



From face-to-face to remote teaching during COVID-19: Lecturers at private colleges in Johannesburg

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Background: South African higher education institutions shifted from traditional to remote teaching and learning because of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) national lockdown. Despite extensive research on remote teaching and learning in public universities, there is a noticeable gap in investigating how private higher education colleges, particularly their lecturers, navigated the transition to remote teaching.

Objectives: The objective of this study was to investigate lecturers' experiences of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown in private higher education colleges in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Methods: This qualitative study is based on an MA dissertation, but focuses specifically on data from semi-structured interviews with 10 lecturers employed at various private higher education colleges in Johannesburg. Thematic content analysis method was used to analyse data and present findings.

Results: The findings revealed several challenges faced by lecturers in transitioning and adapting to remote teaching. These challenges included unreliable internet connectivity, difficulty in monitoring student engagement during online sessions, teaching practical modules remotely, and the absence of conducive work environments during the national lockdown and work-from-home arrangements.

Conclusion: Lecturers at private higher education colleges faced significant challenges in adapting to remote teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown. These challenges highlight the need for better institutional support, targeted training in digital pedagogy, and improved infrastructure to enable more effective remote teaching.

Contribution: This study contributes to literature on remote teaching in private higher education institutions and highlights how remote teaching deepened lecturer-student distance, demonstrating the relevance of transactional distance theory (TDT).

Keywords: COVID-19; remote teaching; lecturers; private higher education colleges; Johannesburg.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic disrupted many sectors and industries in South Africa, and the education sector was no exception, as universities, colleges and schools were temporarily closed, prompting the transition from traditional face-to-face to remote teaching and learning (Gore et al., 2023; Hew et al., 2020; Marinoni et al., 2020). The shift to remote teaching and learning in higher education institutions involves the use of online platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Blackboard (Sutterlin, 2018; Hew et al., 2020). Moodle (2021) and Mukhtar et al. (2020) note that remote teaching constitutes the use of the internet to design and deliver module content, which takes place through either synchronous (live sessions on platforms like Zoom) or asynchronous (learning management systems [LMS], allowing flexibility in time and location) approaches. Although higher education institutions had to adapt to these drastic changes for the benefit of students, research conducted in universities highlights that lecturers faced challenges with transitioning and adapting to remote teaching. These challenges included financial constraints in acquiring remote work resources and the lack of office space to conduct remote teaching (Iwu et al., 2022; Magnus, 2021; Mahlaba & Mentz, 2023).

Even though research highlights that university lecturers faced challenges with remote teaching, limited studies examine the transition and adaptation to remote teaching in the context of private higher education colleges, especially in Johannesburg. Higher education in Johannesburg consists

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of universities and private higher education colleges. Universities mostly operate on a wider scope which includes offering undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and engaging in research and community engagement. Meanwhile, private higher education colleges operate in limited scope including receiving no to little funding from government (SchoolGistSA, 2023). Therefore, there is a difference between universities and private higher education colleges, which underscores the significance of conducting research based on private higher education colleges to contribute to the scholarly debate on remote teaching and learning. Legg-Jack and Ndebele (2022) argue that for remote teaching to be effectively implemented, it is crucial to equip lecturers with training on using various online platforms and to provide essential resources, such as functional laptops. It is against this background that this study examines the experiences of private higher education college lecturers with remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown in Johannesburg, South Africa. The study was guided by the primary research question: What are lecturers' experiences of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in private higher education colleges in Johannesburg?

Literature review: Remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic is caused by a novel coronavirus known as severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). SARS-CoV-2 is identified as a highly infectious virus and primarily spreads through respiratory droplets from person to person (World Health Organization [WHO] 2020). The initial case of COVID-19 emerged in December 2019 in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China, and is believed to have originated in a seafood and animal market in Wuhan, where transmission from animals to humans occurred (WHO, 2020). Symptoms of COVID-19 range from mild to severe, encompassing fever, cough and difficulty breathing. In severe instances, the virus can lead to pneumonia, acute respiratory distress and, tragically, death (WHO, 2020). The WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic in March 2020. Thereafter, the South African government declared a national state of disaster, leading to a national lockdown (WHO, 2020). This lockdown restricted unnecessary movement, necessitating the closure of organisations, institutions, schools, colleges and universities. People were mandated to stay at home unless facing an emergency or required to shop for essential goods (Haider et al., 2020; Singh & Tembo, 2022; Spaul & Van der Berg, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown disrupted the education sector, prompting significant changes in teaching methods – from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning (Bayane, 2020; Gore et al., 2023; Maree, 2022; Marongwe & Garidzirai, 2021). Nonetheless, the transition from face-to-face to remote teaching and learning posed many challenges for both students and lecturers (Mahlaba & Mentz, 2023; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Svongoro & Mudzi, 2023). Research focusing on university lecturers highlights that they encountered challenges such as an increased

