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Prospects of Blended Learning for the Post-COVID-19 Higher Education: The Instructors' Perspectives at a University in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The study explored the prospects of the blended learning approach for post-COVID-19 higher education from the perspectives of instructors at a university in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. The study was qualitative and adopted the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) design. Using the purposive sampling method, a sample of twenty-eight academics was drawn from one university. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and thematically analysed. The findings revealed that blended learning has prospects for higher education in the post-COVID-19 context; such as accommodating vulnerable students without access to the internet and devices, increasing use of technologies for teaching and learning, facilitation of teaching and learning at any time and place, and solving problems of classroom overcrowding, increasing opportunities for higher education enrolment, breaking communication barriers between university instructors and students, and solving problems of truancy and absence of students and lecturers during the face-to-face lecture hours. In light of these findings, this study concluded that the prospects of blended learning should be harnessed for higher education in the post-COVID-19 context. The present study also considered some recommendations for making the blended learning approach effective in attaining higher education goals. These included increasing investment in the use of technologies for teaching and learning; and ensuring that there is continuous training of instructors in the use of emerging technologies for educational purposes while government at all levels continues to support HEIs for the implementation of the BL delivery system.

Keywords: *Blended learning, Online learning, Face-to-face learning, Higher education, University instructors, COVID-19 lockdown*

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak and the innovations resulting from using various digital platforms for teaching and learning have helped Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) understand teaching, research, and community engagements as perhaps not necessarily new but complex tasks deserving a paradigm shift. This new paradigm shift requires that students not only acquire knowledge but also be taught how to think and develop creativity, how to find innovative solutions independently to problems, and

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perform creditably well in standard and non-standard circumstances.[1] Simply put, the pandemic and the subsequent closures of educational institutions across the globe is a pointer to the changes which HEIs require in the post-COVID-19 context such that emphasis will shift away from, noted by Monteiro, Leite, and Lima. "centralization of transmittal teaching towards awareness of the added value of a learning process in which students have a more active role in building knowledge."[2] In other words, the benefits of digital technologies should be harnessed by HEIs to allow for student-centred learning approaches while instructors serve only as facilitators in blended learning (BL) delivery system. In this qualitative study, the prospects of the BL approach for post-COVID-19 higher education were explored from the university instructors' perspectives at the Eastern Cape University in South Africa.

Learning, as a process, involves the acquisition of cognitive and demonstrative experiences for improvement or effecting positive changes in skills, knowledge, and [behaviour].[3] Although the learning environment has been traditionally associated with the physical classrooms where teachers have face-to-face (F2F) interactions with students and learning materials; conduct paper and pen assessments, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant closures of educational institutions had drawn attention to the potential of online learning. Okaz argues that the focus on only F2F interaction provides no room for collaborative learning and does not motivate for implementation of higher-level thinking skills by [university] instructors; he notes further that it is challenging for several instructors at the HEIs to shift their teaching approaches from the traditional F2F interactions to the internet-based interactions.[4] According to Martinez-Caro and Campuzano-Bolarin, students agreed that they received greater learning satisfaction from BL courses than from traditional F2F lectures and courses.[5] Karupiah's study (as cited in Azizan et al.) shows that a majority of tertiary students (78 percent in Malaysia, 83 percent in Canada, and 78 percent in China) during the global pandemic's lockdown had expressed preferences for online learning over F2F mode; provided that programme fees are affordable.[6] The US Department of Education's 2010 report also alludes to the fact that online learning students, on average, outperformed their counterparts who received the F2F instructions.[7] This confirms that both online and F2F learning have to run concurrently as a meld or approach for instructional delivery in the post-COVID time.

