

Disrupting Norms: Reflections on the Challenges and Response Strategies in a Marketing Programme Due to COVID-19

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Abstract

The novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which was declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, has disrupted most economies and industries with higher education being no exception. Transitioning to online learning (OL) was one way most higher education institutions (HEIs) attempted to ensure both effective and safe learning. However, this was often a crisis response rather than a planned digital transformation. The aim of the current study was to explore the response strategies applied by the staff, and also the challenges experienced by the students, during the transition to OL in the Marketing programme at a South African university facing developing nation conditions and the disruption of educational norms. The study findings indicated that the students experienced infrastructure and connectivity challenges; exhibited deficient online competence; and experienced university and home-life challenges. The response strategies applied by the Marketing programme staff are discussed and evaluated in relation to these challenges. While the strategies assisted with some student challenges, other challenges persisted and recommendations for improvement are provided. The article represents a reflection on those challenges which are beyond the control of Marketing academics, but also strategies and new norms which academics may use in such times of disruption to educational norms.

Keywords: online learning; COVID-19; Marketing programme; South Africa

Introduction

The novel Coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which was declared a global pandemic on 11 March 2020, saw the closure of higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world, thereby affecting an estimated 1.8 billion students (Maslen 2020). These closures caused

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rapid changes to teaching and learning worldwide. HEIs had to adopt new norms in teaching and learning that ensured both effective and safe learning. Transitioning to online learning (OL) was one way most of these HEIs ensured a safe and healthy learning environment (Ali 2020). Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) define OL as a system in which the learning process is physically distant from instructors and provided by the use of technological devices and the internet. OL was viewed as a safe learning method during the COVID-19 pandemic period (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021).

The extant research shows a global increase in the number of countries forced by COVID-19 to transition to OL (Ali 2020; Combrink and Oosthuizen 2020; Crawford et al. 2020). This was evident across the globe (Ali 2020), not only in developed nations, such as the United States (Aguilera-Hermida 2020) and the United Kingdom (Crawford et al. 2020), but also developing countries, such as Malaysia (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021), India (Dhawan 2020), South Africa (Dube 2020; Mukuna and Aloka 2020) and Ghana (Agormeda et al. 2020). Feizi and Bakhtiarvand (2020) explain that the growing adoption of OL in HEIs is motivated by the increasing promotion of this learning strategy as an effective alternative in the COVID-19 pandemic period. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020), however, state that many HEIs adopted online teaching and learning as a crisis response rather than a planned digital transformation. Ribeiro (2020) suggests that OL is no longer just good to have, but rather a key strategy for surviving and enabling learning in a COVID-19-like pandemic – it has become the new norm.

Despite the advantages of online teaching and learning, the abrupt transition to OL because of COVID-19 could potentially cause harm to the quality of education (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021). Due to the prohibition of physical interaction between learners and instructors, HEIs that were previously not ready to move, or not in favour of online transition, had to adapt quickly to OL (Joshi et al. 2020). Before the enforced transition to OL, digital learning effectiveness had been claimed to be based on careful instructional design and planning (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020). Crisis response strategies, on the other hand, are often not based on careful design and planning and are fraught with challenges (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020).

The aim of the current study was to explore the response strategies applied by the staff, and also the challenges experienced by the students, during the transition to OL in the Marketing programme at a South African university facing developing nation conditions and the disruption of educational norms. Applying an interpretivist philosophy and qualitative, exploratory design, the research objectives were:

- to identify the strategies applied in the Marketing programme at the university to rapidly transition to OL as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic;
- to determine – from students – the challenges they experienced during the transition to OL; and
- to critically evaluate the university's response strategies in terms of addressing these challenges.

Thus, the study was a reflection on the new norms in higher education that resulted from a global pandemic, the challenges these presented, and the transitioning strategies that were more effective for marketing academics to use in such disruptive times.

Extant Literature on the Challenges of Transitioning Online

Transitioning to OL as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic, is challenging for both students (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021) and staff (Mukuna and Aloka 2020). Carrillo and Flores (2020) note that the abrupt transition to OL from contact learning created many challenges. The extant literature points to a wide array of student challenges as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Aboagye and Appiah 2021; Adedoyin and Soykan 2020; Al-Kumaim et al. 2021). According to Tamrat and Teferra (2020), the digital divide between continents exacerbates these challenges. These challenges are discussed and explained in the following subsections.