workload because of the necessity of dedicating more time to preparing for online classes and developing new materials (Iwu et al., 2022). Legg-Jack and Ndebele (2022) add that university lecturers faced challenges in maintaining student participation in online sessions and sometimes experienced poor internet connections, which affected remote teaching. Engaging with students in online classes posed a major challenge because of low participation levels, as many students kept their cameras off, making it challenging for lecturers to assess their concentration during lessons (Legg-Jack & Ndebele, 2022). Hence, lecturers needed to explore strategies to improve student engagement and encourage active involvement (Baber, 2020).

As lecturers worked from home, research highlights that they also lacked dedicated office or workspace, which interfered with their productivity, creating a sense of inefficacy while working remotely (Iwu et al., 2022). Chibuwe and Munoriyarwa (2023) expand on the issue of remote teaching and note that university lecturers encountered significant difficulties in remotely delivering modules that demanded numerical and practical skills within a remote learning environment. Therefore, the absence of face-to-face interaction and teaching posed hurdles in modules with practical components (Chibuwe & Munoriyarwa, 2023). These challenges faced by lecturers have been identified as psychological, emotional and social dilemmas that are taking a toll on their mental and physical well-being. A significant contributor to their mental strain is the inadequate provision of e-resources, including essential data and devices for remote teaching (Govender et al., 2021; Newlin & Israel, 2021).

While existing literature conducted on university lecturers highlights the dynamics and challenges they faced with remote teaching, there is limited research examining the experiences and perceptions of private higher education college lecturers regarding the studied phenomenon. This study aims to empirically contribute to the scholarly research on remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically in the context of private higher education college lecturers. The study further uses the transactional distance theory to theoretically analyse the experiences of private higher education college lecturers in transitioning, adapting and dealing with remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown.

Theoretical framework

Transactional distance theory (TDT) is employed to examine remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic by focusing on the experiences of private higher education college lecturers in Johannesburg. Michael Moore introduced TDT in the 1970s to analyse the dynamics of distance education. He posits that the transactional distance, or the psychological and communication gap between instructors and learners in distance education settings, is influenced by three primary factors: structure, dialogue and learner autonomy (Moore, 1997). Structure pertains to the organisation of the educational programme, encompassing the curriculum, instructional

materials and delivery methods. It is suggested that a well-defined structure can minimise the transactional distance in teaching and learning (Moore, 1997; Moore & Kearsley, 2011). Falloon (2011) argues that dialogue involves the interaction between instructors and learners, emphasising meaningful communication and responsiveness to learners' needs. Effective dialogue plays a crucial role in bridging the transactional distance between educators and learners. Furthermore, learner autonomy refers to the extent to which learners are self-directed in their learning process, allowing them to assume control over their educational journey (Moore, 1997). These factors collectively contribute to reducing the transactional distance between instructors and learners, thereby fostering more effective learning experiences.

Transactional distance theory was a suitable theoretical framework for examining remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown, particularly in private higher education colleges. By using TDT, we can better understand how the physical separation between lecturers and students shaped private higher education college lecturers' experiences of remote teaching. For example, the shift to remote teaching exacerbated the transactional distance, leading to a more structured, but less connected learning environment. This change had adverse effects, such as weakening the sense of rapport between lecturers and students and a decline in student motivation (Lufungulo et al., 2021). Additionally, Hanekom (2020) highlights that both lecturers and students faced challenges in adapting to online instruction. Therefore, through the lens of TDT, it is clear that the challenges lecturers faced in adjusting to remote teaching likely had a negative impact on students' learning process and performance.

