

AUTHOR:

Prof Mahlapahlapana Johannes
Themane¹ 

Prof Layane Thomas
Mabasa¹ 

AFFILIATION:

¹University of Limpopo, South
Africa

DOI: [http://dx.doi.
org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.
v40.i1.2](http://dx.doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v40.i1.2)

e-ISSN 2519-593X

Perspectives in Education

2022 40(1): 18-38

PUBLISHED:

04 March 2022

RECEIVED:

10 August 2021

ACCEPTED:

19 October 2021

Epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A South African experience

Abstract

The quest for access to higher education has increased rapidly in the past 25 years of democracy in South Africa. However, this increase has not been matched by student academic success. This lack of success may even be worse with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has given rise to challenges that have affected student learning, especially for students who come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. In response to these, many institutions of higher learning have resorted to online teaching and learning. Despite this aforementioned lack of success, there are some who have succeeded. This group of students is the focus of our study. Therefore, the question discussed here is: How do students of historically disadvantaged backgrounds have access to higher education and succeed in their studies, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic? We employed a qualitative methodological approach, where the case study research design was adopted. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select a total of 18 participants from the School of Education at the University of Limpopo in South Africa. The sample was divided into four categories. The first category was made up of 10 students. The second category comprised 2 administrative staff, the third category consisted of 4 academic staff and 2 support staff (residence and academic writing) formed the last category. Data was collected through interviews and document analysis. The findings showed that students from disadvantaged backgrounds encountered challenges with their academic and their social lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, we established that they developed coping skills (working in groups, moving around from one spot to the other in search of a strong connectivity) to navigate through their challenges. These findings imply that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds can succeed if they leverage their studies on self-agency and social capital despite disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Access; success; COVID-19; historically disadvantaged students; higher education.

1. Introduction

When the new democratic government in South Africa came to power in 1994, there was a need to improve different sectors of society. Amongst other sectors to be improved, was the students' participation rate in higher education. This was done by developing different policies. These policies paved the way for the creation of a single non-racial education dispensation, transformation of the curriculum, democratisation of university management and increasing access and success (access and success roughly means when students are given the necessary support to succeed in their studies. More on this is discussed in the literature review section) to the previously disadvantaged students in higher education (Badat, 2014). However, some of the aspirations these policies have not achieved, such as whether the agenda as set out by White Paper 3, has been realised (Essop, 2020).

The White Paper 3, 1997 (Department of Education [DoE], 1997) succinctly captures the spirit of the transformation agenda of higher education in South Africa. Its purpose was to address the national needs by facilitating increased access to, and articulation between, career-focused and general academic programmes, thus facilitating student mobility between different programmes. Its first step was to provide guidance on the shape and size of higher education and to obviate the homogenisation of the system by widening access (DoE, 1997). As Pillay (2020) indicates, this was also meant to increase participation rates in dealing with historical inequities and improve the lives of the citizens in South Africa. This led to a rapid increase in student enrolments, which has not been matched with student academic success (Cross, 2018). For example, at the University of South Africa (UNISA), (a distance learning institution with a high student intake in South Africa)

... the headcount enrolments of school-leavers, that is, students in the 18–22 age-group increased by 45.3% - from 43 422 to 63 109 - between 2005 and 2017; and in the 18-24 age-group¹¹ it increased by 59.7% - from 64 158 to 102 448, an annual average growth of 4%, which is slightly below that for students in the 25 and above age-group (Essop, 2020:14).

Consequently, some scholars started to question the issue of focusing on the drive for students' physical access to institutions of higher learning without looking at their epistemic access and success (Morrow, 2009; Manik, 2015).

From 1994 to 2014, access to higher education was still very limited (Badat, 2005; Nel & Kistner, 2009; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014). However, in the past five years there has been an exponential increase in access to higher education (Tjønneland, 2017). The goal of increasing access and success in institutions of higher learning has not been realised in the past 25 years. This is evidenced by a small number of throughput rates in institutions of higher learning, especially amongst the previously disadvantaged students (Tjønneland, 2017). White Paper 3 hinted at this slow progress when it observed that there were obstacles to epistemic access and success, such as poor funding, low throughputs and high dropout rates (Education White Paper 3, DoE, 1997; Essop, 2020). This situation may even be worse during the current COVID-19 pandemic (Badat, 2020; Le Grange, 2020; Motala, Sayed & de Kock, 2021; Dlamini & Ndzinisa, 2020). In addition, these studies have not looked at its influence on the historically disadvantaged students, specifically. Since the pandemic is likely to exacerbate the situation, there is a need for studies on epistemic access and the success of these students during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may help to understand and manage its impact by formulating policies on the pandemic in higher education.

2. Literature review

The literature review is divided into six sub-themes. The sub-themes are: the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on higher education, the conceptualisation of epistemic access, the conceptualisation of epistemic success, historically disadvantaged students, enabling factors affecting students' epistemic access and success and challenges to students' epistemic access and success.

2.1 *The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on higher education*

The COVID-19 pandemic disease has caused unprecedented harm to society (Diluxe *et al.*, 2021). Its advent had an impact on different aspects of society including higher education. The sudden closure of universities and subsequent departure of students from campuses led to an alternative approach to teaching and learning. They had to resort to online learning. As Maatuk *et al.* (2021) indicate, this includes web-based education, digital learning, interactive learning, computer-assisted teaching and internet-based learning. However, the sudden change to online learning brought with it several challenges. Challenges include a lack of social interaction amongst students (Alexander, 2008) and disparities among students in terms of access to online teaching and learning (Azubuikwe *et al.*, 2021).

A review of literature on epistemic access and success reveals that it has been a hotly debated subject. As Nyamupangedengu (2017) indicates, the debate on student epistemic access and success dates back to the 1990s. It then became prominent during the student protests (#FeesMustFall Movement) of 2015 and 2016, which were initially ignited by unaffordable fee hikes (Costandius *et al.*, 2018). Blame was also placed on the irrelevant curricula, which led to the call for a decolonised curriculum by students (Costandius *et al.*, 2018).

Concomitant to this, was the issue of epistemic access and success. Since then, there has been a steady increase in literature on these specific issues (Du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014). This debate can be categorised into three themes: the debate about the concept epistemological access (Morrow, 2009; CHE, 2010), factors affecting students' epistemic access (Bozalek, Garraway & McKenna, 2011; Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Maphosa *et al.*, 2014), factors affecting students' success (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Nyamupangedengu, 2017) and challenges in dealing with epistemic access and success (Lewin & Mawoyo, 2014; Cross, 2018; Manram & Maistry, 2018; Toquero, 2020).