Lack of Infrastructure

Technological devices and the internet are an integral part of OL (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020). Students often access OL via their own mobile phones (Henaku 2020) or family members' mobile devices (Feizi and Bakhtiarvand 2020). These devices have limited access or capability such as not being able to install the needed applications (Henaku 2020). Students' concentration is also likely to be interrupted when they are accessing virtual classes using smartphones (Alqurshi 2020). In addition, the transition from contact learning to OL in developing countries is often hindered by electricity shortages (Subedi et al. 2020) which compound the challenges of studying and working from home (Laher et al. 2021).

Internet Connectivity

Internet connectivity challenges result in students' poor attendance and inability to maintain a presence in OL classes (Alqurshi 2020). The connectivity challenge is commonly stated among the major hindrances of OL (Feizi and Bakhtiarvand 2020; Henaku 2020) particularly in developing nations (Aboagye and Appiah 2021; Adnan and Anwar 2020). Unavailable or inferior mobile networks, especially in rural areas, deny students the required connection for OL (Dube 2020; Feizi and Bakhtiarvand 2020; Henaku 2020). The lack of internet connection results in challenges for communicating with tutors, lecturers or academic support staff (Aguilera-Hermida 2020) and creates anxiety for students (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021; Kearns 2012).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also resulted in increasing poverty levels, rendering poorer students or families unable to afford broadband connection or the purchase of sufficient data (Adnan and Anwar 2020; Laher et al. 2021). Consequently, learners fall further behind in their development (Corlatean 2020). Feizi and Bakhtiarvand (2020) acknowledge that some countries have provided support to address the high cost of data packages.

Complex Home Environment

The complex environment at home necessitates students' participation in household production, including cleaning and cooking (Henaku 2020). Students face challenges in balancing their personal life, work and school while living at home (Aguilera-Hermida 2020). Effective OL is impacted by the increasing inability to concentrate, given many distractions, including noise and household tasks (Aguilera-Hermida 2020). This new norm can cause socially depressed students, impacting their attitude towards OL (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021).

Time Management

OL is self-directed; students determine when they access and engage with online materials and the learning programme (LaTour and Noel 2021). The flexibility advantage of OL becomes a challenge because students have loads of time and flexibility such that there is never a "right time" for OL (Dhawan 2020). Laher et al. (2021) also report that the lack of structure and flexibility of OL resulted in students experiencing challenges with managing their time. This flexibility exacerbates procrastination in students because of concentration challenges. Combrink and Oosthuizen (2020) found that students lack time management skills and are unable to study effectively, and the transition to OL has worsened this challenge. According to Aguilera-Hermida (2020), students are inadequately prepared for balancing their personal, work and social lives with the new norms of learning.

Inadequate Online Content/Academic Curriculum Design

There is a lack of supporting resources (Aguilera-Hermida 2020) and quality digital content (Khlaif and Salha 2020), and the theoretical nature of online content often limits effective learning (Dhawan 2020). Laher et al. (2021) claim that the lack of human contact with lecturers and other students results in students experiencing difficulty in understanding learning/course material. These students find it difficult to ask questions on OL platforms.

Delivery Mode

The sudden transition to OL exposed challenges in the lack of online teaching and learning experience (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021). Joshi et al. (2020) report that students consider the lack of field trips and real-world experiences to be major weaknesses in OL. According to Dhawan (2020), students find OL lacks engagement and is boring. Aguilera-Hermida (2020) found that the online environment negatively influences effective OL because screens are the sole delivery method for learning. OL is yet to offer more tailored attention to individual students, with a two-way interaction often remaining difficult to implement (Dhawan 2020). As a result, students lack motivation and develop negative emotions towards learning because of the absence of contact learning or lack of normalcy due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Aguilera-Hermida 2020).

Students also cite too many online tasks as contributing to their feelings of being overloaded and being a key cause of increased stress levels (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021).

Digital Competence

According to Al-Kumaim et al. (2021), Malaysian students reported unfamiliarity with the new OL environment. Most students born in the digital era are digitally competent, however, some students lack this competence and are most likely to be disadvantaged by OL (Adedoyin and Soykan 2020; Motaung and Dube 2020). A lack of technical skills is a major challenge for digital learning (Dhawan 2020). Du Preez and Le Grange (2020) acknowledge the acute digital divide in South Africa. Even the “digital native” students might exhibit limitations with their use of technology which is central to OL (Ali 2020). Dhawan (2020) found that students are inadequately prepared for various e-learning and academic-type competencies. Too many new online technologies can lead to low efficacy which in turn leads to low cognitive engagement in students (Aguilera-Hermida 2020). Thus, students should be trained in the use of new technologies prior to being expected to use them.