Research methods and design

The study employed a qualitative research approach to investigate the challenges and experiences faced by lecturers regarding remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative research is focused on presenting narratives and textual descriptions of the phenomenon under investigation (Babbie, 2021; Vanderstoep & Johnson, 2009). This method facilitates a comprehensive exploration and understanding of human actions, events and experiences (Sarantakos, 2005; Bless et al., 2013). Therefore, adopting a qualitative research approach enabled researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of lecturers' experiences with remote teaching in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically within private higher education colleges in Johannesburg.

This study was conducted in the City of Johannesburg, which is a part of the larger Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality. The choice of this location was driven by the substantial presence of private higher education colleges within the municipality (Yes Media, 2021). The Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality is divided into seven regions which constitute various private higher education colleges.

However, the specific focus of this study was on two regions, namely Region A and Region B. These regions were selected because they have the highest number of face-to-face colleges that shifted to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET], 2022).

This study draws from an MA dissertation which interviewed a total of 26 participants consisting of 16 students and 10 lecturers. However, this paper only refers to in-depth data from 10 lecturers in private higher education colleges. These participants were accessed and selected using the snowball and convenience sampling techniques. The snowball technique involved identifying and interviewing the first participant who then suggested other participants matching the characteristics of the study (Babbie, 2021). Convenience sampling was therefore based on selecting participants matching the characteristics related to this study, which included participants who lectured at a specific college in Region A or Region B during the COVID-19 pandemic and were between the ages of 30 and 50 years old. Participants were telephonically contacted, and those interviewed suggested others matching the characteristics of the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants, and all interviews were conducted using the Microsoft Teams platform as suggested by participants. All interviews were conducted in English and recorded, and each interview lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. An interview guide which consisted of open-ended questions was used to guide the interview sessions with participants. Semi-structured interviews were therefore suitable for this study, as they allowed researchers to gain in-depth understanding of lecturers' experiences of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic at private higher education colleges in Johannesburg (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The study employed the thematic content analysis technique to analyse the collected data and present findings in themes (Alhojailan, 2012). The analysis followed a set of steps proposed by Rosenthal (2016), including transcription, coding, theme identification and writing. All interviews were conducted on the Microsoft Teams platform, and transcripts were generated. To ensure accuracy, transcripts were thoroughly reviewed and validated against recorded interviews, with necessary corrections made. After transcript validation, the next step involved closely examining coded information. This process involved identifying common ideas, which were highlighted using different colours based on the ideas identified. The third step focused on identifying common themes that addressed the research aim and objectives. These themes were colour-coded according to theme category. In the final step, each identified theme and sub-theme underwent interpretation, providing a comprehensive analysis.

Participants were also given an information letter and consent forms to sign as an act of voluntarily agreeing to

participate in the study, which were thoroughly discussed with them before the interview. This approach ensured that lecturers were fully informed about the study and had the opportunity to provide consent before participating. Pseudonyms were used for all participants to ensure that their personal information was not disclosed as per their request. The above steps assisted in ensuring that participants' rights were protected in the study.

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance to conduct this study was obtained from the University of South Africa, College of Human Sciences Research Ethics Review Committee (No. 17018013_CREC_CHS_2022).

Results

Transitioning from face-to-face to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic: 'It was challenging because we were not prepared'

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, higher education institutions including private higher education colleges, predominantly relied on traditional face-to-face teaching methods. However, as the pandemic emerged and lockdowns were implemented, academic institutions rapidly transitioned to remote teaching as the prevalent mode of instruction. This shift posed considerable challenges for lecturers, particularly because of a lack of preparation and training. The lecturers in private higher education colleges interviewed in this study shared similar sentiments about the difficulties encountered during this transition. James, a 35-year-old lecturer, described his experience with remote teaching:

'Remote teaching was a chaos and a new thing to all of us, and most importantly we were not prepared for it at all. I remember receiving communication from the department that the college will be transitioning to remote teaching. I had no idea what to do and where to start because I was used to teaching students face-to-face. Hence, I felt like the college quickly implemented remote teaching because we were not adequately trained and ready for such a thing.' (James, 35-year-old lecturer, April 2023)