2.2 *Conceptualisation of epistemic access*

The concept of student epistemic access is a contested terrain because there are different meanings attached to the concept. This makes it difficult to reach a common understanding of the concept. These meanings can be grouped into two categories. Those that see access as merely a physical entry into an institution of higher learning and those that go beyond physical access to include the support (additional teaching time, peer mentoring and tutorials) that goes with it. Alexander (2008) and Gamede (2006) explain access only as a physical entry into an institution of learning. Other scholars (Badat, 2014; Cross & Atinde, 2015; Du Plooy & Zilindile, 2014) explain access as a process that involves integration into university academic life and the ways of knowing and connecting it to opportunity and success. Therefore, our perception of access is that it is more than a mere physical presence. It calls for the creation of an enabling environment by the provision of resources such as academic, administrative

and support staff. It also requires the provision of tutorials and academic development support services to students (Morrow, 2009).

2.3 Conceptualisation of epistemic success

On the other hand, epistemic success, similar to the concept of access, also carries multiple meanings because of its fluidity. Thus, it is not easy to confine it to one meaning. Therefore, it is difficult to have a common understanding of what it means. In some instances, it may refer to cognitive abilities such as achievement in learning; whereas in some cases it may refer to social wellbeing, which encompasses good social relations or interrelations in an ecological psycho-social system (Morrow, 2009). The system may include collaborative knowledge-building, reflective learning, individual construction of knowledge (self-efficacy) and the ability to apply knowledge in practical situations (Lonka, Ketonen & Vermunt, 2021). Regarding collaborative learning, success means that the student should be able to work with others effectively in order to succeed. Concerning reflective learning, and an individual's construction of knowledge, as well as the ability to apply knowledge in practical situations, success in this article means the ability to employ strategies to mitigate challenges. Our view of success is more than just cognitive success, such as pass rates and throughputs. It includes being emotionally intelligent and being able to work with others under stressful conditions.

2.4 Historically disadvantaged students

The concept of who historically disadvantaged students are requires our comment if we are to understand their epistemic access and success. It (the concept) still lacks a universally accepted definition despite the fact that it has been subjected to a rigorous interrogation from educational researchers who draw from the Bourdean tradition (Cross & Atinde, 2015). In the South African context, it is used to refer to Black students (African and Coloureds) who through their historical race classification by the apartheid system, constituted poor and working-class students. Thus, students from these backgrounds are often regarded as having socio-cultural deficits. However, contrary to this view, we contend as others do (Cross & Atinde, 2015) that these students have unrecognised resources (for example, multilingualism) and dispositions that stand them in good stead to succeed in higher education. They have resources such as social agency and resilience to succeed against all odds (Masutha & Naidoo, 2021). Therefore, the narrative of the historically disadvantaged students needs to be qualified. In this context, the concept refers to Black students (African and Coloureds) who are classified as poor and from the working-class; mainly found in historically black universities.

2.5 Enabling factors affecting students' epistemic access and success

Given this understanding of epistemic access and success as more than mere physical access, there are other factors that should be considered. Such factors either enable or inhibit student success. Enablers include policy documents and guidelines that provide a legislative framework, such as the Post-School Education and Training Policy (2013) and Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) (2014) that seek to facilitate movement across all divisions within higher education and training. There are challenges with its implementation, however, such as the differences of institutional programme requirements. Furthermore, other factors that serve as enablers are teaching qualifications, the use of varied ways of presenting module content and effective handling of assessment and feedback (Maphosa *et al.*, 2014).

2.6 Challenges to students' epistemic access and success

Besides the enablers, there are also inhibitors to students' access and success, such as students' lack of preparedness, their incapability of using resources, lack of teaching and learning space, and a lack of academic writing and study skills (Badat, 2020). Other challenges include epistemic exclusion of vulnerable students (such as those who are from historically disadvantaged backgrounds) because of lack of resources such as laptops and internet connectivity (Lavazza & Farina, 2020; Timmermann, 2020). Additionally, online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic can be a disabler for epistemic access and success (Badat, 2020). Finally, there is also an emergence of epistemic uncertainties brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, universities are uncertain about how to implement online teaching as there are no clear policies to guide and regulate it. Most of the activities are on a trial and error basis (Viale, 2020; Dunwoody, 2020). For example, in some instances students submit their assessment activities online, only to find that their work does not appear in the system. When students make a follow-up, there are no clear policies and guidelines yet for recourse (Kaup *et al.*, 2020).

What emerges from this literature so far is: how do students from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed in their studies especially during the COVID-19 pandemic? Such information obtained may be helpful to universities, researchers and policy makers in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic and then especially for resource-poor students. It is against this backdrop that this study sought to explore strategies used by students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds to succeed during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, the research questions for the study were formulated.

3. Research questions

Main question:

How do students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds access and succeed in their studies during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Sub-questions:

1. What challenges do students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds encounter as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding epistemic access?
2. What challenges do such students encounter as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic regarding epistemic success?
3. How do such students deal with these challenges?

4. Theoretical framework

There are different theories that can be used in researching students' epistemic access and success in higher education such as: Social Realism (Archer & Archer, 1995), Activity Theory (AT), (Engeström, 1999), Legitimation Code Theory (LCT) (Bernstein, 2000; Maton, 2013), and Resilience Theory (RT) (Garmezy, 1987). Lastly, epistemic access and success may be explained through Resilience Theory (RT). For this paper, we have applied the Resilience Theory (Garmezy, 1987) to examine the issue.

4.1 Resilience Theory

Resilience can be understood in different ways: as a process and as an outcome. As a process it refers to an individual's ability to adjust well to a special adversity (Theron, 2016). As an outcome, it refers to the ability to maintain or regain strength despite significant stress or adversity (Kalisch *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, in essence resilience is an individual's ability to succeed under difficult situations. This can be achieved by the ability to draw from one's own resources, such as religious beliefs or self-efficacy. In some cases, the ability to overcome adverse circumstances may come from one's connectivity with other people or societal structures such as family, friends and the community. This we can refer to as social capital.

Broadly speaking, it encapsulates how some individuals, through self-agency, can bounce back in life after experiencing adversity. But, when scrutinised more closely, it carries numerous meanings. Rutter (2013) looks at it as an *adaptation* of an individual to a situation when given the right resources and social supportive environment. Garmezy (1987) looks at it from a socio-ecological perspective: where success relies on individual, family and support factors.

Werner (2000) argues that for a person to succeed in the face of adversity that person should have appropriate individual attributes, family support, emotional support and external system support such as the church, political organisations and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in place. What emerges from this discourse is well captured by Duchek, Raetz and Scheuch (2020) who outline the tenets of resilience as *anticipation, coping and adaptation*. These imply that the individual should be able to anticipate adversity before it arrives, and prepare for it. In doing so, the individual increases their chances of coping with adversity. But, since such an anticipated situation may be unavoidable, the individual should adapt to a new situation, that is, to bounce back.

