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# Household Challenges, Family Dynamism and Online Learning under COVID-19 Pandemic in a South African University

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** Reduce the spread of the virus amongst people, especially students and lecturers, thus online learning was introduced in 2020. To find out the effectiveness of online learning and family dynamics posed by this phenomenon

**Design/methodology/approach:** The researchers conducted a research at one of the University of Technology in South Africa, situated in the Province of Kwa-Zulu Natal, in Pietermaritzburg. The main aim was to determine the challenges posed by online learning while students were at home, compounded by COVID-19 pandemic.

**Findings:** The results of the analysis showed the connection between family dynamics such as family settings, online learning and the impact of COVID-19 pandemic in this regard. It can then be concluded that there is a significant influence between family setting, such as bereavement, divorce, lack of internet connection and overcrowding at home, COVID-19 and the adjustment to online learning.

**Research limitations/implications:** Lack of internet connection and overcrowding at home, COVID-19 and the adjustment to online learning.

**Paper type:** Research paper

**Keyword:** Family Dynamics, COVID-19 pandemic, Household, , Online Learning, South African University

## I. INTRODUCTION

The success of a company is strongly influenced by the individual performance of its employees. Every The advent of COVID-19 necessitated that students across the world transition to online learning. The transition to online learning by schools, colleges and universities have received considerable attention although online learning is not a new thing. Schools and universities had to close to reduce the spread of COVID-19. Due to isolation, the use of technology has been considered the most appropriate alternative to keep educational systems functional in many parts of the world during this period. The spread of COVID-19 has also caused fear, anxiety and other concerns to students, children, and parents (NCIRD, 2020). Scholars have raised questions concerning the preparedness of schools, colleges and universities' transition to online learning (Houlden and Veletsianos, 2020; Li and Lalani, 2020; OECD, 2020b), (Henaku, 2020). The availability and capacity of schools' existing technology, infrastructure and resources to facilitate online learning have been questioned (Lee, 2020). In spite of all the shortcomings, many universities in developed countries have been able to transition successfully (Wu, 2020; Belle, 2020; Basilaia and Kvavadze, 2020). While great strides have been achieved, there are some inevitable challenges such as students' access to internet connection and computers at home to use for their online learning.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Family Dynamics

Jabbari, B. & Rouster, (2021) asserts that family dynamics refers to the patterns of interactions among relatives, their roles and relationships, and the various factors that shape their interactions. As family members rely on each other for emotional, physical, and economic support, they are one of the primary sources of relationship security or stress. Secure and supportive family relationships provide love, advice, and care, whereas stressful family relationships are burdened with arguments, constant critical feedback, and onerous demands. Interpersonal interactions among family members have lasting impacts and influence the development and well-being of an individual via psychological, behavioural and physiological pathways. Thus, family dynamics and the quality of family relationships can have either a positive or negative impact on health and well-being of an individual. Ferri, F., Grifoni, P. & Guzzo, (2020) concurs as it was stated that during the school closures, existing inequalities connected to different socioeconomic situations have increased mainly due to lack of resources, including access to educational technologies and the Internet; lack of physical spaces to carry out home-based learning among families from poorer backgrounds, who lack the basic skills to support their children.

Jabbari, B. & Rouster, (2021) further postulates the factors that contribute to healthy family dynamics as being individuation, which is the process through which a person achieves a sense of individuality separate from the identities of others and begins to consciously exist as a human in the world, mutuality, which is the sharing of a feeling, action, or relationship between two or more parties, flexibility which is the ability of a joint or series of joints to move through an unrestricted, pain free range of motion, stability which means the quality state, or degree of being stable such as the strength to stand or endure and clear communication which means understanding the emotions and intentions behind the information as well as being able to clearly convey a message, one need to also listen in a way that gains the full meaning of what is being said and the other person feel heard and understood. Factors contributing to unhealthy family dynamics, amongst which are isolation, inflexibility which is the unwillingness to change or compromise, disorganization the inability to plan one's activities or affairs efficiently, unclear communication and conflict.