James highlights the challenges of adapting to remote teaching, particularly because of the lack of preparation and training. He explains his personal experience, citing confusion upon receiving the announcement, which reflects the broader issue of unstructured and unprepared transition as private higher education college lecturers were still accustomed to face-to-face teaching methods. These sentiments were echoed by other lecturers, such as John, a 46-year-old lecturer from another private college:

'Changing from face-to-face to online teaching was difficult at first, especially for us older lecturers because we are not familiar and fast with technology, and we were also not provided training for online teaching. Hence, I relied a lot on support from other colleagues especially young ones because they know when to click and what to do with technology.' (John, 46-year-old lecturer, May 2023)

Both James and John emphasise the lack of training as a major barrier to adapting to remote teaching, particularly for older lecturers who were less familiar with technology and remote teaching. John specifically illustrates how he sought assistance from younger colleagues, underscoring the difficulties faced by those unfamiliar with digital teaching tools. These accounts reflect the widespread challenges private higher education lecturers faced during the abrupt transition to remote teaching, largely because of insufficient preparation and training.

Challenges experienced by lecturers teaching during the pandemic: 'Remote teaching and working from home was a challenge'

Building upon the debate on the transition to remote teaching during COVID-19, several challenges were noted by private higher education college lecturers regarding online classes. Participants highlighted issues such as unstable internet connections, difficulties in maintaining and monitoring student engagement, and the absence of a conducive workspace at home. One of the main challenges mentioned during interviews was the instability of internet connections and network issues. Grace, a 37-year-old lecturer, shared her biggest challenge with remote teaching:

'Honestly remote teaching was difficult because the college had not provided lecturers with adequate equipment such as functional laptops and data for remote teaching and learning. I had to instantly get Fibre (WIFI) to be able to work at home, as I had meetings and classes. But it was challenging because the internet connection was not strong, sometimes students would complain that they could not hear me during online classes, and classes would also finish early due to poor network.' (Grace, 37-year-old lecturer, April 2023)

Grace explains how remote teaching was not easy because of a lack of proper support. She highlights how the college did not provide her with data, and she ended up getting herself fibre (WiFi) to continue with work and online classes. Despite these efforts, she experienced an unstable internet connection which negatively impacted her online classes with students – as they sometimes would not hear her during online classes. The issue of unstable internet connection was echoed by other lecturers in this study. For instance, Mike, a 39-year-old lecturer from another college said:

'The internet connection was the biggest challenge I had when having to conduct online classes because as a mathematics lecturers I had to sometimes do calculations for students to see. But the internet connection was unstable sometimes that students would miss some steps, and when I ask if they understand, they complained that they did not get all the steps and information I demonstrated because I was cutting. This therefore affected students' performance in module tests and examination.' (Mike, 39-year-old lecturer, April 2023)

Mike's narrative further illustrates that remote teaching was not easy because of unstable internet connection

and network issues. He mentions that remotely teaching modules such as mathematics was difficult because of poor internet connection and network problems, as students would sometimes miss calculation steps during classes. The difficulty of teaching practical modules was also mentioned by John, a 46-year-old lecturer:

'I strongly believe that face-to-face classes are much better than remote teaching, especially for subjects that involve practical applications and discussions. Being in the Hospitality Industry, I have observed that students perform better in a face-to-face setting due to increased interaction than in remote teaching or online classes.' (John, 46-year-old lecturer, May 2023)

John also expressed the difficulties encountered in lecturing practical modules during the pandemic. He specifically teaches hospitality modules, where the curriculum necessitates students to participate in face-to-face classes involving hands-on activities, such as practical beverage demonstrations and cooking sessions. The transition to remote teaching posed substantial challenges, particularly for lecturers overseeing practical modules that heavily rely on live demonstrations. As a result, remote teaching affected students' performance in module tests and examinations. It is clear that remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic was challenging for lecturers as unstable internet connection and network issues made it difficult for them to teach students as effectively as they could, and as it was during traditional face-to-face classes on campuses.