Student Wellbeing

Before COVID-19, the number of hours students spent online averaged less than five hours; however, during the COVID-19 lockdown, students’ screen time increased to an average of six to 10 hours (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021). Students also experienced increasing depression and anxiety (Fruehwirth, Biswas and Perreira 2021). Al-Kumaim et al. (2021) suggest that the causes of growing mental health challenges include students’ exposure to multiple OL platforms, thereby producing information overload. The various OL avenues often have different OL tasks, leading to sleeplessness that negatively impacts students’ mental health and personal wellbeing. In addition, inadequate resources for effective OL lead to increased stress among students (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021).

Online Curricula and Assessments Design

HEIs need to develop a responsive curriculum addressing students’ evolving needs, while remaining relevant and adapting to life outside the boundaries of learning institutions (Gul and Khilji 2021). OL programmes must be designed to balance creativity, interaction, relevancy, student-centeredness and group-based activities to facilitate effective OL (Dhawan 2020). A responsive curriculum should not be limited to what is being taught, but should address real-life issues, including employability and cultural responsiveness (Gul and Khilji 2021).

Assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning (Maqsood et al. 2021). Before the COVID-19 pandemic, assessments had been part of the evaluation criteria used to inform student evaluation (Middleton 2020). According to Middleton (2020), these assessments were designed for traditional learning and have lost their effectiveness in the new context of OL, resulting in polluted test scores. The impact of stress, anxiety,

illness, transition to OL, lack of access to OL materials and potential of cheating have rendered the traditional assessment methods inadequate and inappropriate indicators of student performance. The impact of COVID-19 necessitated the need to design diverse assessment options that would assist OL (Alqurshi 2020).

Similar to OL, online assessment can be done either asynchronously or synchronously (Khan and Jawaid 2020). On the one hand, asynchronous assessments are not completed in real-time, and assignments and portfolios are used. These can be used to assess students' problem-solving and higher order critical thinking skills. On the other hand, synchronous assessment methods consist of online, real-time assessments similar to traditional methods. Khan and Jawaid (2020) claim that multiple-choice questions can assess students' knowledge and cognitive thinking while open book exams evaluate students' problem solving, critical thinking and creativity. Sandhu and De Wolf (2020) recommend allowing students to write open book examinations which Khan and Jawaid (2020) reason can reduce the cheating challenge in an exam.

Methodology

The current study applied an interpretivist philosophy and qualitative, exploratory design. Using ethnographic techniques, the methodology first involved a detailed account of the context of the study, namely, the frantic transition to OL implemented in the Marketing programme within the university. Having obtained Research Office ethical approval, this was followed by an in-depth qualitative content analysis of the students' responses to these actions during the year. The source documents included participant diary assignments, student feedback to a preliminary trial run (the dry run) and student feedback during the year. Students enrolled in three courses in the Marketing programme, namely, two honours (fourth year) courses with nine students each and a third year Marketing module with 42 students, participated in the study. Critical analysis was then applied to compare the Marketing staff's and the university's response strategies in transitioning to OL, with the student challenges identified through the content analysis.

An Ethnographic Account of a Marketing Programme at a South African University

South Africa, like many other countries, first became aware of the COVID-19 pandemic early in 2020. By March the first cases at the university had been detected and the university implemented various measures, such as screening protocols; setting up "campus health war rooms" to monitor the situation and be able to take immediate decisions; and providing advice to students and staff to practise good personal hygiene including cough etiquette and hand washing. By mid-March, amidst union and community pressures, and moves towards a national lockdown, the university announced the early commencement of the mid-term break and the students were required to vacate the university residences. At that time, the staff in the School of Management, IT & Governance – which includes the Marketing discipline – were

instructed to ensure that their course materials were uploaded on the OL system (OLS). Although the OLS had been in place for several years, the staff had only been encouraged to use it, and if they used it, it was generally only to upload course outlines, additional readings and, perhaps, lecture notes.

In mid-March 2020, the staff were encouraged to start pre-recording lectures and uploading those. They were also asked to support each other and share useful information. From then on, a barrage of courses, webinars and workshops became available. Some were hosted by staff, others by the IT & Communication Department, and of course, there was a host of internationally offered options. The panic to upskill and transition to OL had begun!