## **2.2. Dependence on social grants**

The level of dependence to cater for families including payment of tuition has had devastating impact on communities at large, especially students due to COVID-19. Bhorat, H., Oosthuizen, M. and Stanwix, (2021) states that the initial lockdown, introduced on 23 March 2020, was predominantly stringent, imposing restrictions on all movement outside home, thus limiting economic activity to essential services Gustafsson, (2020) According to De Groot, J. & Lemanski, (2021) social distancing and had been introduced in South Africa to limit the spread of the coronavirus. The ban on social gatherings of more than 100 people as a precautionary measure and subsequently through a suite of more direct requirements such as lockdowns, curfews and mandatory of using a face mask outside the house became apparent. Soon after, news reports surfaced that soldiers were using violence (including rubber-bullets) to implement social distancing amongst low-income inhabitants while standing close together queuing for food supplies. An example of social grants was brought to the equation as people from poor backgrounds flocked to the post office and retail stores due to low levels of banking amongst this group. The grant recipients did not only break the COVID- 19 rules, but excessively exposed themselves to the virus by standing in slow-moving queues for hours. Grant recipients with increased susceptibility to COVID-19 fatality (i.e. the elderly and the disabled), also had to compete with others stocking up on groceries during lockdown. According to Stats SA, more than 17 million people, or one on five South Africans depend on government's social welfare grants, a figure that is anticipated to grow after the COVID-19 outbreak.

## **2.3. Taking care of loved ones**

Cluver, L., Operaio, D., Lane, T. & Kganakga, (2012) asserts that taking care of loved ones and abandoning education has become prevalent. Qualitative and anecdotal evidence suggests that young people are often the providers of medical and intimate care for sick relatives, and frequently assume responsibilities for domestic work and siblings care Bauman, Foster, Silver, Berman.

## **2.4. Bereavement**

Bereavement has been identified as one of the elements that constitute difficult family dynamics. Moore, Sampson, Kupeli and Davies 2020 states that COVID-19 brings forward death for many older people. While grief is normal part of life and death, circumstances around death can influence the grief process. Having consultations and being involved in decision-making are significant elements for helping families and carers prepare for end of life. Feeling unprepared for death is associated with higher levels of complicated grief after death Hebert. In dementia care, family carers often start grieving before death as they experience

an assortment of relationship and personal losses. Studies show between 47% and 71% of these carers report grief while caring and 20% experience complicated grief death (Chan, D., Livingston, G., Jones, L. & Sampson, 2013).

Carers may experience higher grief if they feel that the dying process was traumatic or unexpected and they may live with regretting care decisions or being unable to say goodbye to their family member (Supiano, K.P., Luptak, M., Andersen, T., Beynon, C., Jacobs, E. & Wong, 2020). These circumstances may be heightened in this time of improbability and where families may not be able to see or have physical contact with their relative at the end of life. Families who are able to see a relative who is dying in hospital may then have to socially isolate afterward and not be able to attend the funeral.

### **2.5. Divorce of parents**

In terms of divorce of parents, South Africa, while being delayed in terms of the disease when compared to the rest of the world, was no exclusion to this global pandemic. In response to the rising number of confirmed cases, in South Africa, a “hard” or full lockdown was announced on March 23 by President Cyril Ramaphosa, (2020) to commence from midnight on March 26. This was done as part of government’s strategy in an effort to “flatten the curve”, which refers to an attempt to slow the rate of infection and as such changes the curve of the infection rate within the country. Changing it from what could be considered an exceptional curve, which is sharp when plotted on a graph, contrasted to one which when flattened would see a delayed peak is believed to reduce the demand placed upon the countries’ health care system and result in this being more easily managed. Stringent rules and regulations were issued by the government for the general public. One such example, was regulation 6(m) which banned the movement of children between divorced parents.

However, on April 27, amendments were made to this regulation, resulting in their relaxation. Subsequently, children between parents or coholders of parental rights and responsibilities remained illegal. However, there were two exceptions which were made, such as; where an existing court order was in existence, or if there was a Parental Right and Responsibilities Agreement or Parenting Plan which regulated contact arrangements in place (Van Niekerk, S., & Elson, 2020).