Thus, in this study, we used this theory because we found it appropriate to scaffold the participants' responses that helped us in answering the research question. This was done by using two of the three tenets of the theory, as already outlined. We looked at how students coped with adversity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, how they coped and adapted in their studies during online teaching, learning and assessment. We looked at the way in which the students used their social capital to cope and also how they leveraged their self-agency and socio-ecological iterations to adapt in order to succeed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of Resilient Theory is consistent with how others have used it. For example, Sommer, Howell and Hadley (2016) used it to analyse how to stay positive and build strength during organisational crises and Duchek, Raetz and Scheuch (2020) used it to explore the role of diversity in organisational resilience. More specifically, the theory was used by Cassidy (2015) on the nature of the association between academic self-efficacy and academic resilience to develop an intervention meant to promote resilience in students. Additionally, Mwangi *et al.* (2015) focused on the relationship between academic resilience and academic achievement among secondary school students in Kenya. This evidence points to the importance of the Resilient Theory as a theoretical lens in understanding students' epistemic access and success.

5. Methodology

This study adopted the qualitative research approach, where a case study research design was used. Since the study intended to serve as an instrument to inform diverse stakeholders such as researchers, policy makers, students and lecturers, we adopted a single-instrumental

case study (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). It was used to explore strategies that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds use to succeed in their studies during the COVID-19 pandemic at a South African university. We found the design suitable to understand the experiences of participants from their own viewpoint (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). It also helped us to interact and gain nuanced insights on the way in which students coped with and adapted to the COVID-19 pandemic challenges.

5.1 Sampling

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 18 participants from the School of Education at the University of Limpopo. This is a sampling strategy where participants are selected because of their potential to provide data relevant to the research question (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Applying purposive sampling, the sample was divided into four categories. The first category was made up of 10 students, designated as S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9 and S10. The second consisted of 2 members of the administrative staff, AS1 and AS2. The third category comprised 4 members of the academic staff, labelled as AC1, AC2, AC3 and AC4. The last category included 2 members of the support staff (residence and academic writing), referred to as SS1 and SS2. The reason for there being 18 participants was because those eighteen were deemed appropriate to provide the required data to answer the research questions.

The composition of the student sample had to meet the following five criteria: First, they had to be receiving financial aid through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) in the final year of the programme. The NSFAS criterion was important because currently it is regarded as a measure by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for students who come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds (Jackson, 2002). Second, they were supposed to have come from quintile 1, 2 or 3 schools. The quintile system of schools advocates for a funding system that promotes equity, which means that schools that are well resourced receive less money from the national government, while poorly resourced schools are allocated more money. Schools classified as quintile 1, 2 or 3 are less resourced (Mwabu & Schultz, 1996). Third, they had to come from a township or a rural village area. This was a measure of their being from disadvantaged backgrounds. Fourth, they had to have succeeded in their studies, and not to have repeated a subject in their studies. This was important because we wanted only students who were successful, despite the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fifth, they had to be well-balanced in terms of gender and residence type. The residence type question sought to find out the experiences of those living in the university residences and those who lived in the university neighbourhood because they face different challenges; for example, those off campus often experience a lack of electricity which the campus residents do not. This fifth criterion is an important one as it is high on the agenda for the transformation of higher education in South Africa in pursuit of social justice and equity (Department of Education, 1997). This was achieved by using the purposive sampling strategy where the academic records were perused to identify successful students by gender.

The administrative staff were selected based on having direct experience with the students' access and throughput. They provided us with the data related to the profiles of students. We were then able to select those who succeeded in terms of academic performance. The administrative staff also had to have had at least two years' experience working at the university. This level of experience was deemed necessary as they would

be able to provide data regarding how students used their services for support. Academic staff had to be associated with the programmes for which the selected students were registered. These were important for the supplying of data related to the students' academic performance in the lecture halls and laboratories. The support staff had to have had at least two years' experience of working with students in their various capacities. This category was important for supplying data on how student support services (library, computer centre, counselling) were used by the students.

5.2 Data construction

Data were constructed through four datasets as follows:

Dataset 1: Data on the profile of the School of Education was constructed by collating data on the academic and administrative staff, the curriculum orientation, the overall instructional programme, the formal access arrangements for students and staff, the student numbers (size) of the school, the student distribution by gender and the broad philosophy of the school in terms of what it sees as its distinctive mission and identity. This data came from a combination of interviews with the academic, administrative, support staff, students and the relevant school documents, such as school calendar (Document A) and academic records (Document B). These documents were important to distinguish between the profiles of students who came from disadvantaged backgrounds and those who did not. For example, the documentation was used to distinguish between those who qualified for NSFAS and those who did not. They also helped us to select those who were successful and those who were not (from academic records: Document B).

Dataset 2: Sampled students were interviewed individually using a semi-structured interview protocol that covered the three research foci of the study (experience, engagement and effects) and the three cultural domains (institutional, academic, student) that frame the investigation. In line with our theoretical framework (process and outcomes) and as a response to the research questions, the interview dataset helped us to identify nuances in the students' teaching and learning experiences as well as to explore their engagement with their peers, lecturers and support staff, and the effect thereof. Of specific importance for this study, was an understanding of their biography/background and the implications of campus experience.

Dataset 3: School administration staff were individually interviewed to determine the formal arrangements for access and service as well as the collective experiences of student problems, needs, challenges and concerns from the point of view of the administrative staff. This evidence was meant to triangulate the data to explain experiences of the student-administration encounter and the extent to which this interface facilitates or frustrates academic access and success.

Dataset 4: School academic staff were interviewed as well to determine their understanding of the student experience and their enumeration of the obstacles to student progression within the academic sphere. This data provided a lecturer's perspective on the student encounter with the teaching and learning context of a particular school and how lecturers identified the problems and their resolution in academic terms.

5.3 Data analysis

De Casterlé *et al.* (2012) argue that qualitative data analysis can be a complex, laborious and time-consuming process. This is due to the need to follow specific steps in summarising the

constructed data. First, we followed Miles and Huberman's (2014) recommendation that the process of data analysis should follow three concurrent processes, namely, data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing or verification. Thus, we reread the data transcripts closely several times until we had distilled what we found to be manageable data. We then coded the data on a data matrix. According to Miles and Huberman (2014), codes are tags or labels that are assigned to the documents or segments of documents (i.e., paragraphs, sentences or words) to help catalogue key concepts while preserving the context in which these concepts occur. The coding process included development, finalisation and application of the code structure. Using codes, we examined what was articulated, that is the content and how it was said, i.e. the language usage. From the process of coding we kept moving back and forth between data analysis and the literature, and that helped us to develop four themes.

