Remote Teaching and Learning at a South African University During Covid-19 Lockdown: Moments of Resilience, Agency and Resignation in First-Year Students' Online Discussions

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Abstract. The aim of article is to analyse the remote teaching and learning experiences of students, as expressed in online discussions among first-year students at a South African university, to enhance understanding of how learning remotely during Covid-19 lockdown affected students' lives and their academic commitment. The article draws on data collected from 45 students, mainly aged between 18 and 22, registered for an academic literacy course. These students came from diverse racial, socioeconomic and schooling backgrounds, although most were black students. These participants' Covid-19 and remote learning experiences are used in this case study as qualitative datasets. To generate rich narratives, a set of open-ended questions were designed and posted on the course's Blackboard page. The questions focused on the socioeconomic, psychological and academic effects of Covid-19 during the lockdown. At the end of the course, a thematic analytical approach was used to identify and categorise participants' online discussions into key themes. The datasets were then interpreted through the lens of predetermined concepts such as resilience, resilience and agency. The data show that some students saw remote learning as an opportunity to be creative and innovative, but for others, their socioeconomic situation negatively affected their lives and academic commitment. Students' remote teaching and learning experiences revealed moments of resilience and agency, but also a deep sense of resignation to the socioeconomic and psychological burdens of Covid-19. Based on these findings, this article discusses some implications for the future of higher education in South Africa and recommends possibilities for further research.

Keywords: Covid-19 lockdown; remote teaching/learning; resilience; resignation; South Africa

1. Introduction and Background

Full remote teaching and learning under the Covid-19 lockdown in 2020 and continuing restrictions in 2021 has provided an opportunity for the academic community in South Africa to reflect on the state of the country's higher education. The pandemic also created, or rather enforced, an unprecedented opportunity for contact universities to devise innovative, flexible and inclusive ways of teaching and assessment (Hedding et al., 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). As staff and students reconfigured their social lives to adjust to the "new normal", there were ongoing conversations about the gains, opportunities and challenges of online teaching and learning during the pandemic. These conversations were driven partly by the uncertainties and unpredictability surrounding the Novel Corona virus (Covid-19) and the future implications of the shift to online delivery for higher education teaching and learning (Hedding et al., 2020; Le Grange, 2020b; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021; Motala & Menon, 2020).

As the debate on the use of different digital platforms grew, it became clear that the pandemic had "add[ed] a new layer of complexity and uncertainty to an already volatile and contested higher education" situation (Motala & Menon, 2020, p. 82). Moreover, the pandemic came at a time when South African universities are still grappling with several items of unfinished business, such as transformation and curriculum decolonisation. Issues of inclusivity and social justice were again at the epicentre of these discussions, forcibly reminding us that South African universities are still spaces for both the haves and have-nots, or to put it differently, they are learning spaces where the privileged and the less-privileged co-exist. Here, the familiar narrative of the rural South Africa students with no food and living in deplorable conditions, who have no digital devices and who can't afford data dominated the conversations (Czerniewicz et al., 2020, Dube, 2020). The severity of the Covid-19-related teaching and learning challenges varied from university to university, with the most severely affected students based at the historically disadvantaged universities and in vulnerable communities (Le Grange, 2020b; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021; Mbhiza, 2021). Because these universities were under-resourced to begin with, staff and students encountered more technological and infrastructural challenges when the higher education sector was unexpectedly forced to resort to remote teaching and learning by the pandemic (Alex, 2022; Mtshweni, 2022; Odularu et al., 2022).

The learning challenges of particularly black South African students are well known, and they resurfaced in the national consciousness as schools and universities grappled with the academic disruptions induced by Covid-19. The exacerbation of these long-standing challenges suggests that these challenges have been approached and addressed in a very tokenistic style by South African universities (Angu et al., 2020; Czerniewicz et al., 2020). Therefore, when the non-distance universities were forced to migrate to virtual teaching, the first concern of academic and support staff members, and university managements, was to lessen the Covid-19 burden on already vulnerable students. They used existing quantitative data to devise plans and to manage the challenges associated with remote teaching and learning, especially during the national lockdown (Agormedah et al., 2020; Hedding et al., 2020; Le Grange, 2020a; Motala & Menon,

2020). Consequently, many scholarly publications that emanated from these conversations neglected the voices of students, as they focused on how universities tried to navigate the Covid-19-induced emergency online teaching and learning landscape. They also tended to focus primarily on the negative effects of Covid-19, often ignoring students' ability to be resilient and the ways in which they exercised a sense of agency during this life-threatening crisis (see Gumede & Badriparsad, 2021; Madiope & Mendy, 2021; Mtshweni, 2022).