Additionally, conducting remote teaching amid the pandemic posed significant challenges, primarily in the monitoring and sustaining of student engagement during online classes. Participants in this study expressed a notable preference for face-to-face teaching, citing the ability to actively observe and engage with students in real time. The transition to remote teaching, however, presented difficulties for lecturers by hindering their capacity to effectively monitor and fully interact with students. For example, Happiness, a 42-year-old lecturer, shared:

'When teaching on campus, the interaction with students is more immediate. You can observe their facial expressions, making it easier to notice if they are concentrating. However, in remote teaching, students might simply log in for attendance without active participation. As a lecturer you cannot see if they are interested in the content, or if they are participating or getting something out of the remote classes.' (Happiness, 42-year-old lecturer, May 2023)

Happiness highlighted the positive aspects of teaching before the pandemic, emphasising the ability to observe students' responses in face-to-face classes. However, she also noted the challenges of remote teaching, particularly the difficulty in gauging student reactions, as many kept their cameras off, presumably to conserve data. As a result, remote teaching in private higher education colleges made it more challenging for lecturers to monitor student participation effectively.

Another significant challenge identified was the absence of a conducive and properly equipped home-office workspace. Several interviewed lecturers expressed the difficulties they faced while working in uncomfortable environments at home. This factor adversely affected their ability to deliver high-quality lectures and provide sufficient support to their students. Susan, a 41-year-old lecturer, said:

'... Working from home and remotely was challenging as there were distractions due to lots of activity happening at home, making work from home difficult. Other people were also staying in the house. My working environment was therefore not conducive as I did not even have a dedicated workspace or office and this negatively affected my concentration and ability to support students.' (Susan, 41-year-old lecturer, May 2023)

Susan articulates the difficulties she faced in staying focused and being productive when working from home. Her challenges with maintaining focus during teaching from home stemmed from the absence of a dedicated workspace. The predominant issue revolves around the constant interference caused by ambient noise and various distractions in her home environment. She then had to navigate through disruptions, which negatively impacted her ability to concentrate and deliver effective lessons. Consequently, there were instances where Susan felt that she fell short of providing her students with the undivided attention they deserve during her designated working hours. The issue of working from home was also echoed by other lecturers interviewed in this study. For instance, Dintle, a 40-year-old lecturer, said:

'Working from home during the pandemic was a challenge because I did not have a workspace or office, and I stay with people in the house. As such, I was distracted throughout the day and especially during online classes because I kept on apologising to my students for the background noise. This was a bit embarrassing for me, but it was [*the*] situation that we were faced with and there was nothing we could do.' (Dintle, 40-year-old lecturer, May 2023)

Dintle supports Susan's reflections on working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic and conducting remote teaching. She mentions that working from home was difficult because she did not have a specific space dedicated to work. This led to frequent distractions during work hours, especially during online classes, because of background noise from people she lives with. As such, remote teaching in private higher education colleges was challenging for lecturers, as the absence of a conducive workspace at home resulted in constant disruptions during online classes, ultimately affecting students' performance.

The challenges faced by college lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic in transitioning to remote teaching were multifaceted. The findings underscore that many lecturers found themselves inadequately prepared and ill-equipped for the abrupt shift from traditional face-to-face instruction to remote modalities. One prominent issue that surfaced was the prevalence of unstable internet connections and network disruptions, adversely affecting the quality of remote teaching

sessions. Notably, the findings revealed that lecturers encountered internet connectivity problems, which had a detrimental impact on both the delivery of their remote classes and the performance of their students amid the pandemic. The instability in internet connections emerged as a significant obstacle, impeding the seamless execution of online teaching and leading to challenges in effectively communicating lesson content. This issue, experienced across various private higher education colleges, also hindered the engagement and participation of students, further exacerbating the difficulties lecturers faced in delivering high-quality education.

The findings highlighted lecturers' struggle to effectively monitor and sustain student engagement during virtual classes. This challenge was exacerbated by students opting to keep their cameras off, which made it difficult for lecturers to gauge participation levels and maintain a conducive learning environment. Consequently, this lack of visual engagement significantly contributed to the overarching difficulties experienced in remote teaching. Additionally, the findings identified a significant issue: the lack of conducive work areas and spaces at home for lecturers. The absence of an optimal work environment impacted lecturers' concentration levels, further complicating their task of facilitating online classes. This, in turn, had a ripple effect on student engagement and performance.

