

The higher education experiences of the first wave of Covid-19 infections in South Africa

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The novel coronavirus disease's (Covid-19) first wave in 2019, originated in Wuhan city of China and has spread rapidly around the world, sending billions of people into lockdown. The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared the coronavirus a pandemic. In light of the above statement about the spread of the first wave of Covid 19 infections, a growing number of national institutions of higher learning across South Africa and in different contexts experienced challenges - disruptions such as either postponed or cancelled all campus events such as workshops, conferences, graduations, sports and other academic activities. The higher education institutions such as universities and colleges are taking intensive measures to prevent and protect all students and staff members from this deadly and highly infectious disease. Faculty members were already in the process of transitioning to online teaching platforms.



SARS-CoV-2 has impacted every economic and social sector across the globe, including higher education in South Africa. Every student and staff member at a higher education institution has been affected in some way and to varying degrees; not one person will emerge from this catastrophe. It is impossible to predict every short and long-term impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, but we will experience the aftershocks for a long time to come. Here, I discuss some of these challenges – ranging from the undergraduate level to large research projects. At undergraduate and honours levels, several higher education institutions had to scramble to place study material online for students.

Out of necessity, contact universities had to develop innovative and flexible ways to offer both theory and practical components to students and find alternative forms of formative (and most likely summative) assessment. However, academic staff at contact universities typically have little, if any, experience or training in the pedagogy or delivery of online learning. Thus, academics with teaching responsibilities will have had to upskill and familiarise themselves quickly with online learning platforms and all that they entail, including increased administration. The shift to online teaching forces academics to truly interrogate and re-evaluate their curricula. It encourages a move away from 'rote learning' to focus more on problem-solving, critical thinking and applied understanding by using a holistic and integrated approach because traditional assessment techniques are no longer viable.



But in a country where a large percentage of students depend on financial assistance to make ends meet, where data costs are high and even a mobile connection may not be readily available to all and where devices such as laptop and computers are seen as a luxury, it is not surprising that contact universities have faced push-back from students who have argued that universities cannot expect them to continue with online learning without providing the necessary resources. Moreover, a limited number of educational websites have been made data-free to students, although the largest online platform (Blackboard and its various platforms) is not hosted in South Africa and, therefore, cannot currently be accessed for free. In addition, not all university staff owns a laptop or a personal home computer; neither do all have proper access to the internet from home. Even better-resourced universities, arguably best suited to address the challenges that this pandemic presents, had to grapple with making laptops available for staff and devising mechanisms to run its internal operations and administration remotely, as well as to find alternatives to traditional sit-down examinations for hundreds of thousands of students. Despite this rapid spread of the Covid-19 infections in South Africa. Cornerstone Institute was able to continue with her vibrant PGCE online programme in education. In the midst of a horrendous pandemic, their PGCE students were motivated, despite difficulties, as a result, we have seen a group of education students qualify to be teachers with their postgraduate certificates in education in 2020.

Despite the unknown realities of the Covid-19 second wave spread in 2021, Cornerstone Institute is continuing with online teaching and learning. For more information and to view some incredible degrees, higher certificates and short courses hosted by Cornerstone Institute, visit www.cornerstone.ac.za or go to its [Facebook page](#).

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