Given that teaching and learning in higher education is negotiated between students, staff and university management, student voices are critical for our understanding of the impact of full remote teaching and learning during the Covid-19 lockdown on students' academic journeys. Against this background, this article uses qualitative data gleaned from online discussions with 45 first-year students in a Health Sciences academic literacy course to understand how Covid-19 and online teaching and learning have affected the lives and academic journeys of this cohort of students. It argues that while some of these students saw remote learning as an opportunity to be creative and innovative, epitomising moments of resilience and agency, for others, the socioeconomic demands that they faced had a negative effect on their lives and ultimately their academic commitment, resulting in a deep sense of resignation to the socioeconomic and psychological burdens of Covid-19.

To make meaning of these discussions, I first review the literature on online teaching and learning during Covid-19 lockdown with a focus on South Africa. Then I explain how the data was collected and analysed, and discuss the key themes that emerged from the data. Finally, I consider the future implications for teaching and learning in South Africa and suggest possibilities for further research.

2. Online Teaching and Learning During Covid-19 – the South African Context

Covid-19 has produced a new body of knowledge in South African higher education about emergency online teaching and learning during a pandemic. The large range of articles published during the national lockdown in South Africa focused on different topical issues, such as the relationship between the fourth industrial revolution (4IR), the challenges and opportunities of emergency remote teaching and social inequalities in South African higher education during and after Covid-19 (Alex, 2022; Mhbiza, 2022; Mtshweni, 2022). These studies sought to make sense of how the pandemic has shaped social and academic lives, while inadvertently exposing the deepening social inequalities in South African universities and communities (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Hedding et al., 2020; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2022; Motala & Menon, 2020; Mtshweni, 2022). Recurring references in these studies to the "new normal" suggest that the world will never be the same again, and predict that modes of teaching and research in the higher education landscape will change drastically after the pandemic. Many authors believe that, despite the devastating effects of Covid-19 on our mind and souls, the pandemic has provided an opportunity to reimagine, rethink and recreate the university space (Du Preez & Le Grange, 2020; Hedding et al., 2020). One has to

continue to ask how, in finding ways to reimagine the South African university space, these institutions will address the social issues, which they have neglected for years, and which have resurfaced so clearly during this pandemic.

When the 2020 academic year in South Africa began, even though news of a new deadly virus spread globally, it was business as usual on university campuses. Lectures and social activities continued uninterrupted, as the government and university management cautiously monitored the rapid spread of the virus. However, the always buzzing campuses were deserted when the South African government announced a full national lockdown in March 2020 and students had to return home. Once it became clear that the lockdown would not end after the initial three weeks, universities resorted to full online teaching and learning to salvage the academic project amidst mounting fears, anxieties and uncertainties, as the virus spread insidiously throughout South Africa. The announcement of a national lockdown prompted university leaderships to respond speedily, as events from the recent past tell us that "higher education in South Africa is no stranger to crises, having experienced several of these at different junctures in its history" (Motala & Menon, 2020, p. 85). For example, the #Rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall had already changed the higher education landscape in South Africa drastically, with universities investing large sums in educational technologies that can support massive hybridised teaching and learning, either synchronously or asynchronously.

Although these landmark student protests transformed the South African higher education landscape in unimaginable ways, it would be naive to compare these events to the unprecedented disruptions caused by Covid-19. Unlike with Covid-19, the managements of universities could predict that there would be explosive student protests because tensions had been simmering on campuses for years (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Hedding et al., 2020; Madiope & Mendy, 2021; Motala & Menon, 2020). In the case of the #mustfall movements, the management of universities long ignored visible warning signs, but once the movements started at some universities, others could hurriedly prepare. However, because the emergence and spread of Covid-19 was so abrupt and unpredictable, universities were forced into emergency remote teaching and learning without adequate planning and preparation. This meant students and staff had to experiment with different technologies to teach, and universities chopped and changed strategies, requirements and expectations on the fly as more research evidence about the mutations of the virus and the likelihood of an extended international crisis became available (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Czerniewics et al., 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). At some universities, especially those in the rural parts of South Africa, remote teaching and learning challenges were exacerbated by inadequate resources and lack of staff with the right skillsets (Alex, 2022; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021; Mtshweni, 2022).

