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Editorial

The academic world has undergone significant transformations as we navigated the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. The global pandemic has forced academic institutions to rapidly adopt new ways of teaching, learning and conducting research. In this editorial, we present a curated list of articles from various authors, highlighting different facets of the changes experienced in academic institutions.

In this issue of our academic journal, we present a collection of articles exploring various aspects of higher education during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These articles provide valuable insights into the challenges students and educators face and the strategies and solutions developed to address these challenges. The articles are presented under three themes: challenges and opportunities towards an engaged university during COVID-19; student wellbeing and belonging; student-staff participation, technology and praxis.

The first article, “Beckoning a new post-Covid higher education engagement agenda: lessons from Nelson Mandela university COVID-19 responses” considers challenges and opportunities towards an engaged university during COVID-19. Discussing how Nelson Mandela University’s community engagement initiatives were strengthened during the pandemic, highlighting the importance of community engagement as a priority for universities, even in emergencies.

The second theme is student-staff wellbeing and belonging. The articles under this theme include the second article, “Factors affecting students’ use of a data-free instant messenger for online peer tutoring: a large, undergraduate class at a historically disadvantaged university”. The article examines the factors that may impact student acceptance and use of a data-free instant messenger for online peer tutoring.

“Connection, desperation and disillusionment: Exploring student wellbeing at a university in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic” explores how students experienced wellbeing during the pandemic using Photovoice as methodology and highlights the importance of a sense of connection and resilience.



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“Students’ sense of belonging at a South African university during COVID-19” investigates the sense of belonging of undergraduate students during the pandemic and how the university responded to the crisis. The last article under this theme is “Cross-cultural collaboration through virtual teaming in higher education”. The article explores the value of virtual collaborative international learning programmes and the benefits of such programmes for staff and students from different countries and cultures.

Student-staff participation, technology and teaching praxis is the third theme. The first article under this theme is “University students’ participation during COVID-19 induced online learning in Zimbabwe’s universities and strategies for optimizing students’ participation”. The article identifies technological and pedagogical issues and proposes strategies for optimising participation and assessment while ensuring academic integrity. “Lessons learnt from teaching an Applied Drama and Theatre pedagogy online in a digitally divided South Africa” highlights the challenges of adapting and transforming pedagogy for online learning during the pandemic.

The next article, “Technology-driven proctoring: Validity, social justice and ethics in higher education”, examines the impact of digital proctoring on social justice, ethics, and validity during the pandemic and the importance of ensuring valid assessments that evaluate the concepts that we wish to assess. The article, “Flexible curriculum design for quantitative skills development: Building on the insights gained during COVID-19”, examines the impact of COVID-19 on curriculum design and delivery and how flexibility can lead to positive outcomes, including improved academic performance. The “Perceptions of pre-service teachers on breakout room micro-teaching with Zoom” article investigates pre-service teachers’ experiences with micro-teaching in Zoom’s breakout rooms.

“Student perspectives on the challenges of an online orientation at a large South African university during the COVID-19 pandemic” sheds light on the challenges of implementing an online orientation programme for first-year students and how universities can leverage online orientation to support students’ transition into the university environment. The last article under this theme is “Using WhatsApp-based mobile learning environments during abrupt switches to online learning: A duoethnographic account”. The article discusses the use of WhatsApp-based mobile learning environments in two South African higher education settings during abrupt switches to online learning.

We hope this selection of articles provides insights into the various aspects of the changing academic landscape and sparks conversations on how we can continue adapting and improving our practices.