In the view of Azizan et al., BL will likely become the mode of learning in the post-COVID-19 era to provide practical benefits of F2F learning and the flexibility of online learning.[8] Of course, HEIs in South Africa cannot underestimate the prospects of BL as the world is gradually moving out of the pandemic to the post-COVID-19 period, when instructors in higher institutions may be compelled to teach their modules using both 2F2 and online learning approaches. In the extant literature, BL benefits have been generally noted in other South African countries. BL is noted to have benefited Malawi in terms of continuous professional development of its workforce; promoted student engagement and support in Namibia; strengthened Botswana's rural-based science teachers'

[1] Tatiana Krasnova, "A Paradigm Shift: Blended Learning Integration in Russian Higher Education," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 166 (January 2015): 399–403, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.12.543.
[2] Krasnova, "A paradigm shift: Blended learning integration in Russian higher education." 400.
[3] Bokolo Anthony Jnr., "Institutional Factors for Faculty Members' Implementation of Blended Learning in Higher Education," *Education + Training* 63, no. 5 (June 1, 2021): 701–19, https://doi.org/10.1108/ET-06-2020-0179.
[4] Abeer Ali Okaz, "Integrating Blended Learning in Higher Education," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 186 (May 2015): 600–603, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.04.086.
[5] Eva Martínez-Caro and Francisco Campuzano-Bolarín, "Factors Affecting Students' Satisfaction in Engineering Disciplines: Traditional vs. Blended Approaches," *European Journal of Engineering Education* 36, no. 5 (October 2011): 473–83, https://doi.org/10.1080/03043797.2011.619647.
[6] Siti Norbaya Azizan et al., "Academic Staff's Perspective on Blended Learning Practices in Higher Education Post COVID-19: A Case Study of a Singaporean University," *Asia Pacific Journal of Educators and Education* 36, no. 2 (January 20, 2022): 205–31, https://doi.org/10.21315/apjee2021.36.2.11.
[7] Gulnara Namyssova et al., "Challenges and Benefits of Blended Learning in Higher Education," *International Journal of Technology in Education* 2, no. 1 (October 16, 2019): 22–31, https://www.ijte.net/index.php/ijte/article/view/6.
[8] Azizan, et.al. "Academic staff's perspective on blended learning practices in higher education post COVID-19."

professional development; and encouraged innovations such as hands-on skills for student engagement in real-situation like professional practice.[9]

Commenting on the prospect of the BL, Alammary et al. aver that BL is capable of offsetting the weaknesses and shortcomings associated with either online learning or F2F learning.[10] This view is buttressed by several other scholars who also affirm that BL is a systematic integration of face-to-face teaching with online modalities, which include web-based technologies or mobile learning and radio, with the strength of each mode mutually and reciprocally reinforcing one another.[11] Put differently, studies have proven that the BL approach is more effective than either the traditional F2F mode[12] or online learning interactions.[13] The effectiveness of the BL approach over either the F2F or online learning has been affirmed in studies where it is unambiguously stated that students achieved better learning outcomes from the BL courses compared to outcomes from either the traditional F2F or online courses.[14]

Blended learning is simply defined as a mix of instructional modalities, that is, both the F2F learning and online learning modes.[15] The BL approach is, therefore, a meld of both F2F instructional delivery and online instructions[16] and has become one of the most commonly used modes of instruction at the HEIs.[17] Krasnova defines it as a teaching method that melds "the most effective F2F teaching techniques with online interactive collaboration, both constituting a system that functions in constant correlation and forms a single whole."[18] Azizan et al. posit that BL would expectedly emerge in the post-pandemic as the new educational approach; which brings into use both F2F teaching with online tools in such a way that HEIs have a meld of COVID-19 fully online learning and on-campus F2F

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[9] Bopelo Boitshwarelo, "Exploring Blended Learning for Science Teacher Professional Development in an African Context," *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning* 10, no. 4 (September 23, 2009), https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v10i4.687; Jesse Johnson, Mike Abia, and Rejoice Quest, "A Comparison of Blended and Traditional Approaches to Computing and Informatics Instruction in Namibia Outcomes and Consequences for a Developing Nation," in *7th Annual International Conference on Computer Science Education: Innovation & Technology (CSEIT 2016)* (Global Science & Technology Forum (GSTF), 2016), https://doi.org/10.5176/2251-2195_CSEIT16.41; Nikolaos Mastellos et al., "Training Community Healthcare Workers on the Use of Information and Communication Technologies: A Randomised Controlled Trial of Traditional versus Blended Learning in Malawi, Africa," *BMC Medical Education* 18, no. 1 (December 2, 2018): 61, https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-018-1175-5; P. Muhuro and S. M. Kangethe, "Prospects and Pitfalls Associated with Implementing Blended Learning in Rural-Based Higher Education Institutions in Southern Africa," *Perspectives in Education* 39, no. 1 (March 12, 2021): 427–41, https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/PIE.V39.I1.26.