In fact, staff and students at most universities had been using learning management systems such as Blackboard for years. However, they had mainly been used to complement contact teaching and learning. As a result, many academic staff members were not completely prepared for remote learning

because "academic staff at contact universities typically have little, if any experience of training in the pedagogy or delivery of online learning" (Hedding et al., 2020, p. 1). In addition, students from both privileged and disadvantaged communities were left to struggle with access to devices, data and internet connectivity problems in urban and rural areas, without the quality of student support they were accustomed to, and these problems were more severe in vulnerable communities (Alex, 2022; Dison et al., 2022; Le Grange, 2020b; Mtswheni, 2022). To alleviate the burdens of emergency remote learning, many South African universities provided devices and data to students in need. Despite such support from universities, many students found themselves at the intersection of social challenges such as structural poverty and inequality, as well as the continued emotional and psychological challenges related to Covid-19 (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Czerniewics et al., 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020).

On the positive side, the pandemic has definitely ignited a renewed passion to reimagine and rethink modes of teaching and learning in the South African higher education context. However, Le Grange (2020a) cautions that this process might open up space for the "uberfication" of the university: as South African universities shift towards online pedagogy, higher education studies will be commodified and students will become clients, choosing what to learn, how to learn and where to learn and "the lecturer becomes an on-demand worker" (Le Grange, 2020a, p. 6). This means the university will become a marketplace and it will entrench an already corporatized leadership style aimed primarily at gratifying the clients while "academic staff members are increasingly subjected to forms of surveillance, including through performance management" (Le Grange, 2020a, p. 8). If the "uberfication" of the university becomes a reality, this will further deepen the social inequalities already prevalent in South African universities, as there will be no "equitable benefits from the affordances of new technologies" (Du Preez & Le Grange, 2020a, p. 90).

Thinking through the idea of "uberfication" of universities, one is again reminded that South African universities are still spaces defined by different forms of discrimination, often captured in the paradoxical learning experiences of students in impoverished townships and suburban homes. The class structures that have defined our universities for decades have been made increasingly visible, epitomising the disparate worlds of our students (Angu, 2019; Dube, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Under Covid-19 conditions, some participated in remote learning, undisturbed, in the comfort of their homes, with unlimited data, a dedicated study space and reliable devices, but others had to study in shared communal spaces with family, with very limited data and out-dated devices. This meant, according to several studies, that many students struggled with online learning because of the cost of data, poor connectivity or simply because they had no dependable electronic devices (Gumede & Badriparsad, 2021; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021; Mbhiza, 2021). For example, Alex (2022), Mtshweni (2022) and Odularu et al. (2022) argue that resource-constrained and historically disadvantaged universities in rural areas have been affected more than those in urban areas, revealing clearly the digital inequalities in the South African higher education sector. Many students' experiences during the national lockdown are

therefore tales of those living on the fringes of survival – the voices from the margins – as well as tales of those living in luxury and comfort. These paradoxes tell us that South African universities' "capacity to respond [to Covid-19] is thus uneven along the predictable fault lines of class, race and gender" (Manderson & Levine, 2020, p. 368). These experiences have had several implications for the academic performance of students during the national lockdown from March 2020.

3. Method of Data Collection

The data used in this article emerged from online discussions with 45 students registered for an academic literacy course offered by a Department of Family Medicine at a South African university. They were mainly between the ages 18 and 22 and from different racial, social, economic, and schooling backgrounds. However, the majority were black South African students. These students were therefore the project participants and constituted the unit of analysis for this case study. Their stories about Covid-19, the lockdown and remote learning are used in this article as qualitative datasets. To sustain participation and generate rich narratives during the online discussions, a set of open-ended questions were designed and posted on the course Blackboard page and students were regularly reminded to participate through announcements. The questions focused on the social, economic, psychological and academic effects of Covid-19 during lockdown. The course convened once a week for one hour 40 minutes (a double period). The first hour was used for normal lectures and class activities. To enliven the lectures, the last 40 minutes were reserved for discussion. In addition, regular communication through announcements ensured that discussion continued after lectures.