Using the Resilient Theory, we could make meaning out of emerging themes, as Azungah (2018) advises, and we were enabled to merge the empirical evidence from the data with theoretical explanations (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). This oscillation between the past literature on epistemic success and the collected data to develop themes helped us to answer the research question. Thus, the past literature helped us to leverage data analysis on Resilient Theory. Therefore, we were able to distil the essence, meanings and norms, order, patterns and rules that led us to the following four themes: Challenges encountered regarding access to teaching and learning, challenges encountered regarding success, strategies that students use to deal with the challenges, support that students get to deal with the challenges and lessons learnt from their experiences. These themes were derived from the research questions and the data constructed.

5.4 Ethical considerations

Data for this article comes from a larger study project: Understanding epistemic access and success of historically disadvantaged students in South African universities (REC-01-155-2019) that was approved by the Faculty of Humanities Research Ethics Committee at the University of Johannesburg. Different sites were used to collect data, including the University of Limpopo. For this reason, the University of Limpopo gave gatekeeper permission.

Regarding ethical issues, we considered the following: informed consent, confidentiality, discontinuance, anonymity, protection from harm and data management. The participants were given informed consent forms to complete. This was done before the research process commenced. They were also informed that they were at liberty to withdraw from the study should they have felt uncomfortable at any time. Additionally, their identities were kept anonymous. We also promised that the data would be used for research purposes only. Furthermore, we ensured that our interaction with them was not in any way harmful to them. For example, we observed social distancing by using telephone and online discussion with the participants in order to adhere to COVID-19 protocols. Finally, the data were secured for future use at the University of Johannesburg archives and anonymised at the site where the study was conducted. This was because the research was conducted by the University of Johannesburg, while the University of Limpopo was just the research field.

5.5 Trustworthiness of the research

The trustworthiness of a study plays an important role in ensuring the integrity of a study (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2011). In this study, we undertook five steps (credibility, transferability, dependability, conformability and subjectivity) to ensure the trustworthiness of our findings.

This was done as follows: To ensure the credibility of the study, we went back to the participants for member-checking after the transcription of the interviews. We read the transcripts to them to ascertain the correctness of the way in which transcripts were captured and asked them to confirm or negate. In instances where there were discrepancies, transcripts were rephrased. There was also continuous interaction between the participants and the researchers until the finalisation of the study.

Transferability of the findings was done by ensuring that we constructed rich and more nuanced data. For example, we ensured that their responses were thick enough by probing and rephrasing questions to give a clear picture of issues related to epistemic access and success. The participants' responses helped us to obtain detailed information on the context. This helped us to maximise the transferability of the findings of the study to other contexts.

Regarding the dependability of the study, certain steps were taken to ensure whether another researcher who followed the same steps could arrive at comparable findings. To this end, we used transparent approaches by using more than one method of data construction (interviews and documents) as described earlier. Regarding conformability and subjectivity, we had to ensure that the findings and conclusions are based on the data collected from the participants and not our own extrapolation.

6. Findings

The findings reveal that students encountered diverse challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, but were able to overcome them. They used various strategies to succeed, which provided lessons to be learned going forward. These become clear in the discussion below.

6.1 Challenges encountered by students regarding access to learning

We were guided by our research questions to develop themes as explained under the data analysis section. Therefore, the first theme was based on the first question that focused on the challenges encountered by students in accessing higher education. The first issue noted by students and staff members was regarding the access to teaching and learning using online facilities. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, it found that universities, similar to many other sectors, were unprepared. The university staff needed to find or create alternative ways to respond to the challenges. For example, lecturers had to switch to online delivery. Most historically disadvantaged universities were unfamiliar with online teaching and learning. The staff and students had to adjust to new ways of doing things (Maphalala, Khumalo & Khumalo, 2018). The unpreparedness of staff and students posed serious challenges. Lecturers struggled to prepare lessons for online teaching. In some instances, they needed guidance from students on how to use online learning facilities such as the Blackboard platform. One lecturer (AC2) when asked about his experience in the use of Blackboard to be able to teach, responded by indicating that:

It is very difficult. It is very confusing because it is a combination of stuff and the culture. And mostly, it is ... because the curriculum... you know you get it at a later stage because you missed a lot of stages because of the lack of training in the use of facilities such as the Blackboard. So, we had to learn a lot of things in a short space of time.

The students confirmed that lecturers encountered challenges with online teaching. In some instances, staff requested them to assist them in the use of online facilities. One student (S9) said:

Most of the lecturers were not familiar with this new mode of teaching online. They had to adjust. It took them a very long time to adjust. They could not even present a lecture using a blackboard. So we had to work under pressure and it was not a good thing at all. We had to accommodate our lecturers instead of them accommodating us. But even now some of our supervisors are still struggling. They would tell us that they are old, they do not know these things, referring to Blackboard.

These responses by the lecturer and the student highlight the challenges that students encountered regarding access to teaching and learning because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This finding is consistent with the observation by Badat (2020) who points out that online teaching and learning poses a big threat to access in higher education in South Africa, especially for students who come from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Another set of challenges that filtered from the data was on the availability of mobile data and in some cases network coverage. One student (S4) succinctly expressed it as such:

We who come from rural areas, had challenges with internet connectivity. We were unable to log into the system and consequently, could not attend some of the classes. The geographic location of where we are staying suffers from unstable network connection. To remain connected, we had to move from one room to the other or move outside the house. This was also compounded by lack of mobile data because it is very expensive for us, which affected our learning.

This response shows that the pandemic affected students differently. Those who came from disadvantaged backgrounds had difficulties in gaining access to online learning. The geographic area in which their homes are situated did not serve as a conducive learning environment. Students who live in deep rural areas are often confronted with this type of challenge. This finding is in line with Aini *et al.* (2020), who observed that students using e-learning tools face a variety of challenges, including internet connectivity. They also found that students had no e-learning system support. The challenge is more acute in rural areas than in urban areas. Consequently, students in rural areas are likely to remain behind in terms of access to the curriculum than those in urban areas. This is likely to perpetuate inequalities. This was compounded by the lack of policy guidelines on teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.2 Challenges encountered by students regarding success

Other than the access challenges, students also experienced challenges that affected their success. One such challenge was regarding assessment (Motsa, 2021). Staff members seemed not to have been prepared for online assessment strategies. The students, on the other hand, complained about having to switch to typing essays on Blackboard from the conventional handwritten essays. They indicated that typing slowed their pace in answering questions, resulting in their being unable to finish their assessment tasks timeously. One student (S3) captured this as follows:

We used to fight with our lecturers with regard to the duration of time allocated for the exam. We were not familiar with typing when writing a test. I remember when writing an economics test, 80% of us could not finish. When we told the lecturer, he just said: "that is nothing". They were not prepared to accommodate us on assessments. They also did not give us enough time to prepare for the exams.