Moore, K.J., Sampson, E.L., Kupeli, N. & Davies, (2020) asserts that while parental alienation syndrome is occasionally mentioned in South African legal discussions, it would appear that the sabotage of access or visits to noncustodial parent by the custodian parent, as part of using the child as a weapon within a nonacrimonious separation of divorce appears to be far more commonly recognised (Szabo, 2020). The longer that this process appears to be far more commonly recognised (Szabo, 2020). The longer that this process of parental alienation takes place, the greater the likelihood of it being consolidated. In response to this, it is of utmost importance that this process be identified and intervened on several levels Szabo, (2020) these being on both practical and legal paths as well as from a mental perspective.

### **2.6. Lack of essential needs**

According to Isbell, (2020) the insufficiency of essential needs in the Afro Barometer report stated that while about half of South Africans had piped water (53%) and toilets (50%) in their homes, many must leave their homes or even their compounds to access these essential services. Rural, poor, and black South Africans face particular disadvantages in access to key public services and infrastructure such as water and sewage systems, markets banks and cell phone services, making it more difficult for them to quarantine at home. Amin, D.O. & Ofori-Asenso, (2020) postulates that access to water is a key determinant for infectious disease control and prevention; thus limited access creates a challenge for transmission control. Nevertheless, across many South African countries where inequalities in access to safe water is pervasive, there is a need to be worried in light of COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly three million people in South Africa live in water stressed environment. This presents a major challenge towards controlling the spread of COVID-19. Poorly developed water and sanitation systems was reported to be a key determinant of the rapid spread of the 2014 Ebola outbreak, as well as an underlying factor in the high number of deaths.

### **2.7. Factors related to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Henaku, (2020) postulates the following factors as contributors to household challenges associated with online learning and COVID-19 pandemic:

## **2.8. Connectivity Problem**

In a study conducted by Henaku, (2020) participants used the expression “network problem” in their description of their online learning experience. Participants explained that their online learning is categorised with connectivity problems due to poor mobile network. Participants revealed that the poor mobile network denied them of constant internet connection for online learning. They further described that they sometimes miss lectures or cannot follow the discussion on their online platforms because of the network problems they face. Some participants reported that lecturers sometimes shorten lectures because of network problems.

## **2.9. Internet Bundle**

With regards to participants’ responses, one of the most common topics of discussion by nearly all participants was internet bundle. Participants were much concerned about the internet bundle. Participants were much concerned about the internet bundle because they said it was expensive and online learning devours a lot of the internet bundle. Some participants explained that they sometimes missed online lectures because they did not have money to procure internet bundle. Largely, participants revealed that they purchase the internet bundle themselves. Hence, online learning is financially draining since they spend most of their pocket money on internet bundle.

## **2.10. Challenges with Device**

All participants involved in the study were either using their mobile phones or laptops for online learning. In discussing their online learning experiences, some participants shared that they had challenges concerning the device they were using. They explained that this made it difficult for them to accessing some websites as well as installing some applications needed for online learning. Participants added that some of their colleagues did not participate in online learning because of the lack of devices.

## **2.11. Household Production**

Participants explained that the home was not conducive for online learning. Participants shared that the home environment influenced their participation negatively in online learning because they encountered different forms of disruption. Participants discussed that most of the disruptions encountered at home were as a result of the need to participate in household productions such as cooking for the family and taking care of younger siblings. Participants elucidated that the performance of these household productions sometimes prevented them from participating in online lectures. Also, their parents complained that they spend too much time on their phones.