At the end of the course, a thematic analytical approach was used to identify and categorise participants' online discussions into key themes. The datasets were then interpreted through the lens of predetermined concepts: agency, resilience and resignation. This approach provided a prism to avoid generalising about the South African Covid-19 and remote learning experiences, and to access and make meaning from participants' subjective perspectives on remote teaching and learning. The analysis and interpretation of these personalised experiences revealed that, although some of the participants saw remote learning during lockdown as an opportunity to be creative and innovative, for others, the social and economic demands of learning remotely during pandemic exerted various pressures on their lives. Consequently, they could not cope with academic expectations, resulting in de-registration (Angu, 2019; Dube, 2020; Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Drawing on these findings, the following sections have used the concept of resilience, agency and resignation as frames to analyse and make meaning from the data collected from the participants.

To use students' online discussions as research data, ethics clearance was obtained from the university where the study was done. This clearance granted permission to use students' learning activities and assignments for research purposes. In line with the ethical requirements, the participants have been anonymised and direct

quotations from the online discussions are cited verbatim (in italics) in this article simply as "student response".

4. Presentation and Analysis of Students' Discussions in a Virtual Space

The discussion forum on Blackboard provided a space for this group of students to share with their peers, without any restrictions, their Covid-19 and remote learning experiences. As the students navigated the challenges of full remote learning, this space became an outlet to share their frustrations, disillusionments or their impassioned commitment to their studies, driven by a sense of resilience and agency. The data collected from these online discussions provided an opportunity for different interpretations because of the uniqueness of their stories about Covid-19, lockdown and remote teaching and learning in South Africa (Angu, 2019; Motala & Menon, 2020).

4.1 Memories of the Social Realities in South Africa

Many scholars have represented Covid-19 as the "great equaliser", arguing that the virus is race-, class- and ethnicity-blind. However, the stories of this group of students tell us that it would be misleading to ignore intersections of race and class in trying to understand how the virus has affected the lives of students. For instance, in a country that was already grappling with different forms of inequality years before the viral outbreak, it is disingenuous to fail to focus on social structures that continue to drive inequalities in South Africa and how these affected student learning during lockdown-induced remote learning (Angu, 2019; Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Sokhulu, 2020). The online discussions allowed students to remember, through the lens of their remote learning experiences, the digital/social inequality in South Africa, even though they were students at the same university. One student narrated her remote learning experience as follows:

> *My worries regarding the online learning is that some of us live in a crowded space with many family members and there is a lot of noise which might deprive a person from focusing. We cannot go to libraries or any quiet place as a result of this lockdown due to Covid-19. Besides what I have aforementioned, data will be a problem and some of us live in places where network connection is not stable hence there will be chances of missing out on online teaching. But if it is the only option to continue with our academics then we might as well use it as it will benefit us, and if ever a person missed a session due to any problems then he/she can catch up with any friend who was in the online teaching.* (Student response)

This student lives several kilometres from the university and her comment highlights the social differences between students who live in rural areas and those in urban areas, and how their social spaces became impediments to learning during remote learning. Also, because the student's experience of remote learning happened in a vulnerable rural area, it can be read as a process of remembering "how issues of equity and inequality have played out in the 'pivot' to remote teaching and learning" (Czerniewicz et al., 2020, p. 947). In this testimony, two forms of inequality (digital and social) are shown to intersect to influence this student's remote learning efforts. This student experience is not new in South Africa, but Covid-19 has helped to excavate memories of a post-apartheid South

Africa still reeling from different forms of inequalities (Du Preez & Le Grange, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020).

Given that this South African university's student population is demographically diverse, discrepancies in students' lived experiences in rural and urban areas and how they affected their remote learning efforts featured strongly in the online discussions. In the following comment, one participant remembers poor living conditions, digital constraints and the learning disruptions caused by this student's situation:

> *I would like to address how this pandemic is affecting my learning. Like I said before I'm in the village with my mother right now and she is currently sick so I have to care for her since there's only the two of us here. The connection is not stable and my phone does not have enough space to download all your slides. It's very painful what this pandemic is really doing but I hope for the best. I would like you to share everything on Whatsapp because it's very easy to access it.* (Student response)

Here, we see how this student's access to remote learning during a viral pandemic is hamstrung by broader societal problems that the South African government has failed to address in its grand transformative agenda designed to "redress inequalities of access, participation and success" (CHE, 2004, p. 24). This remote learning experience captures how Covid-19 and its wider effects feed on endemic structural vulnerabilities and inadvertently compromise students' access to learning in remote environments (Angu, 2019; Team & Manderson, 2020).