From this excerpt, we can see that the pandemic posed a huge challenge to the academic programmes at universities, especially in terms of teaching, learning and assessment for the

lecturers and students. This disrupted the academic plan as outlined in the university calendar at the sample at the University of Limpopo (Document A).

It is also worth noting that the use of online learning destroyed the peer-to-peer collaboration amongst students. The social distancing regulation made it difficult for them to use group work in their studies. The participants argued that social distancing worked against their usual way of doing things such as studying together to assist one another. However, contrary to this assertion, one student (S1) stated emphatically that: "We do gather together. That is how we help each other with university work such as group discussions and assignment writing". This appears to have been in contravention of the COVID-19 pandemic regulations. This observation may imply that students from disadvantaged backgrounds improvised in various ways, including stepping out of the bounds of the pandemic regulation in order to succeed. This is in line with the findings by Varol *et al.* (2021) who observed that students were willing to adhere to the COVID-19 pandemic regulations; but not always, especially not when it stood between them and success.

6.3 Strategies used to mitigate challenges encountered on access and success

In answering the sub-question on "How do they deal with these challenges?" Our findings revealed that several strategies needed to be adopted. We found that the lecturers and students collaborated to mitigate the adverse experiences in enhancing access and success during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in the use of online technologies. They had to work together to enhance access and success. One student (S5) was emphatic by saying that:

We had to work well in collaboration with our lecturers. They were understanding and tried to accommodate us where we did not understand. In instances where we missed classes due to lack of connectivity or internet instability, they recorded lessons which we could have access to after the class. They also sent us notes that we were able to use. But when we write tests, they usually do not give additional time. One of the lecturers (AC4) corroborated the student's response by saying:

We work well with the students. We do provide notes for them. Those who miss classes due to a variety of reasons, including network problems, are provided with recordings of lessons and notes. When they write a test, we do give them additional time due to unstable network connectivity. We also teach during weekends and after hours to accommodate all the students.

The increased collaboration between students and lecturers is a vital strategy for students' access and success. Regarding assessment, contrary to what one of the students indicated earlier, one lecturer (AC1) revealed that students were given additional time to accommodate the challenges that students experienced during assessment, for example, typing. Students claimed that they were not used to answering examinations through typing, and therefore needed more time to do so. The differences might be due to the variation in their interpretation of the concept of additional time. This finding is in line with what Rowan and Galanakis (2020) observed, namely, that increased collaboration between stakeholders held the key to mitigating adverse effects on schooling during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, Toquero (2020) outlines additional strategies, which include the migration of students from campuses to their homes to avoid the spike in infections and scaling up lecturers' training for online learning and teaching strategies.

The students indicated that they had developed several survival strategies. For example, concerning the lack of network connectivity, they had to return to their places of residence near the university where there is strong internet connectivity. Those who are far from the university, indicated that they survived by moving from one spot to another in search of strong connectivity. One student (S1) said: "We move from one spot to another. For example, I move from the garage to the living room and ultimately outside the house until I find an appropriate spot". They also help each other by working in groups even when writing a test (S1). Our findings confirmed the relevance of the Resilience Theory in this context and have provided a robust analysis of its use. The theory stresses the survival of an individual who is facing adverse circumstances. That is, how an individual can bounce back through self-agency after experiencing an adversity in life. The analysis shows that the students overlooked their negative circumstances (lack of resources such as computers, textbooks and proper accommodation) to beat the odds and succeed in their studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has enabled us to reveal that, despite their impoverished backgrounds, these students have succeeded during the COVID-19 pandemic, as evidenced by their academic records (Document B).

6.4 Support provided for students

In this theme, we highlight the support that the university provides to enable epistemic access and success during the COVID-19 pandemic. This support can be divided into two categories, namely, the support from administrative staff and the support from the support staff.

As a result of the pandemic, students had to be sent home and this made it difficult for all students to physically access help from the university, especially from the administrative staff. For example, in a case where a student wanted to change courses and/or add a course on the study programme, it was not easy to do so. This became a barrier because it would not be possible to access such help. Consequently, there arose a need for an alternative way of supporting them. The university administrative staff member (AS2) enthusiastically explained the alternative supporting strategy by stating that:

We have opened a school-based email address, as the volume of individual emails became too cumbersome to handle efficiently. This approach facilitated the interaction between students and us. However, the school email option had its own limitation in that some students could not communicate effectively due to language barriers in expressing what their problems actually were. Consequently, in some cases, it was difficult to assist the students as they could not be easily decoded.

This finding reveals the challenges the administrative staff encountered in their effort to support the students whilst they were away from campus. The challenges revolve around the limitations in the use of emails and the difficulty in decoding what students were communicating. This finding has also been revealed in a study by Zhang *et al.* (2020). They found that to appropriately deal with the issue of many emails and to still efficiently communicate with the students, there was a need for information on the superhighway (this is an extensive electronic network appropriate for the rapid transfer of information).

In addition to the support by administrative staff, there was also support from the support staff (academic excellence centre, counselling). Their role in creating an enabling environment for epistemic access and the success of students has proved critical. This is evidenced by the use of some of the interventions to deal with challenges faced by the students. They provided support and counselling to staff and students who were self-quarantining. In some cases, they provided sanitisers, masks and basic information necessary for dealing with the

COVID-19 pandemic regulations and peer education. This kind of support and counselling was necessary for the students to help them be strong and continue to access classes. This support was critical for success in their studies during the COVID-19 pandemic. One support staff (SS2) member captured their role succinctly by stating that:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, we counselled a number of students who had different challenges such as anxiety and depression due to the loss of a family member who had succumbed to the disease. Also, there were those who tested positive and were afraid that they were going to die. Furthermore, there were those who struggled to cope with their studies because they are by nature visual and kinaesthetic students.

The above comment by the support staff member shows that most students were emotionally and psychologically affected by the pandemic. Counselling was especially important for support and motivation to enable students to cope with attending classes, having access to lessons and ultimately succeed (Govender, Reddy & Bhagwan, 2021). This sentiment was corroborated by one of the participating students (S3) who remarked that:

Peer education helped me to know people, meet different people, know them and talk to them. It helped me to be brave and outgoing and interact more. Before then I was a shy and closed person. I never raised my hand in class for the past three years. They taught me about health issues such as teenage pregnancy and other health related issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic, similar to any other pandemic, requires group therapy as one of the strategies to conquer its psychological and social effects (Sheraton *et al.*, 2020). As Brusadelli *et al.* (2020) indicate, group therapy is important as it could be done online, where participants can support each other to cope with adverse circumstances. Thus, it could be done while observing the COVID-19 pandemic health protocols. From the preceding response, one can sense that the students felt more empowered when working in groups (Orrù *et al.*, 2020; Mpango *et al.*, 2020).