[10] Ali Alammary, Judy Sheard, and Angela Carbone, "Blended Learning in Higher Education: Three Different Design Approaches," *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 30, no. 4 (September 9, 2014), https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.693.

[11] Muhuro, and Kangethe, "Prospects and pitfalls associated with implementing blended learning."; Charles R. Graham, Wendy Woodfield, and J. Buckley Harrison, "A Framework for Institutional Adoption and Implementation of Blended Learning in Higher Education," *The Internet and Higher Education* 18 (July 2013): 4–14, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2012.09.003; Randy D. Garrison and Norman D. Vaughan, *Blended Learning in Higher Education* (San Francisco, CA, USA: Jossey-Bass, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118269558.

[12] Namyssova, et.al. "Challenges and benefits of blended learning in higher education."

[13] Alammary, Sheard, and Carbone, "Blended learning in higher education: Three different design approaches."

[14] Namyssova, et.al. "Challenges and benefits of blended learning in higher education."; Barbara Means et al., "Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies.," *US Department of Education*, May 2009; Karen Smith and John Hill, "Defining the Nature of Blended Learning through Its Depiction in Current Research," *Higher Education Research & Development* 38, no. 2 (February 23, 2019): 383–97, https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2018.1517732.

[15] Renee Crawford and Louise Jenkins, "Blended Learning and Team Teaching: Adapting Pedagogy in Response to the Changing Digital Tertiary Environment," *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 33, no. 2 (December 1, 2016), https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.2924.

[16] Inkeri Ruokonen and Heikki Ruismäki, "E-Learning in Music: A Case Study of Learning Group Composing in a Blended Learning Environment," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 217 (February 2016): 109–15, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2016.02.039.

[17] John Marco Pima et al., "A Thematic Review of Blended Learning in Higher Education," *International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning* 10, no. 1 (January 1, 2018): 1–11, https://doi.org/10.4018/IJMBL.2018010101.

[18] Krasnova, "A paradigm shift: blended learning integration in Russian higher education." 401.

learning.[19] In this study, the BL approach is understood to be a learning approach that adopts a combination of both F2F and online environments to suit the attainment of specific educational goals over a given period.

Researchers have argued that the BL approach will certainly be the new instructional model of course delivery at the higher education level.[20] According to Alammary et al., there are three approaches to BL design in higher education, namely: the low-impact blend, medium-impact blend, and high-impact blend.[21] A low-impact blend is an approach in which instructors add or introduce some extra online web-based activities to a traditional F2F course. Alammary et al. opine that this is an approach that inexperienced instructors who are just trying out a blended learning course for the first time without making an effort to redesign the course to achieve blended learning outcomes.[22] This approach is easy to use by instructors with minimal experience teaching courses in a traditional F2F classroom. Its challenge is that it requires some knowledge of technology for a successful application.

The second approach is the medium-impact blend which allows an instructor to redesign an existing course by replacing some activities in the F2F learning with online web-based activities, believing that some aspects of the course would be better with some online instructions. For example, an instructor may decide to introduce a computer-based test to replace the traditional F2F paper and pen test. Another example is the submission of assignments electronically via email or the LMS platforms. The instructor can also share lecture notes electronically rather than dictating such notes to students during class. The medium-impact blend emboldens and motivates instructors to design a fully implemented blended learning course. The challenge in this approach is the ability of instructors to dedicate sufficient time and efforts required for designing the blended course; and which of the components of the traditional F2F course would be better off when taught or handled fully online.[23] The third approach, the high-impact blend, is used when a new course curriculum with a blended learning delivery system is built or designed by the instructors from scratch. This approach allows for the integration of F2F with online components to better meet the needs of individual students. Its challenge is that it requires a high level of technological knowledge and experience in blended learning design.[24]