On 24 March 2020, a national lockdown was declared in South Africa. Although the university's options for a crisis response included a suspension of the academic year, the decision was made to move all academic content to virtual platforms. The university acknowledged that this would entail challenges for both staff and students, but no alternative was deemed feasible. The following section documents the steps taken during the transitioning of Marketing modules onto online platforms.

While the staff were exposed to numerous online teaching tools and resources, they were left to their own devices in terms of deciding what to use, and this was largely determined by looking for reviews on the software and by trial-and-error. Time was short and pressure high.

At the planned restart of the semester, resumption of lectures was delayed as the university decided that each module should have a "dry run" of all planned online activities with the students in order to identify any student challenges. The "dry run" included checklists, for example, that enabled students to download a video, upload an assignment, take mock surveys, join discussion fora and do tests. The "dry run" was extremely useful as it identified numerous challenges that students were facing. These are presented, among other challenges, in the findings section.

The university also undertook a major geo-tracking exercise to identify those students who were most challenged from an electricity and data perspective. Students could apply for laptops and all students were granted a monthly data bundle to assist with their data challenges. Lectures were initially uploaded as PDFs of slides along with detailed typed notes, then later recorded using the voice recording option accompanying PowerPoint presentation software. Then the university purchased Kaltura software for recording which had advanced features of allowing the students either to toggle between the lecturer and slide views or to include both. The files were also automatically compressed without requiring staff to manually compress recorded files using additional software. In the first few weeks of online lectures, the students were asked for feedback on the various methods and it was then decided that the Kaltura recorded lectures were

the best. File upload restrictions for the OLS had to be adjusted to accommodate the large number of data-heavy files.

In addition to the recorded lectures, weekly class meetings took place on Zoom, thus a synchronous element to the online course was introduced. As these were limited time periods due to electricity and data challenges faced by students, the purpose of these sessions was to provide an overview of the content for the week but also handle student questions or discuss class practical exercises designed to encourage engagement. These were also recorded and posted on the OLS. Minutes of the meetings were typed up including actions required by the students. These were also posted on the OLS for later referral by students. All lectures were also accompanied by notes in Word that contained the material in the slides but which could be added to by students. These also contained live links to the relevant recordings of lectures. Practical exercises were also developed on the OLS to encourage practical application of the theoretical concepts. These could have required students to build on the contributions of others in discussion fora or upload individual contributions. All contributions received feedback from the lecturer and were available to all students thus resembling face-to-face, in-class discussions. Online tests involving a combination of question formats were used for continuous assessment.

For the module dealing with Marketing strategy, a participant diary assignment was also set requiring students to diarise various aspects of their experience as citizens in lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic and to reflect on the social Marketing strategies they were exposed to. A competitive, group-based, business simulation was used to encourage collaborative decision making and experiential learning. Students were also required to write a self- and group-reflective report, not only on the Marketing decision making and strategy development, but also their own personal and group functioning. Students could also request one-on-one Zoom meetings to discuss anything related to the module content or their research. These were also recorded if the student so desired. Class WhatsApp groups were set up for class communication and sometimes content discussions.

Findings

Student Challenges Identified

As already mentioned, ethical clearance was obtained from the university, and informed consent was obtained from the students to use information from their participant diary assignments. This, together with the dry run and student feedback during the year from students in the three courses in the Marketing programme, was content analysed to extract the following student challenges.

Table 1: Student challenges

Theme	Evidence examples
Lack of infrastructure and resources	“I used to use the LAN computers. Now I have to borrow my brother’s old, slow laptop”
	“Can view stuff on my phone but it is hard to be productive”
	“There is one old laptop in the house that we all must share”
	“No access to the library or LAN”
	“Don't have the text book, no library access”
	“Unreliable electricity supply, untimely and unannounced power losses”
	“I don’t have a smartphone so no access to WhatsApp, email, lecture videos or online assessments”
Internet and data issues	“Data is expensive”
	“Poor network”
	“I was in student housing, now I live with my mum’s family in rural KZN. We often don’t have electricity and there is no internet”
	“The videos use all the data and it is expensive”
	“Poor internet coverage”
	“I don’t have funding as the [xxxx] postgrad bursary ran out of funds buying data”
	“Data cost limitations. I can’t access things like videos on Moodle due to limited data”
	“I can only work after 12h00 at night so I can use my night owl data”
“No data, Mum can only buy data periodically”	
Home environment	“No space of my own. It is hard to work”
	“There are too many of us come home. Space is cramped”
	“I have to work at the family dining room table, but the children also play there. I can’t participate in class discussions”
	“At home I have duties like fetching water, cooking, cleaning, looking after children and shopping. There is no time for homework”
	“Working from home is not the most conducive, juggling home responsibilities with OL “
	“There is always noise”
	“Others [in the house] have nothing to do, so watch TV. It is hard to concentrate. No space of my own”
“I want to go back to campus. I can’t study here”	
Time management	“Working remotely takes extra time – hard to make progress with dissertation”
	“Things take longer cause I am doing it on my phone”
Competence challenges	“I don’t know how to upload assignments”
	“How do I record my presentation on my slides”
	“Can’t do a PowerPoint presentation”
	“Can't access Zoom / Moodle”
Emotional stress	“We are experiencing a lot of challenges at the moment. I