For years now, the gap between rich and poor has continued to widen. The ANC-led government is often criticised for failing to address social challenges, especially in vulnerable communities. For example, in the middle of the pandemic, the government was heavily lambasted "for its poor handling of emergency public procurement and the distribution of financial support as it became evident that the procurement had not been able to avoid endemic corruption in government" (Van Schalkwyk, 2021, p. 46; see also Baloyi, 2020). The handling of procurement processes exposed the government's ineptitude, which provided a fertile ground for more corruption in government departments, delaying the provision of protective equipment and learning devices for learners in need (Du Preez & Le Grange, 2020; Van Schalkwyk 2021). Universities managed their own procurement processes, but the government's inability to efficiently manage Covid-19 relief support and the implications for remote learning recurred in the discussions. One participant commented:

> *The first thing that we should look at, is that the Covid-19 exposed our government. We now know that our government didn't invest much into our education, they didn't have a backup plan for the nation to keep on with the school work during such outbreaks and now they have made a resolution whereby most of the students will get devices to use as a backup to learn which is a good thing and through this, the inequalities in the education system are fading bit by bit because even poor students will be able to get them and learning will continue. I believe that our government, universities and colleges have to learn their lesson that they should invest*

more in online learning and also covering every student poor or rich….
(Student response)

Several studies have documented the South African government's failures, including a lack of political will to address educational inequalities in basic and higher education. It is well-known that while schools in urban and opulent suburbs are resource-rich, many schools in black communities are severely under-resourced (see, for example, Alex 2022; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021; Mtshweni 2022; Shava 2022). In the above comment, the student's memory of the school system in South Africa is a snapshot of the two disparate worlds that continue to influence the scholastic experiences of students and the failure of the state to address socioeconomic constraints in the schooling system. For this student, a dysfunctional schooling system and remote learning challenges during lockdown are symptomatic of an ailing state, which has failed to address its social problems (Czerniewicz et al., 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020).

4.2 Student Discussions as Moments of Resignation or Resilience

The online discussion by students also contained vignettes of resignation or resilience as they grappled with emergency remote learning during the national lockdown. Here, this group of students displayed their personal dispositions, either to confront the challenges of remote learning or to allow their socioeconomic vulnerabilities to influence their determination to succeed (Chisadza et al., 2021; Mahendher et al., 2021; Vaugh, 2020):

I am trying to get used to these online platforms that I have never used and I am equally concerned that technology might fail me. But because of the Covid-19, we must do it, not only to complete the academic year but most importantly to protect lives. (Student response).

Most of us are all worried about this whole online thing and if it will ever be fruitful because on my side, I am back in the village and the internet connection is very poor. I'm currently able to use my phone as a device to interact with everyone, no laptop or bigger device for the upcoming lessons. I am even scared of what is going to happen when it's time for tests and exams since they'll be conducted online because my phone is giving me problems as well. So, it is really overwhelming but I am trying my best to not miss anything because we cannot afford to lose the whole year because of this pandemic. (Student response)

Despite the multiple challenges associated with emergency online learning during lockdown, universities' rapid pedagogical response to Covid-19 disruptions was construed as empowering for many students, regardless of their social backgrounds (Chisadza et al., 2021; Makgahlela et al., 2021). These responses expose a strong determination to succeed despite the challenges with devices and connectivity. Although many of these students experience different forms of exclusion, they still imagined their education as critical for their social transformation. For these respondents, losing an academic year would only worsen their material conditions in the aftermath of Covid-19. Here, we see students who have been emboldened by pre-existing social conditions and are ready to endure the impact of Covid-19. In this context, students' sense of

resignation or resilience was influenced by individual motivation, self-awareness and adaptive behaviour, as well as the physical and mental strength to study (Chisadza et al., 2021; O'Sullivan, 2006).