The BL approach has advantages, including enhancing effective communication between instructors and students, facilitating effective collaboration among learners, fostering a student-centred generation of new knowledge and engagement, enabling flexibility of teaching and learning, and accommodating an appropriate combination or blend of technologies and learning processes.[25] In the same vein, Buran and Evseeva state the merits of the BL approach as follows: easy adaptability to students' needs, development of students' creative and critical thinking, and reduction in the instructors' workloads.[26] The findings of a study on post-COVID-19 and the potential of BL in higher institutions indicate that the BL approach has the potential to create "both cohesive and effective learning environment overcoming geographical and physical barriers of traditional face-to-face classroom teaching."[27] Similarly, other scholars have submitted that BL not only makes it possible to

[19] Azizan, et.al. "Academic staff's perspective on blended learning practices in higher education post COVID-19."
[20] Alammary, Sheard, and Carbone, "Blended learning in higher education: Three different design approaches."; Anders Norberg, Charles D. Dziuban, and Patsy D. Moskal, "A Time-based Blended Learning Model," *On the Horizon* 19, no. 3 (August 16, 2011): 207–16, https://doi.org/10.1108/10748121111163913.
[21] Alammary, Sheard, and Carbone, "Blended learning in higher education: Three different design approaches."
[22] Alammary, Sheard, and Carbone, "Blended learning in higher education: Three different design approaches."
[23] Alammary, Sheard, and Carbone, "Blended learning in higher education: Three different design approaches."
[24] Alammary, Sheard, and Carbone, "Blended learning in higher education: Three different design approaches."
[25] Pima, Odetayo, Iqbal, and Sedoyeka, "A thematic review of blended learning in higher education."
[26] Anna Buran and Arina Evseeva, "Prospects of Blended Learning Implementation at Technical University," *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 206 (October 2015): 177–82, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.10.049.
[27] Stephen Ntim, Michael Opoku-Manu, and Anthony Addai-Amoah Kwarteng, "Post COVID-19 and the Potential of Blended Learning in Higher Institutions: Exploring Students and Lecturers Perspectives on Learning Outcomes in Blended Learning," *European Journal of Education and Pedagogy* 2, no. 6 (November 16, 2021): 49–59, https://doi.org/10.24018/ejedu.2021.2.6.162.

exchange synchronous and asynchronous feedback between instructors and students but also promotes their educational needs, including improving learning satisfaction, convenience, flexibility, and development of language learning, and critical thinking skills.[28]

In post-COVID-19, HEIs, especially those located within rural areas, can benefit tremendously from implementing the BL approach. The BL benefits for rural-based institutions are multi-faced. They can engage part-time instructors when it becomes difficult to engage full-time staff because most qualified personnel choose to seek employment in cities with readily available social amenities for comfort and convenience. With the BL approach, while the full-time instructors are present on campus for their classes using the F2F instructional delivery; their counterparts engaged on a part-time basis who are constrained to be physically available on campus can leverage the online mode of instructions through the learning management systems (LMSs) and other digital platforms to engage students.[29] Writing from the perspective of teachers, Medina admits that BL systems provide students with various options to choose from; and enhance student academic experience. The author further points out that BL instructional delivery offers flexibility through the F2F, online web-based instructor-led activities, and web-based self-access activities. In addition, instructors can use practical, up-to-date, time-effective instruction to complement their classroom-based (F2F) lessons; they can as well optimise time and cost-benefits by delivering in-class lectures via audio-visual materials such as podcasts and videos to facilitate a blended lesson.[30] In a study that highlights the potential of BL for reform of higher education, Matheos and Cleveland-Innes underscore the prospects of BL for fostering student engagement and performance; improving design, learning outcomes, and assessment; facilitating retention and reducing time to degree; promoting adaptive and competency-based learning; developing new literacies and collaborations; building skills for lifelong learning, and optimising resources or cost reduction.[31] In a review study on the prospects and pitfalls associated with implementing BL in rural-based HEIs in Southern Africa, Muhuro and Kang'ethe found that BL is diversity-friendly, student-centred, flexible, and effective for attaining nearly 100 percent of expected learning outcomes.[32]

Against the background above, this study is poised to fill a gap in the extant literature concerning the dearth of empirical research on the prospects of the BL approach for higher education in the post-COVID-19 period, more especially in the context of HEIs in South Africa. In light of this objective, the study is guided by posing the following research question: What do university instructors think about the prospects of blended learning for higher education in the post-COVID-19 context in South Africa?