	haven't been well for the past week and at times my group members don't have data either. Please bear with us Prof the situation is quite abnormal"
	"I withdrew, could not get registered before lockdown. No money now"
Other	"Can't get hold of group members"

Discussion

The ethnographic exploratory study revealed that while the government and the university implemented various measures to alleviate the pressures on citizens and students, such as additional grants for unemployed people, data bundles for all students, and laptops supplied to students deemed in need, the study identified that many students experienced challenges as a result of the new norms. The key challenges faced by the students and the response strategies implemented by the Marketing programme staff and the university, are discussed below.

Infrastructure and Connectivity Challenges

- **Limited infrastructure** and a lack of computers was a common problem creating major challenges for the students that were not dissimilar to those experienced in other developing nations such as Ghana (Agormeda et al. 2020; Henaku 2020) and Iran (Feizi and Bakhtiarvand 2020). Many students had been living in university accommodation prior to the pandemic. They had not needed laptops as they used the university's computer facilities and WiFi. At home, however, such infrastructure and connectivity were often unavailable.
- **Electricity shortages and power cuts** were commonplace. The socio-economic circumstances of many students also meant that many families shared a single computer. As they all needed to be online for work or school, it was difficult for students to attend online classes and spend the amount of time online as required by many online courses. Online courses with continuous assessments often require more time dedicated to various types of assessments (Al-Kumaim et al. 2021). Perceived ease of use has been proven in many technology acceptance models to influence behavioural intentions (Venkatesh and Davis 2000). While mobile phones may have internet capabilities, they are extremely difficult to use for OL, thus representing a barrier to their use. Despite widespread attempts by HEIs to provide needy students with laptops, the students in the study repeatedly mentioned challenges related to infrastructure.
- While the lack of laptops could, to some extent, be addressed by HEIs, **connectivity and internet access** were more difficult challenges to address. Whether the lack of connectivity was due to electricity shortages, or limited networks, these developing nation challenges hindered both online teaching and learning and were particularly problematic for rural students. This also

affected downloading of learning materials, class participation and group work. Network providers provided some relief by zero-rating certain educational sites such as the university library sites (McKane 2020) which helped the students to access materials, but they still complained about data-heavy recorded lectures and additional video material made available to supplement course materials. In addition, this challenge affected class and group interaction. Students seldom used their videos and this made building rapport and collegiality in classes more difficult to achieve. Having multiple channels of communication and being prepared to be flexible were the most appropriate staff response strategies.

Home Environment – Balancing Home-Life and Time Management

Part of the skills development in higher education is time management, particularly with regard to technology. Students need to develop personal self-control in order to manage their use of technology (Crittenden, Biel and Lovely 2019). In poor households with limited infrastructure and internet connectivity, the students were under even more pressure to ensure their usage of these precious resources was both effective (learning oriented) and efficient (without wasting resources). Ultimately, it is the students who must take responsibility for learning as “they must acquire requisite knowledge and skills” (Crittenden, Biel and Lovely 2019, 5). However, in the South African context, time management challenges were associated more with needing to balance university and home-life commitments.

When staying in university accommodation, the students would not have been expected to perform household chores such as fetching water, babysitting young children and possibly even cooking and cleaning. Furthermore, lockdowns resulted in even more overcrowded homes, and people being confined to their homes added to the student work pressures as well as emotional strain. Therefore, the life skills of time management and self-discipline would benefit students’ coping abilities. Providing regular tasks that break down the workload and encourage a regular work schedule, could help students to develop these life skills. Weekly group-based decisions for the simulation, and daily participant diary entries and reflection, were staff response strategies applied to help students develop such routines and discipline.