Valuable lessons of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic

While teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic presented numerous challenges, it also served as a catalyst for valuable lessons. Many private higher education college lecturers highlighted the acquisition of crucial technological knowledge and skills as one of these lessons. This is particularly evident in the insights gained from an interview with Bongani, a 33-year old lecturer who shared his transformative experience as a lecturer during the pandemic. He said:

'The Covid-19 pandemic taught me the variation in teaching tools that one can utilise where we were so used to face-to-face classes. It taught me the various ways in which you can make teaching interactive, even if it was an on a digital format. It further taught us that we do not necessarily need to be in class anymore to be able to provide quality education.' (Bongani, 33-year old lecturer, April 2023)

Bongani highlights that the pandemic and the shift to remote teaching played a pivotal role in expanding his repertoire of teaching tools and methodologies. This period not only compelled him to diversify but also allowed him to acquire additional skills, particularly in making remote classes more interactive. The experience gained by lecturers through remote teaching served as a catalyst for further enhancing their overall teaching proficiency. This was echoed by Mary, a 30-year old lecturer who said:

'Well, it opened me up to a different scope of teaching and extending myself to remote teaching as a young lecturer. At that stage I was quite used to contact teaching and it challenged me

to look into different scopes of teaching and also get used to the concept of not only distance but also to the concept of hybrid teaching now.' (Mary, 30-year old lecturer, May 2023)

In the provided excerpt, Mary emphasises that the experience of remote teaching significantly enriched her overall teaching approach, compelling her to explore innovative methods. Consequently, both Bongani and Mary share similar perspectives on the valuable lessons gained from their respective experiences with remote teaching during the pandemic. This shift is highlighted by their transition from conventional face-to-face methodologies to the adoption of diverse teaching approaches tailored to the demands of remote teaching.

Discussion: Lecturers' challenges of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic in private higher education colleges

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown had a significant impact on higher education institutions in South Africa. Following the global declaration of the pandemic in March 2020, the South African government declared a national state of disaster and enforced a lockdown (WHO, 2020). The lockdown aimed to restrict unnecessary movement, leading to the closure of schools and higher education institutions (Haider et al., 2020; Singh & Tembo, 2022; Spaul & Van der Berg, 2020). Maree (2022) suggests that the lockdown necessitated a shift in teaching methods for both schools and higher education institutions. As a result, higher education institutions, including private colleges, transitioned to remote teaching and learning to maintain academic programmes. While much research has focused on the challenges faced by university lecturers, this paper specifically examined the experiences of lecturers in private higher education colleges.

The findings revealed that lecturers in private higher education colleges encountered challenges when shifting from traditional face-to-face teaching to remote teaching. A key barrier was the lack of preparedness and institutional support for online teaching. Many lecturers reported that they had not received formal training in using digital platforms, which hindered their ability to implement remote teaching effectively. Research highlights that the success of online teaching is contingent on the digital literacy of educators and adequate professional development in online pedagogies (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020). The absence of structured training particularly affected older lecturers who were less familiar with technology. This aligns with studies showing that professional development programmes significantly improve educators' ability to engage students in remote settings (Crawford et al., 2020). Thus, the sudden shift to remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic posed significant challenges for lecturers in private higher education colleges, as they received minimal institutional support.

Beyond digital literacy, lecturers in private higher education colleges faced technical and infrastructural challenges, including unstable internet connections, limited access to teaching resources and difficulties engaging students remotely. According to TDT, these challenges increased transactional distance, as lecturers were unable to create a dynamic learning environment. Moore (1997) argued that dialogue involves meaningful communication, which is essential in reducing transactional distance. However, the technological barriers faced by lecturers in private higher education colleges in remote teaching hindered such communication. Unreliable internet connectivity has been widely cited as a critical barrier in remote learning environments, especially in low-resource settings (Iwu et al., 2022). This study found that lecturers in private higher education colleges faced similar challenges with internet instability, which hindered their ability to conduct online classes effectively. The lack of reliable internet access also prevented lecturers from facilitating real-time discussions and feedback, thus increasing the psychological gap between lecturers and students. Unlike university lecturers, who may have received institutional support for data access, lecturers in private higher education colleges were largely responsible for arranging their own internet services. Studies have also shown that disparities in access to reliable internet infrastructure exacerbate inequalities in digital learning experiences (Mishra et al., 2020).