## **2.12. Overall Perception of Online Learning**

The participants were undivided about the fact that online learning was a good initiative to ensure the stability of teaching and learning while at home. However, they were of the view that due to the numerous challenges associated with online learning, it should be called off. In a study conducted Auguilera-Hermida, (2020), under situational and environmental challenge, students reported their biggest challenge to be concentrating while being at home. There were many distractions such as family members, noise and housework. Also students associated home with a space for relaxation, so concentration was difficult. Students wrote, “There was a lot going on in the background of my home. Sometimes I could not focus long enough to listen to professors, “and “I work better in a separate environment from home. I associate home with resting, so having to be productive at home has been difficult.” The second, more relevant, challenge was difficult balancing activities between personal life, work, and school. One participant quoted as saying: “It was a challenge managing other responsibilities that I had along with my schoolwork. “Financial hardship during the pandemic was mentioned as a challenge too...participant wrote, “Financially, I was left with barely no money to work with. Other challenges that students mentioned were lack of social interaction and unexpected changes in their lives (death of family members, being pregnant). Another participant said, “It is just very hard, “and “glaring at a screen made me tired.” Moreover, students found it difficult to understand the material and some lost their internships or clinical practices. The other challenge mentioned more often was the lack of supporting resources to complete schoolwork. Student mentioned, many of the normal tools I would need have to learn are unavailable, like peer tutoring, library etcetera. Students also reported difficulties in communicating with professors.

The lack of internet connection was also a problem because many people were using the internet at once. Moreover, students considered that the quality of learning process decreased after the transition to online learning. They were quoted as saying: “lack of educational value found in modified assignments structure, “and “I felt I was not learning at all.” Additionally, some participants reported stress due to an

increased workload, “professors added more work,” and difficulties because they were not familiar with some online tools. It was noted that, not many students mentioned unfamiliarity with online learning, the quotes alluded to denotes difficulty for a student who has never taken an online course. One student said “ I know that our generation is supposed to be technologically inclined, but, in my personal experience I am not and this process is a struggle that I hope I never have to go through.”

### **2.13. Emotional Challenges**

Participants reported a lack of motivation and negative emotions as the most prevalent emotional challenge. Student mentioned, “they stay at home and lose motivation. They also reported stress, anxiety, being worried about getting sick (coronavirus), and changes in their mental health. Students wrote, “I feel my mental health has deteriorated, I feel more sad than I usual, my grades dropped and my mental health worsened (Shim, T.E. and Lee, 2020). suggests that the largest dissatisfaction with remote learning related to network instability, and students cited experiences of network difficulties that disrupted their classes. In remote learning, networks are both a means of promoting interaction between the teacher and students or among students (Trentin, 2007). Therefore, networks are important to the online learning environment and one of the most significant areas for improvement.

Dissatisfaction with the interactions in online learning included poor communication with the instructor as well as inability to collaborate effectively with classmates and a lack of possible feedback to be exchanged between students. According to Tu, C., McIsaac, (2002), online communication can vary by typing skill. They added that due to difficulty in typing and appropriate communication skill, teachers should assess the levels of such skills in their classes. This demonstrates the need for additional, helpful resources that can be provided to students enabling to develop technical skills involved in remote learning. Concentration is another significant factor that students complain about, stating that long classes and lack of sense of belonging or fellowship led to reduce levels of concentration.

According to Wei, (2020), adjusting the pace of online classes can reduce concentration issues along with being able to deliver class content more effectively. In addition, asserts that in the case of emergency remote online classes, not only are students unable to acquire specialised skills, but also, they, cannot improve their level of comprehension and do not feel that they are involved in their classes. Therefore, innovative teaching methods should be pursued to create a more effective learning environment in remote learning. The roles of teachers and learners are an important element for improving the effectiveness of remote learning. Students seek to be provided with the necessary tools for classes to take place in a realistic environment that allows for smooth participation and active teaching.

Furthermore, remote learning was also cited as being unfamiliar and challenging for both teachers and students. According to Trust, T., Whalen, (2020), teachers also feel burdened and unprepared for online instruction and suffer from internet connectivity issues and unclear educational policies, similar to their students. Therefore, to improve remote learning, the difficulties experienced by both students and faculty should be understood, and ways should be sought to solve them. According to Schlesselman, (2020), the potential for future crises requiring the implementation of remote classes is high. For this reason, it is time to prepare online learning environments where students can actively participate in place of the poor class designs currently being used. In addition Cavanaugh, (2005), stated that online learning takes more time to prepare, revise, and interact with face-to-face classes. Therefore, a more systematic and effectively planned remote learning system should be devised tackling the disadvantages of emergency remote learning presented in this study.