Providing various avenues for student-to-student and student-to-lecturer communication (e.g. OLS chat facilities and class WhatsApp groups) also provided an emotional support system for the students. They often expressed high levels of anxiety and emotional stress in their feedback and discussions, as is evident from the findings. Providing emotional support is thus important. In addition to peer and lecturer support, HEIs should provide staff with links to refer students with more serious emotional or physical challenges to experts.

Competence Challenges

Although students today are described as digital natives and have grown up with technology in the digital world (Crittenden, Biel and Lovely 2019), they still experienced difficulties in using the OLS. This was the case particularly with the features which were only used once courses were completely online, such as task or assignment submission systems and online assessments. Care needed to be taken not to assume that the students either could use, or would quickly learn on their own, how to use the different technologies. Guides needed to be made available to the students and not only to the staff who were learning new technologies and systems.

Lack of Student Participation and Engagement

Engaging or re-engaging students is not a new challenge for academics (Blewett 2017). Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, in the classroom setting academics were challenged to find ways to engage students. However, engaging students in the online context was a real challenge in the COVID-induced new norm. The participant diaries proved to be an effective tool for improving student engagement. While the students were reluctant to engage in online class discussions, they enthusiastically completed the participant diaries and reflected on their experiences in relation to social marketing strategy. Although only evident when the diaries and reflective assignments were submitted at the end of the semester, the students had been encouraged to engage with material throughout the semester in order to complete their diaries and reflective exercises. LaTour and Noel (2021) found that students who engage with a course throughout the programme perform better than those who only access the material at the end of the course when they need to complete summative assessments. Kearns (2012) also found that staff said that in face-to-face lectures, complex concepts can be broken down into smaller components which can be completed and assessed regularly. Mini-tutorials were proposed as an online alternative thus reinforcing that multiple, small activities may help to keep students engaged throughout the course.

The business simulation also required the students to analyse their weekly reports. Cadotte (2016, 119) describes simulations as “a form of competitive training that can provide transformational learning”. The competitiveness of the simulation may also have helped to engage the students and also improve their understanding of marketing. Kietzmann and Pitt (2016) state that students learn more by experimentation and practice, and business simulations assist students to gain some of this real-world experience. The reflective report which formed part of this assignment required reflection not only of the marketing strategies applied but also the individual and group functioning. It is believed that this also assisted with student engagement. Ke, Xie and Xie (2016) state that meta-reflection should be a core component of educational games, such as simulations, as it assists in the transition of play-based cognition to real learning.

In an attempt to engage the students, a variety of different activities, such as discussion fora and online activities, were also developed. For every part of the curriculum, online

participatory, application exercises were set. Joshi et al. (2020) also recommend class discussion fora and message boards as methods for improving student engagement. These activities and discussion fora certainly helped to ensure that the students regularly accessed the OLS and made attempts to apply the theories. They also had the advantage of providing students with regular, relevant, feedback on their and other students' contributions. "Feedback plays an important role in learning" (Van Popta et al. 2017, 25). However, the regularity of such activities as well as the need for feedback on all attempts of these activities, also greatly increased the workload of both students and staff and contributed to the time management challenge. Future strategies may take the advice of Van Popta et al. (2017) to implement a peer review system.

Multiple communication avenues were also a response strategy employed by the Marketing staff to maintain open channels of communication and engage students, whether in conversations between themselves or with a lecturer. Prompts for simulation decision submissions, open OLS discussion fora, and assignment requirements were often posted via email and also the class WhatsApp group. While the email correspondence seemed less effective, since WhatsApp messaging uses limited amounts of data, it proved to be an effective tool for encouraging student-to-student communication; engagement with the lecturers; and general engagement with the various assessment tools, learning materials and activities. This finding supports the study of Humphrey, Laverie and Shields (2019) who found that text messaging reminders positively influenced on-time assignment hand-in, perceived confidence in the learning materials and performance.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the world into the new norm, not least of all HEIs which were forced, almost overnight, to adopt the new norms of online teaching and learning. This article presents the findings of an ethnographic exploratory study of the transition to OL in a Marketing programme at a university in South Africa in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives were to identify the strategies applied by the Marketing programme staff in the emergency transition to OL; to determine the challenges experienced by the students in the transition; and to critically evaluate the university's transition to OL in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The article represents a reflection on those challenges which are beyond the control of Marketing academics, but also strategies and new norms which academics may use in such times of disruption to educational norms.

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