In the following two responses, the need to be resilient was driven by students' sense of empathy, stemming from the recognition that Covid-19 is a human crisis that has affected both students and lecturers (Le Grange, 2020b; Mbiydzebyuy & Silungwe, 2020). The dominant narrative that someone's race and class or privilege cannot shield the person from Covid-19 seemed to have instilled a renewed sense of survival and willingness to overcome the challenges associated with remote learning during lockdown:

> *This pandemic is a first for many of us. It's overwhelming in many concepts for both lecturers and students. Online teaching and learning have its pros and cons. Many of us might have the data and means to connect to the internet but our signal in the area might not be good. In all honesty, Sir, I personally feel that at this point in time we can't say whether online teaching will have a positive or negative effect on both students, lecturers and the university as a whole and most importantly the effect it will have on those who move on to second year (following year of study).* (Student response)

> *We are as equally concerned as you are regarding this online method of teaching but I believe we don't have any alternative at this moment. Instead we need to be open-minded towards it so that it doesn't become tedious...I suggest we become patient with each other as this type of learning is new to all of us.* (Student response)

There is a sense of collective pain and suffering in these responses, which serves as an additional incentive to resist remote learning challenges. The students' acknowledgement of the lecturers' frustrations and anxieties, as well as the impacts of the pandemic on university resources seemed to have provided an additional reason to be resilient.

4.3 Student Online Discussions as Expressions of Agency
The collection of online discussions showed clearly that although South African students experience different forms of marginalisation, many come to university with knowledge and lived experiences that can be used to confront their challenges in higher education (see Clark et al., 2016; Luo et al., 2019; Vaugh, 2020). These online discussions became prisms through which we can understand how a group of students was able to exercise their sense of agency as they studied remotely during the national lockdown. Here, we see these students' attempts to reimagine and rethink their learning strategies as they navigated the unexpected learning disruptions caused by the national lockdown. Students' enactment of agency is captured in the following two responses:

> *I think we should use this opportunity to familiarize ourselves with online learning as I think this will be an important part of studying in the future and this will help to digitalise some classes. Digitalization of classes will help a lot with time management and learning at your own pace. I am concerned that new test dates are not made readily available by*

all our subjects so I feel afraid that I would not have adequate time to prepare. (Student response)

To succeed with online learning, one must be disciplined enough to not only attend the classes and passively absorb the information but to actively participate. In addition to self-discipline, one must also have adequate time management skills so that you do not feel overwhelmed when classes and assignments start to pile up. (Student response)

In these discussions, the students cited above approached remote learning as an opportunity to remake their social identities, learning activities and digital experiences (Lindgren & McDaniel 2012; Vaugh, 2020). In the quotations, the students capture a shift to new and creative learning ideas employed to "give significance to the world in purposeful ways with the aim of creating, impacting and/or transforming themselves and/or the conditions of their lives" (Basu et al., 2009, p. 345). The display of student agency in these discussions was also evidenced in the way the students envisioned a future digitized higher education space and the role that Covid-19 remote learning could play in preparing them for the future higher education environment. Remote learning during lockdown is constructed here as an opportunity for students "to make choices, act on their intentions, and take actions in their efforts to develop their own stance in [this] learning context" (Vaugh, 2020, p. 116).

Emergency teaching and learning during national lockdown in South Africa meant students and lecturers needed more support to complete the set curriculum. Unlike the #mustfall movements, no one was physically, technically or emotionally prepared for full remote learning in a viral pandemic situation (see Du Preez & Le Grange, 2020; Laher et al., 2021; Mahlaba, 2020; Van Wyk, 2021). In the online discussions, there was evidence of peer support and learning amongst students using different social media platforms. Students' sense of agency in this context was shown in their ability to think collaboratively as they confronted different online learning challenges such as self-motivation, time management and self-discipline:

Guys, first thing that you have to do is to set your own time table that literally works for you, but remember that a day is made of 24 hours you cannot make a time table whereby you gonna study for 4 hours and sleep, watch movies and Television for 20 hours. Try studying for more than 6 hours but with breaks in between just for brains to rest or you can even get some nap in those breaks, but you have to tell your siblings or parents to wake you up after how many minutes. (Student response)

In this excerpt, agency is about sharing ideas and strategies for meaningful online learning with peers. It is about building a relationship of collaboration as students were able to use the discussion forums to reach out to their peers (Angu 2019; Clark et al., 2016). In the context of online learning during lockdown, effective learning was not restricted to this group of students independently taking ownership of their learning. In fact, the online space provided an outlet for collaborative learning and peer-to-peer support. Here, agency is about collective

thinking and engagement with classroom activities, learning strategies and coping mechanisms (Angu, 2019; Luo et al., 2019; Vaugh, 2020).