## **III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

The research was carried out to determine the challenges posed by online learning while students were at home, compounded by COVID-19 pandemic. Online interviews used, it is done by selecting a sample from the population as it saves time, there is scheduling flexibility, reduces time to complete forms, convenient, it is also more inclusive and convenient while expanding the participant pool.

Bryman, (2014) suggest that Webcam interviews offers further possibilities for synchronous online personal interviews. This is similar to a telephone interview, in that it is mediated by technology, but also similar to an in-person interview, since those involved in the exchange would be to see each other. However, the respondent’s answers would need to be transcribed, as in traditional qualitative interviewing.

Data analysis was performed using thematic analysis, which were divided to main themes and sub-themes. Main themes ranged from taking care of loved ones and abandoning education, bereavement

/separation /divorce and marital problems, insufficiency of essential needs that hindered higher education progression. Sub-themes comprised taking care of a sickly person at home, looking after a child or children, death of both parents/guardians, separation/divorce of parents, and lack of basic essential needs. By using thematic analysis flexibility that is not tied to a specific philosophical orientation was achieved. The main goal was to identify, analyse and describe patterns or themes across data set (Bryman, 2014).

#### **IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Family dynamics and online learning challenges were outlined, emanating from the interviews conducted with 95 students.

*Table 1 depicts the profile of the focus groups interviewed:*

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*Profile of research participants as focus groups*

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<i>GROUP A</i>	<i>Group A comprised of ten (10) females in the ages ranging between 20 and 22. At the time of the study, they either were second or third year students enrolled for different programmes at the study site.</i>
	<i>They were all single. Majority of the participants were Black African and one coloured. They all spoke isiZulu.</i>
<i>GROUP B</i>	<i>Group B consisted of ten (10) members, they were all females. Their ages range between 20 and 33. They were either second or third year students. Nine of them were single and one was married. They were all Black African and all spoke isiZulu.</i>
<i>GROUP C</i>	<i>Group C was made up of ten (10) members with their ages between 20 and 24. At the time of the study, they were all third year students. The group was comprised of two (02) males and eight (08) females, they were all single and they all spoke isiZulu.</i>
<i>GROUP D</i>	<i>Group D consisted of ten (10) members, between the ages of 20 and 31. The composition was made up of six (06) female and four (04) males. They were all single and all of them spoke isiZulu.</i>
<i>GROUP E</i>	<i>Group E consisted of ten (10) members. They were second year students, within the age range between 21 and 24, with nine (09) male and one (01) female. They were all single and Black African. They also spoke isiZulu.</i>

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From table 1 above, it is known that majority of the participants were females and isiZulu was their first language. Also the analysis reveals that majority were unmarried and their nationality/race was Black African Zulu women except one participant in group A, there was one colored who happened to speak isiZulu. From the focus groups, the following responses were recorded:

Group A and B respectively, stated that family background plays a huge role in a student deciding to succeed. Poverty was cited as one main reason. They stated that if the family cannot afford to buy food and provide for basic needs, it was even more challenging for a student to focus on their studies, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Group C stated: “We unanimously feel that family finances does affect the student negatively as some of us come from poor families” .... Therefore, if we know that there is nothing to eat at home, like food, we get worried and think about how we can fix it. The more we worry... the more there is a shift in focus in terms of our studies” ... It is hard” ...and COVID-19 is not making it easier, with travel restrictions.

A participant from Group C stated: “My mother got sick and she was admitted to hospital, it was painful” ..... I could not concentrate on my studies”

A participant from Group B stated” My grandmother was sick, I was the only elder at home , I had to take care of her on a daily basis.... Even when she was admitted to hospital, I had to attend my online classes and go to hospital in the evenings.... It was difficult for me as I was young then... and I am still young, I am not in a position to take care of a sickly person.”

A participant from Group C stated: “losing a parent/s could is devastating as there will be no one to take care of your financial needs.” ... especially data for online classes, should it gets depleted.”