Furthermore, the university supported the students in numerous ways, including with the provision of mobile data bundles. Students indicated that this was helpful support as some of them did not have access to these resources. This was confirmed by one of the students (S7), who stressed:

We experienced challenges with mobile data and had to move back to campus so that we could make use of the university computers and Wi-Fi. The Wi-Fi enabled us to form WhatsApp groups, which provided us with an opportunity to form peer group learning. We were able to communicate faster with fellow students. For example, through video clips and live chat functions, we were able to make use of learning apps to make learning easier. Furthermore, the university provided accommodation for us, which offered great relief.

Providing these facilities helped students to form study groups, which is in line with the tenets of Resilient Theory. Thus, we used the theory to understand how these narratives about student support enabled epistemic access and success. As already indicated, the Resilient Theory posits that epistemic access and success is dependent on the individual's adaptation to an environment that has an intersection of ecological support involving family, peer support and social structures (Rutter, 2013; Garmezy, 1987). In other words, epistemic access and success is broader than physical entry as espoused by Morrow (2009).

7. Discussion

The study sought to explore how students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds have access to and succeed in their studies at institutions of higher learning especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds had several challenges regarding access and success during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Concerning access, the challenges included difficulties with online teaching and learning due to the unpreparedness of staff and students, the lack of availability of mobile data and network coverage, especially for students who are in deep rural areas. This is in accordance with the observation by Badat (2020) when he remarks that online teaching is fraught with difficulties and challenges. The observation is also consistent with other studies elsewhere. In the Philippines, Agung, Surtikanti and Quinones (2020) found that availability, access and sustainability of an internet connection remain a challenge for individual students, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The implication is that lack of connectivity may reinforce disparities between students who have stable connectivity and those who have challenges with connectivity.

Regarding success, the study revealed that students experienced challenges that affected their success. The challenges centred mainly around online assessment. These included: typing of assignments and the inability to work in groups when doing projects and laboratory experiments. However, despite these challenges, students' narratives during interviews showed how they used their resilience to survive and succeed. This finding is in line with the observation by Dewart *et al.* (2020) who said that students encountered challenges in running their practical clinical assessments because they could not be done online. Kaup *et al.* (2020) also highlight the difficulties of using online assessment. However, they went further to propose a solution to the challenge by indicating that universities can use Proctorio and a Google Chrome extension that monitors students when they write exams. Mseleku (2020) indicates that a major problem is on how to avoid plagiarism during examinations. Maddumapatabandi and Gamage (2020) went into detail by indicating the major challenge with online assessment is that the absence of invigilators and supervisors make it difficult to ensure the legitimacy and reliability of the examinations, whilst at the same time maintaining the integrity of assessment methods. The next and the most important issue is how students mitigate against the challenges identified.

In dealing with the challenges identified, the students employed varied strategies such as collaboration with one another, flexibility in teaching and learning, individual innovation and socio-ecological systems. In line with the Resilient Theory, the strategies enabled the students to access and succeed despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

8. Implications of the study

These findings have several implications for universities, researchers and policy makers. For universities the study has laid bare the inequalities among students. Our data have revealed that some students have no access to resources such as laptops and network connectivity that are often taken for granted. There is a need for universities to be more creative and innovative in maximising the use of technology in teaching and learning. The pandemic has amplified the need for student support, especially for those coming from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, in order to improve their epistemic access and success.

Additionally, this study has underscored the importance of self-agency as a cornerstone to adapting to adverse situations brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. There is also a need to improve quality assurance mechanisms on assessment. Lastly, it should be noted that even though this study is not generalisable to a wider population, the implications espoused here are crucial for the South African higher education system. This could help to enhance critical pedagogies and community partnerships by allowing students to be innovative and creative to access online teaching and learning, and by fostering community partnerships with their peers, support staff, the academic and administrative staff as a leverage for their access and success in their studies.

9. Conclusion

The study sought to explore strategies that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds use to succeed during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was done by using the Resilient Theory as a lens for the study. We found that students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds experienced challenges regarding access and success at university during the COVID-19 pandemic. Access challenges included lack of mobile data and problems with network connectivity. Despite the challenges, the students adapted to the situation in order to succeed. This was done by employing different survival strategies as outlined in the findings. This implies that contrary to the Bourdean deficit theory, regarding students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds, they can still have epistemic access and success during adverse circumstances such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

10. Acknowledgements

The authors would like to acknowledge the Ali Mazrui Centre for Education Studies at the University of Johannesburg for funding the study.

References

- Adnan, M. & Anwar, K. 2020. Online learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic: Students' perspectives. *Online Submission*, 2(1): 45-51. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPSP.2020261309>
- Agung, A.S.N., Surtikanti, M.W. & Quinones, C.A. 2020. Students' perception of online learning during COVID-19 pandemic: A case study on the English students of STKIP Pamane Talino. *SOSHUM: Jurnal Sosial Dan Humaniora*, 10(2): 225-235. <https://doi.org/10.31940/soshum.v10i2.1316>
- Aini, Q., Budiarto, M., Putra, P.O.H. & Rahardja, U. 2020. Exploring e-learning challenges during the global COVID-19 pandemic: A review. *Jurnal Sistem Informasi*, 16(2): 57-65. <https://doi.org/10.21609/jsi.v16i2.1011>
- Alexander, R. 2008. Education for all, the quality imperative and the problem of pedagogy. consortium for research on educational access, transitions and equity (CREATE) pathways to access. *Research Monograph No. 20*: 1-60.
- Archer, M.S. & Archer, M.S. 1995. *Realist social theory: The morphogenetic approach*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511557675>
- Aristovnik, A., Keržič, D., Ravšelj, D., Tomaževič, N. & Umek, L. 2020. Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on life of higher education students: A global perspective. *Sustainability*, 12(20): 8438. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12208438>