Another significant challenge noted in this study was student engagement. Many lecturers reported difficulties in monitoring and assessing student participation in online classes, particularly when students kept their video cameras off. Research indicates that student interaction is a key determinant of effective remote learning (Baber, 2020; Simpson, 2013). The lack of face-to-face interaction made it harder for lecturers to assess students' understanding of the material. Active learning strategies, such as breakout rooms and interactive digital tools, have been suggested as effective ways to enhance student engagement in online settings (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). However, many private higher education college lecturers lacked training in these techniques, limiting their ability to foster interactive learning environments during remote teaching.

Teaching practical modules remotely presented another obstacle in remote teaching. Lecturers in fields such as hospitality and mathematics found it difficult to adapt their teaching methodologies because of the absence of hands-on training opportunities. Research highlights that online learning platforms are often not well-suited for teaching practical subjects without substantial technological investment, such as simulation software or virtual laboratories (Chibuwe & Munoriyarwa, 2023). The lack of resources is a critical aspect of the structure that is suggested to influence transactional distance (Moore, 1997). When teaching materials and methods are not aligned with the nature of the module being taught, transactional distance widens, leading to feelings of isolation and disengagement among students (Moore, 1997). The lack of these resources in

private higher education colleges during the national lockdown further complicated the transition to remote teaching.

Additionally, the findings revealed that the absence of suitable workspaces was a significant challenge for lecturers in private higher education colleges. Following the shift to remote work, many lecturers faced challenges in securing dedicated home office spaces, which hindered their ability to support students effectively. According to TDT, student autonomy is enhanced when they are provided with a clear and well-supported structure. However, in this case, the lack of a suitable teaching environment for lecturers, with students' autonomy in remote settings, created challenges in fostering an interactive and supportive learning environment (Moore, 1997). Research also highlights that an inadequate home working environment can lead to stress and decreased productivity among educators (Crick et al., 2021; Naidu & Modise, 2021). Lecturers also reported distractions from family members, making it difficult to maintain the same level of instructional quality as in traditional classroom settings.

Despite these challenges, the findings indicate that the pandemic also fostered pedagogical innovation. Many lecturers adopted new teaching methods, and remote teaching improved their proficiency with digital tools, including LMS, video conferencing and online assessment platforms, which are now integral to modern education (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Rapanta et al., 2020). The shift to online teaching compelled lecturers to develop technological skills that remain valuable post-pandemic. Many now integrate blended learning models, combining in-person sessions with online resources to provide greater flexibility and accessibility (Crawford et al., 2020). These evolving strategies suggest that remote teaching has catalysed lasting shifts in pedagogy, equipping lecturers with skills and methodologies that extend beyond the pandemic. Moving forward, private higher education institutions must invest in ongoing professional development, enhance digital infrastructure and support educators in remote and hybrid teaching environments.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent national lockdown in South Africa had a significant impact on higher education institutions, including private colleges. These institutions had to shift from traditional face-to-face teaching to remote learning, but the experiences of private higher education college lecturers with remote teaching are understudied. This paper addresses this gap by exploring the experiences and challenges faced by private higher education college lecturers during the national lockdown. The findings revealed that lecturers encountered numerous difficulties with remote teaching, particularly during the transition phase, because of limited training and support. Lecturers at private higher education colleges also faced additional hurdles, such as unreliable internet connections,

difficulty conducting practical modules effectively, and challenges in monitoring student engagement during online classes. Moreover, many lecturers struggled to maintain productivity because of a lack of suitable workspace or home office setup. Despite these challenges, private higher education college lecturers also acknowledged the valuable lessons learned from remote teaching. They gained insights into various methods and support mechanisms that can benefit students in an online learning environment. This paper sheds light on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and national lockdown on higher education in private colleges, emphasising the challenges faced by private higher education college lecturers in adapting to remote teaching.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Authors' contributions

P.B. contributed to the original research idea, analysis, writing and review of the article. P.B. also assisted as the supervisor on this study. A.M. contributed to the original research idea, methodology, data collection, analysis and first draft writing of the article.

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Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available on reasonable request from the corresponding author, A.M.

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