*Table 2. The following were the responses received from individual participants:*

<i>Profile of research participants as individuals</i>			
<i>Gender</i>	<i>Total number</i>	<i>Language spoken</i>	<i>Locality</i>
<i>Male</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>IsiZulu</i>	<i>Pietermaritzburg and Nelspruit (one male)</i>
<i>Female</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>IsiZulu</i>	<i>Pietermaritzburg</i>
<i>Total</i>	<i>45</i>		

Table 2 reveals that there were 45 individual participants. Of the 45, twenty-seven were male and 18 were female. Their age ranged between 20 and 33 years. Two were married and 43 were single. They came from different parts of KwaZulu-Natal, some even came outside the province, for example, participant AB, came from Nelspruit.

*Participant A stated: ...” I personally have a problem with my family’s background because I cannot understand why I am different from other students. My uncle and mother are working; I do not understand why they would fail to provide for us all. I did not ask to be brought into this world” .....so yes, my family finances are a problem, as they could lead me to dropout if I cannot receive the things I require to pursue my studies..... I feel very different from other students; I do not have the things they have” ..... why?” .....*

*Participant H stated: “At home, the only person who is working is my father, he works at a factory, sometimes they have “short-times”, meaning they are asked to stay at home as machines are being serviced” ..... If it is the case in that month, we hardly have enough groceries to see us for the whole month” ... .. And no one is collecting grant money to boost the income.... It is hard” ...*

*Participant J stated: “I have to get up early to cook porridge, clean the house, and cook lunch.... immediately after serving lunch, I must start preparing supper. I hardly find time to sit with my books” ... sometimes we are given assignments to work on, due to the workload at home, I end up submitting late.... and obtain low grades.”*

*Participant R, (who was male) stated: “... we are only boys at home and my mother is not well”. I have to clean the house, bath my mother, cook, do homework with my little brother....it is too much for me....sometimes I feel like dropping out of university and take care of my family full*

*Participant T stated: “No one is working at home” .....” My mother collects pension, and we only rely on her grant money for survival.*

*Participant AE stated: “My father passed away when we were small and my mother raised us” ... I studied hard to pass matric to get to where I am today. I received the funding through my hard work” ..... For me, family background motivated me to always do my best in life. “But, for some, circumstances are bad*

such that they cannot even get to university”. “Currently there is no one working at home, but I am taking that as a motivation to excel in my studies so that I can make things better at home” .....

Participant AF stated: “ ... My parent’s divorce affected us negatively as children... we had to move from the suburb area to a township.... Our lifestyle changed for the worst... we had to downgrade everything. It was difficult as we were so used to a certain standard of doing things” ... my monthly allowance ended. I could not buy the things I wanted, even my monthly data”. It was hard....my marks started dropping .....but I managed to pass all my modules.... I was in the brink of dropping out” ....

Participant AJ stated: “Both my parents are late, due to COVID-19. My grandmother raised me. Only my uncle is working. It is very hard at home. I thought of dropping out, but I realised I will be setting myself up for failure if I do that as my situation will remain the same for the rest of my life”

Participant AR stated: “At home we are all studying and there is only one person working. At times I feel like leaving university early so I can help to support my family” ..... Majority of my siblings are in high school, their needs vary per person, sometimes it is hard to accept that you cannot get what you need as it is not your turn as yet”, especially data and electronic devices to work with.”

## V. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results, the following conclusions were obtained: (1) the provision of electronic devices and data assisted students to attend online classes. So, it is evident that online learning coupled with household challenges at a South African University of Technology posed a threat to students, but the institution was able to support them so they could pursue their studies; (2) Familial circumstances compounded by data and connectivity issues largely contributed negatively to challenges faced by students. It is evident that if the ailing family circumstances and resource provision could be thoroughly managed, students could improve their online learning. Notwithstanding, the Department of Higher Education in partnership with the university had internal arrangements for students to access online classes in 2021 irrespective of their background, especially in time of dire need for resources during COVID-19 pandemic.

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