- Azubuike, O.B., Adegboye, O. & Quadri, H. 2021. Who gets to learn in a pandemic? Exploring the digital divide in remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Research Open*, 2: 100022. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedro.2020.100022>
- Azungah, T. 2018. Qualitative research: deductive and inductive approaches to data analysis. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 18(4): 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-D-18-00035>
- Badat, S. 2005. South Africa: Distance higher education policies for access, social equity, quality, and social and economic responsiveness in a context of the diversity of provision. *Distance Education*, 26(2): 183-204. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587910500168843>
- Badat, S. 2014. South African higher education in the 20th year of democracy: Context, achievements and key challenges. Pretoria: HESA.
- Badat, S. 2020. Reproduction, transformation and public South African higher education during and beyond Covid-19. *Transformation: Critical perspectives on Southern Africa*, 104(1): 24-42. <https://doi.org/10.1353/trn.2020.0030>
- Bernstein, B. 2000. *Pedagogy, symbolic control, and identity*. London: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Bozalek, V., Garraway, J. & McKenna, S. 2011. Case studies of epistemological access in foundation/extended curriculum programme studies in South Africa. *Cape Town: Pearson, ISBN, 978-970*.
- Brusadelli, E., Ferrari, L., Benetti, M., Bruzzese, S., Tonelli, G.M. & Gullo, S. 2020. Online supportive group as social intervention to face COVID lockdown. A qualitative study on psychotherapists, psychology trainees and students, and community people. *Research in Psychotherapy: Psychopathology, Process, and Outcome*, 23(3):279-290. <https://doi.org/10.4081/ripppo.2020.501>
- Cassidy, S. 2015. Resilience building in students: The role of academic self-efficacy. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 6: 1781. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2015.01781>
- Costandius, E., Nell, I., Alexander, N., McKay, M., Blackie, M., Malgas, R. & Setati, E. 2018. #FeesMustFall and decolonising the curriculum: Stellenbosch University students' and lecturers' reactions. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32(2): 65-85. <https://doi.org/10.20853/32-2-2435>
- Council on Higher Education (CHE). 2010. Access and throughput in higher education: Three case studies. *High Education Monitor*, 9:1-200.
- Cross, M. & Atinde, V. 2015. The pedagogy of the marginalized: Understanding how historically disadvantaged students negotiate their epistemic access in a diverse university environment. *Review of Education, Pedagogy, and Cultural Studies*, 37(4): 308-325. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10714413.2015.1065617>
- Cross, M. 2018. *Steering epistemic access in higher education in South Africa, institutional dilemmas*. Buenos Aires, Argentina: CLACSO. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvn96g5c>
- de Casterlé, B.D., Gastmans, C., Bryon, E. & Denier, Y. 2012. QUAGOL: A guide for qualitative data analysis. *International Journal of Nursing Studies*, 49(3): 360-371. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2011.09.012>

- Department of Education (DoE). 1995. *White Paper on Education and Training, Notice 196 of 1995*. Cape Town: Parliament of the Republic of South Africa.
- Department of Education (DoE). 1997. *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education*. Pretoria: Department of Education.
- Department of Higher Education and Training (DoE). 2013. *White Paper for Post-School education and training: Building an expanded, effective and integrated post-school system*. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.
- Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). 2013. Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) Coordination Policy. 31 March. *Government Gazette*, 609(39876): 1-24.
- Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET). 2017. *The Articulation Policy for the Post-School Education and Training system of South Africa*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Dewart, G., Corcoran, L., Thirsk, L. & Petrovic, K. 2020. Nursing education in a pandemic: Academic challenges in response to COVID-19. *Nurse Education Today*, 92: 104471. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2020.104471>
- Diluxe, M., Duga, A.L., Girinshuti, G., Ahmadi, A. & Lucero-Prisno III, D.E. 2021. Eswatini's formidable task of fighting against COVID-19. *Razi International Medical Journal*, 1(1).
- Dlamini, R. & Ndzinisa, N. 2020. Universities trailing behind: unquestioned epistemological foundations constraining the transition to online instructional delivery and learning. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 34(6): 52-64. <https://doi.org/10.20853/34-6-4073>
- Duchek, S., Raetze, S. & Scheuch, I. 2020. The role of diversity in organizational resilience: a theoretical framework. *Business Research*, 13(2): 387-423. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40685-019-0084-8>
- Du Plooy, L. & Zilindile, M. 2014. Problematising the concept of epistemological access with regard to foundation phase education towards quality schooling. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 4(1): 187-201. <https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v4i1.51>
- Engeström, Y. 1999. Activity theory and individual and social transformation. *Perspectives on Activity Theory*, 19(38): 19-30. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812774.003>
- Essop, A. 2020. *The changing size and shape of the higher education system in South Africa 2005-2017*. Johannesburg: Ali Mazrui Centre for Higher Education Studies.
- Gamede, T 2006. The biography of "access" as an expression of human rights in South African education policies. Unpublished PhD thesis. Pretoria: University of Pretoria.
- Garmezy, N. 1987. Stress, competence, and development: Continuities in the study of schizophrenic adults, children vulnerable to psychopathology, and the search for stress-resistant children. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 57(2): 59-174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1987.tb03526.x>
- Govender, N., Reddy, P. & Bhagwan, R. 2021. Academic and psychological challenges of Health Students during the COVID-19 pandemic: A University of Technology perspective. *Perspectives in Education*, 39(3): 44-61. <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v39.i3.5>
- Jackson, R. 2002. The national student financial aid scheme of South Africa (NSFAS): How and why it works. *The Welsh Journal of Education*, 11(1): 82-94. <https://doi.org/10.16922/wje.11.1.7>

- Kalisch, R., Baker, D.G., Basten, U., Boks, M.P., Bonanno, G.A., Brummelman, E., Chmitorz, A., Fernández, G., Fiebach, C.J., Galatzer-Levy, I. & Geuze, E. 2017. The resilience framework as a strategy to combat stress-related disorders. *Nature Human Behaviour*, 1(11): 784-790. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-017-0200-8>
- Kaup, S., Jain, R., Shivalli, S., Pandey, S. & Kaup, S. 2020. Sustaining academics during COVID-19 pandemic: the role of online teaching-learning. *Indian Journal of Ophthalmology*, 68(6): 1220-1221. https://doi.org/10.4103/ijo.IJO_1241_20
- Lavazza, A. & Farina, M. 2020. The role of experts in the Covid-19 pandemic and the limits of their epistemic authority in democracy. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 8: 356. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2020.00356>
- Leedy, D.P. & Ormrod, E.J. 2013. *Strategies for analysing quantitative data. Practical research: Planning and design*. London: Pearson.
- Le Grange, L. 2020. Could the Covid-19 pandemic accelerate the uberfication of the university? *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 34(4): 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.20853/34-4-4071>
- Leibowitz, B. & Bozalek, V. 2014. Access to higher education in South Africa. *Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning*, 16(1): 91-109. <https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.16.1.91>
- Lewin, T. & Mawoyo, M. 2014. *Student access and success: Issues and interventions in South African universities*. Cape Town: The South African Institute for Advancement.
- Lincoln Y.S., Lynham, S.A & Guba, E.G. 2011. Paradigmatic controversies, contradictions, and emerging confluences, revisited. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds). *The SAGE handbook of qualitative research*, fourth edition (pp. 97-128). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Lonka, K., Ketonen, E. & Vermunt, J.D. 2021. University students' epistemic profiles, conceptions of learning, and academic performance. *Higher Education*, 81(4): 775-793. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00575-6>
- Maatuk, A.M., Elberkawi, E.K., Aljawarneh, S., Rashaideh, H. & Alharbi, H. 2021. The COVID-19 Pandemic and E-learning: Challenges and Opportunities from the Perspective of Students and Instructors." *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, 1-18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-021-09274-2>
- Maddumapatabandi, T.D. & Gamage, K.A. 2020. Novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic: common challenges and response from higher education providers. *Journal of Applied Learning and Teaching*, 3(2): 1-11.
- Manik, S. 2015. Calibrating the barometer: Student access and success in South African higher education institutions. *Alternation*, 17: 226-244.
- Manram, R. & Maistry, S.M. 2018. Enabling wellbeing and epistemological access through an authentic assessment intervention: A case study of a higher education programme. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 32(6): 305-325. <https://doi.org/10.20853/32-6-2982>
- Maphalala, M., Khumalo, M. & Khumalo, P.N. 2018. Student teachers' experiences of the emergency transition to online learning during the Covid-19 Lockdown at a South African university. *Perspectives in Education*, 39(3): 30-43.
- Maphosa, C., Sikhwari, T.D., Ndebele, C. & Masehela, M. 2014. Interrogating factors affecting students' epistemological access in a South African University. *Anthropologist*, 17(2): 409-420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09720073.2014.11891450>

