016 posit that unstable internet access and limited electronic devices posed huge challenges to the students in teaching, learning and assessment during the period of online teaching and learning. While grappling with challenges associated directly with the academic project, students also had to deal with personal challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown.

Personal challenges faced by the students

Given that the students were receiving lectures online in their various locations, they encountered some personal challenges. This was also acknowledged by some researchers like Kapasia, et al, (2020). Allen and Seaman, 2011; Brown and Wrisley, 2009; Noel-Levitz, 2013 cited in Nwankwo 2015 also opined that students are bound to face challenges while receiving lectures online. This is because some of the students are staying in remote areas that have connectivity problems. The respondents posited that, "Some students did not have laptops, so they had to secure some loans, which they have to pay back." This posed a huge problem for the students especially those from less privileged homes, whose parent's /guardians' income is quite low. It put them in a position where they ended up borrowing. Some students in remote rural parts of the country found themselves in exceptionally challenging circumstances in the time of remote teaching during the lockdown. They experienced "Lack of connectivity due to the environment that is rural". Lapitan, Tiangco, Sumalinog, Sabarillo, and Diaz, 2021 also commented in their study that students faced connectivity problems in the

online teaching and learning. The situation of these students "was worsened by load shedding" which affected everyone nationally but more so, students in remote rural areas who would hardly afford alternative sources of power. The psychological impact that these experiences would have had on students cannot be underestimated. They complained that there are moments when the Wi-Fi was spotty because of their location in the rural areas. This situation added to the online environment's frustration and interrupted the teaching and learning sessions. They reported that their computers shut down sometimes and it was a problem contacting the ICT department to assist. Most of the respondents pointed out that there were "Distractions (house chores) which led to procrastination". This would be the reality of remote learning for most students. They reported experiencing some distractions like a visitor coming in the middle of a virtual classroom session. As a result of these distractions, and possibly having additional responsibilities, time management became more challenging. Another personal challenge that the students highlighted is, "My attention span at home seems to be a lot shorter than it is in university since my place of comfort has not been created to be an educational environment". The respondents reported that they "did not have access to the library so we depended on online information". This was worsened by the fact that many students did not have study rooms in their houses, a situation that contributed to lack of concentration. Physically, psychologically, and emotionally, students were placed in a state of displacement that had an enormous impact on their learning experience and had a significant impact on their learning experience. This resulted in a decline in academic achievement. For example, the

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discipline in which the subject under study falls is Communications Skills and the average pass rate of the subject in the faculty fell from 80% in 2019 to 69% in 2020 (CPUT, 2021). Remote teaching and learning were a viable alternative that enabled the saving of the academic year and the saving of lives. However, impact of the emergency switch to remote teaching and learning on the quality of education and on the teaching and learning experience in general is not to be too positive, a view shared by Rapanta, Botturi, Goodyear, Guàrdia, and Koole, 2020.

Improvements that can be made

Researchers like, Basilaia, and Kresvavadze, (2020) and Jegede, (2020) expressed the view that Covid 19 has changed the world permanently and this has affected the method of teaching and learning. The students highlighted some of the improvements that the University can make to enhance remote teaching and learning.

A pertinent suggestion made by the students is that “The University should buy enough laptops for all the students.” This view is shared by the following researchers, Sundarasan, Chinna, Kamaludin, Nurunnabi, Baloch, Khoshaim, and Sukayt, (2020). This is very important as it would address the problem of excluding some full participation in the academic project. The students also suggested that “Lecturers can create an automated timeline or checklist on blackboard so that students will be able to track the assignments and their due dates and also monitor their progress.” This is vitally important especially for first year students transitioning from a high school culture where teachers offer closer guidance and monitoring. In a normal face-to-face teaching and learning situation, lecturers would offer guidance and monitoring in the

early part of the first year but the possibility of guidance, monitoring and slow induction into the culture of teaching and learning at university is diminished. Creating such an automated checklist that tracks assignments and their due dates and automatically alerts students would fill the gap created in the transition process in the remote teaching context, reducing chances of missed or late submission by students still struggling with the transition from high school to university. The respondents suggested that ‘Lecturers should use more academic tools that will enable the students to understand the courses more.’ Yet another student added that, “Lecturers should make more reading and research materials available on the University library website or collaborate with other institutions to develop and online infrastructure that will provide a wide variety of materials for students”. Another student suggested that “Lecturers should give weekly quizzes on work covered. This will enable them to identify topics that students are finding challenging and revise them on the form during tutorials”. The students acknowledge the fact that online teaching and learning is not easy and highlighted areas that required improvement. They reported that most of the lecturers used one method only in teaching them during the remote teaching and learning period. Previous studies by Ocak 2011; Ching et al. 2018 cited in Rapanta et al (2020), stressed the fact that lecturers need to improve their pedagogical preparedness in remote teaching and learning. The shift to online learning can be difficult and even could have many unanticipated negative implications if lectures are not innovative and creative using teaching remotely. Here, respondents call on lecturers to restructure their courses looking at the contents, new pedagogical approaches, learning activities and tools

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that may be used to ensure a seamless transition from face-to-face to remote online teaching and learning. The COVID-19 pandemic has moved teaching and learning from the physical classroom space to the virtual space and it is necessary to package teaching and learning in the remote virtual classroom in ways that ensure good pedagogical practices such as active learning, encourage discussion, deep engagement and student centredness, encourage collaborative learning, as highlighted by the students "Online learning should be improved, and I understand that our lectures were not prepared for this paradigm shift, but I hope that going forward they will learn from this experience".

CONCLUSION

This study looked at students' experiences and perceptions of remote teaching and learning alongside Moore's (1993) Transactional Distance Theory. It is grounded on the view that the quality and intensity of them, interaction between the learner and the learning environment influences performance within distance learning environments. The higher the quality of the interaction, the more likely the learner is to perform well. Some of the students expressed the fact that the home environment encroached a lot in their performance.

This study concludes for remote online teaching to be fully effective; improvements are required in the areas of lecturers' creativity and innovativeness, discipline and management of time by students and access to devices and to internet connectivity. However, remote teaching and learning which in this case was mostly online holds significant affordances as it enables students to learn at

their own leisure and pace which is in line with what Cuthrell and Lyon, 2007; Rovai, Ponton, Wighting, and Baker, 2007 found out. Overall, the need to take an emergency switch to remote online teaching and learning presents the higher education sector with significant opportunities which (in conclusion) are captured in the student voices below.

"Students can work at their own pace which are better for some who cannot fully grasp the information immediately. "

"The strength of it is that students can access lectures and other study material at their own pace, and it is unlikely for students to fail."

"Remote learning doesn't differ from contact teaching that much as the only difference between the two is remote learning requires you to take responsibility and keep track of your schedule. Whereas contact teaching the lecturer sets the pace and keeps you on track of what is expected."

RECOMMENDATION

This study recommends that the University should ensure that laptops are provided for all the students.

The data given to students should be increased as it tends to finish before the stipulated times.

Lecturers should post the time frame for all assignments that need to be done at the beginning of the course.

Some respondents suggested that lecturers should improve their response and feedback time.

More materials should be made available on the University library website

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Another study should capture lecturers' experience on remote teaching and learning. A more comprehensive study is envisaged where students' academic performance under remote teaching and learning conditions would be compared with performance to face-to-face times.

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