5. Discussion

As the Covid-19 virus continues to mutate in very unpredictable ways, this pandemic is expected to continue to disrupt the lives of South African students in the (un)foreseeable future. The economic and psychosocial effects of the pandemic have continued to influence teaching and learning, even after the national lockdown (Chisadza et al., 2021; Laher et al., 2021). As staff and students concluded the 2021 academic year, South African university campuses are yet to return to the old normal, although universities are no longer operating in an emergency mode. The majority of South African students have continued to study remotely, but with relatively restricted support in the form of devices and data from universities, compared to the support they received during emergency remote learning in 2020 (Le Grange, 2020b; Mahlaba, 2020; Sokhulu, 2020). This means that in the context of widening social inequalities and the digital divide, many of these students are still struggling to access meaningful teaching and produce quality academic projects (Laher et al., 2021; Makgahlela et al., 2021; Mtshweni, 2022; Odularu et al., 2022).

As universities continued to operate remotely into 2021, there was an increase in scholarly publications on students' perceptions and experiences of Covid-19-induced online learning. An increasing number of studies now focus on understanding the perspectives of students as universities grapple with the deepening effects of Covid-19 on the academic project (see Laher et al., 2021; Makgahlela et al., 2021). Although these studies seek to understand student experiences, their findings tend to focus on the dominant narrative of the vulnerable poor student, living in miserable conditions, which are not conducive for learning. These studies continue to perpetuate the familiar victimhood narrative, often neglecting the transformative power of destitution and under-privilege shown in the multiple ways in which students have exercised their agency and resilience. Put differently, students from impoverished backgrounds are repeatedly portrayed as fragile, and therefore incapable of exercising any agency, while learning remotely (Makgahlela, 2021; Mtshweni, 2022; Odularu et al., 2022; Vaugh, 2020). There are several merits to this argument, if one considers the existential social equalities and the implications for teaching and learning in South Africa. However, history has taught us that the social ills of society are also catalysts of resilience and agency.

Based on the data discussed above, this article makes two key arguments. Firstly, although the narrative of vulnerable poor students with no device, data and/or connectivity dominates in earlier publications on emergency remote teaching and learning, many of these vulnerable students in fact saw this mode of learning as an opportunity to reimagine and rethink their learning approaches (Dison et al., 2022; Mbhiza, 2021). This category of students was able to experience fully the transformative potential of online learning during lockdown. As a result, they attempted to exercise a form of resilience and agency as they grappled with the challenges of remote learning. Secondly, while students believed that every dark cloud has a silver lining, there were also some students who displayed resignation

to the Covid-19 and remote learning challenges. This category of students capitalised on how the negative effects of remote learning and the Covid-19 lockdown, as well as the worsening socioeconomic problems in post-apartheid South African communities did indeed affect their academic performance (Alex, 2022; Dison et al., 2022; Shava, 2022).

6. Conclusion
The #Rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall experiences have shown that South African students, including those from poorer backgrounds, have learned to survive in disruptive learning environments. Although it would be naïve to compare the experiences of Covid-19 with these two critical moments in South African higher education, online discussions collected from this study's sample of students have shown that students who have increasingly been regarded as fragile and vulnerable can in fact be extremely resilient. Although institutional and academic staff support were necessary during emergency remote teaching and learning in 2020, a key predictor of success during emergency remote teaching and learning was a strong determination to succeed against all odds. This sample of students' remote teaching and learning experiences epitomised moments of resilience and agency as they navigated the academic disruptions caused by the pandemic. However, online discussions also revealed some students' sense of resignation to the economic and psychosocial burdens of Covid-19 (Angu, 2019; Dison et al., 2022; Hemson, 2019; Holton, 2019; Mbhiza, 2021).

In the second half of the 2022 academic year, the South Africa university at which this study was done returned to full contact mode after the government lifted all Covid-19 restrictions. There is general excitement around its campuses, but students and staff have to readjust to socialising without wearing masks or maintaining social distance. For some first-year students, it is an opportunity to participate in their long-awaited "university experience"; for others, it is an overwhelming experience with its own fears and anxieties. For university managements, Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to reimagine the idea of higher education, to respond to new, efficient and seemingly more productive ways of learning and working revealed by Covid-19 (Dison et al., 2022; Mbhiza, 2021; Shava, 2022).

7. Recommendation for future research
Since this article is based on qualitative data gleaned from a non-representative sample, the findings, analysis and discussions are not generalisable. Nor can they be used to make recommendations for the South African higher education context. With students back on campus, a large-scale quantitative study on student experiences during and after the lockdown is likely to produce findings that can influence new teaching and learning policies as South African universities enter a post-Covid-19 era.

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