- Maton, K. 2013. *Knowledge and knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*. London: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203885734>
- Masutha, M. & Naidoo, R. 2021. Stories from the margins. In M.K. Ralarala, L.S. Hassan & R. Naidoo (Eds.). *Knowledge beyond colour lines: towards repurposing knowledge generation in South African higher education*, (pp.59-77). Belville: UWC Press. <https://doi.org/10.52779/9781990995057/04>
- Miles, M.B., Huberman, A.M. & Saldana, J. 2014. *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. London: Sage.
- Morrow, W.E. 2009. *Bounds of democracy: Epistemological access in higher education*. Cape Town: HSRC.
- Motala, S., Sayed, Y. & De Kock, T. 2021. Epistemic decolonisation in reconstituting higher education pedagogy in South Africa: the student perspective. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2021.1947225>
- Motsa, N.D. 2021. COVID-19: Understanding and responding to the educational implications for the vulnerable children of Eswatini. *Perspectives in Education*, 39(3):17-29. <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v39.i3.3>
- Mpango, R., Kalha, J., Shamba, D., Ramesh, M., Ngakongwa, F., Kulkarni, A., Korde, P., Nakku, J. & Ryan, G.K. 2020. Challenges to peer support in low-and middle-income countries during COVID-19. *Globalization and Health*, 16(1): 1-4. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-020-00622-y>
- Mseleku, Z. 2020. A literature review of e-learning and e-teaching in the era of Covid-19 pandemic. *SAGE*, 57(52): 588-597.
- Muller, J. 2014. Every picture tells a story: Epistemological access and knowledge. *Education as Change*, 18(2): 255-269. <https://doi.org/10.1080/16823206.2014.932256>
- Mwabu, G. & Schultz, T.P. 1996. Education returns across quantiles of the wage function: Alternative explanations for returns to education by race in South Africa. *The American Economic Review*, 86(2): 335-339.
- Mwangi C.N, Okatcha, F.M. Kinai, T.K. & Ireri, A.M. 2015. Relationship between academic resilience and academic achievement among secondary school students in Kiambu County, Kenya. *International Journal of School and Cognitive Psychology*, S2: 003. <https://doi.org/10.4172/2469-9837.1000S2003>
- Nel, C. & Kistner, L. 2009. The national senior certificate: Implications for access to higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education*, 23(5): 953-973. <https://doi.org/10.4314/sajhe.v23i5.48810>
- Nyamupangedengu, E. 2017. Investigating factors that impact the success of students in a higher education classroom: A case study. *Journal of Education*, 68: 113-130.
- Onwuegbuzie, A.J. & Leech, N.L. 2007. Sampling designs in qualitative research: Making the sampling process more public. *Qualitative Report*, 12(2): 238-254.
- Orrù, G., Rebecca, C., Gemignani, A. & Conversano, C., 2020. Psychological intervention measures during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Clinical Neuropsychiatry*, 17(2): 76-79. <https://doi.org/10.36131/CN20200208>.
- Pillay, P. 2020. Massification at universities of higher learning in South Africa. *Gender and Behaviour*, 18(1): 14784-14799.

- Rowan, N.J. & Galanakis, C.M. 2020. Unlocking challenges and opportunities presented by COVID-19 pandemic for cross-cutting disruption in agri-food and green deal innovations: Quo Vadis? *Science of the Total Environment*, 748: 1-15. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.scitotenv.2020.141362>
- Rutter, M. 2013. Annual research review: Resilience clinical implications. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 54(4): 474-487. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2012.02615.x>
- Sheraton, M., Deo, N., Dutt, T., Surani, S., Hall-Flavin, D. & Kashyap, R. 2020. Psychological effects of the COVID 19 pandemic on healthcare workers globally: A systematic review. *Psychiatry Research*, (292):113360. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.113360>
- Sommer, S.A., Howell, J.A. & Hadley, C.N. 2016. Keeping positive and building strength: the role of affect and team leadership in developing resilience during an organizational crisis. *Group and Organization Management*, 41(2): 172-202. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1059601115578027>
- Stake, R.E. 1995. *The art of case study research*. London: Sage.
- Theron, L.C. 2016. The everyday ways that school ecologies facilitate resilience: Implications for school psychologists. *School Psychology International*, 37(2): 87-103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0143034315615937>
- Timmermann, C. 2020. Epistemic ignorance, poverty and the COVID-19 pandemic. *Asian Bioethics Review*, 12(4): 519-527. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s41649-020-00140-4>
- Tjønneland, E.N. 2017. Crisis at South Africa's universities – what are the implications for future cooperation with Norway? *CMI Brief*, 16(3): 2-4.
- Toquero, C.M. 2020. Challenges and opportunities for higher education amid the COVID-19 pandemic: The Philippine context. *Pedagogical Research*, 5(4): 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.29333/pr/7947>
- Varol, T., Schneider, F., Mesters, I., Crutzen, R., Ruiter, R.A., Kok, G. & ten Hoor, G. 2021. University students' adherence to the COVID-19-guidelines: A qualitative study on facilitators and barriers. *Health Psychology Bulletin*, 5(1): 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.5334/hpb.32>
- Yin, R.K. 2018. *Case study research and applications*. London: Sage.
- Zhang, W., Wang, Y., Yang, L. & Wang, C. 2020. Suspending classes without stopping learning: China's education emergency management policy in the COVID-19 outbreak. *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, 13(55): 1-6. doi:10.3390/jrfm13030055.
- Werner, E.E. 2000. Protective factors and individual resilience. *Handbook of Early Childhood Intervention*, 2: 115-132. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511529320.008>