METHODOLOGY

Although the study was a part of the larger research project which investigated work-from-home experiences of academics and the COVID-19 impacts, this study specifically aimed at reporting the aspect which explored the university instructors' perspectives on the prospects of blended learning for higher education in the context of post-COVID-19 in South Africa. Thus, this section meticulously explains each aspect of the research methodology as religiously followed in this study.

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[28] Onke Gqokonqana, Odunayo Magret Olarewaju, and Melanie Bernice Cloete, "Blended Learning Challenges During COVID-19: A Case of Cost Accounting 2 Students at a Selected South African Higher Education Institution," *Research in Social Sciences and Technology* 7, no. 2 (June 26, 2022): 87–107, https://doi.org/10.46303/ressat.2022.11.

[29] Muhuro, and Kangethe, "Prospects and pitfalls associated with implementing blended learning."; Kazeem Ajasa Badaru and Emmanuel Adu, "Preservice Teachers' Perception of the Usability of Telephone Conferencing as a Mode of Instructional Delivery in Social Studies.," *UNESWA Journal of Education* 1, no. 2 (2018): 168–80,https://www.researchgate.net/publication/342083706_Preservice_teachers%27_perception_of_the_usability_of_telephone_conferencing_as_a_mode_of_instructional_delivery_in_social_studies.

[30] Liliana Cuesta Medina, "Blended Learning: Deficits and Prospects in Higher Education," *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology* 34, no. 1 (March 28, 2018), https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.3100.

[31] Kathleen Matheos and Martha Cleveland-Innes, "Blended Learning: Enabling Higher Education Reform," *Revista Eletrônica de Educação* 12, no. 1 (February 7, 2018): 238–44, https://doi.org/10.14244/198271992524.

[32] Muhuro, and Kangethe, "Prospects and pitfalls associated with implementing blended learning."

Research paradigm

According to Badaru and Adu, a study has to be grounded within a set of beliefs or a philosophical framework upon which a researcher's action is premised.[33] The study's paradigm was interpretivism, which Badaru et al. described as a philosophical belief that realities are multi-layered and complex. In other words, a single phenomenon can be subjected to several interpretations.[34] The choice of this research paradigm became necessary as it enabled the researchers to understand and interpret the prospects of the BL approach for higher education in the post-COVID-19 context from the university instructors' perspectives in South Africa.

Research design

The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research design was adopted in this study. The design was considered most appropriate because the researchers were properly guided in gathering an in-depth perspective of each of the university instructors on the phenomenon under study, being the prospects of the BL approach for higher education in the post-COVID-19 era. Creswell posits that making interpretations of any given phenomenon under study is the underlying goal of a phenomenology design.[35]

Research approach

The study adopted a qualitative research approach. Nieuwenhuis posits that the focus of a qualitative research approach is to explore the meanings, experiences, beliefs, and perspectives of participants on a social phenomenon being investigated.[36] Corroborating the above view, Badaru avers that a qualitative research approach is adopted by researchers who believe that realities are best interpreted through the meanings ascribed to phenomena under investigation.[37] This approach was most appropriate for this current study because the researchers were interested in understanding the participants' beliefs and perspectives about the prospects of the BL approach for the post-COVID-19 pandemic's higher education.

Research participants

The study's population consisted of all instructors in five faculties at a rural university in the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. The study's sample size comprised twenty-eight instructors drawn from the whole population through the purposive sampling technique, otherwise described as a judgemental or subjective sampling technique. The judgemental sampling gives room for the researcher's judgement in selecting participants with shared characteristics that may be considered relevant to the present study. The university instructors were purposefully selected from across five faculties; the researchers ensured that each of the faculties was represented in the sample. Other criteria for inclusion of participants in the study included their fields or faculties, work experiences, ranks, and gender. The participants have spent between three years and thirteen years in their jobs as university instructors.

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[33] Badaru, and Adu, "Preservice teachers' perception of the usability of telephone conferencing,"168-180.

[34] Kazeem Ajasa Badaru et al., "Teaching in a Pandemic: An Exploratory Study into University Instructors' Perceptions of Work-from-Home Opportunities and Challenges during the COVID-19 Lockdown in South Africa," *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research* 21, no. 7 (July 30, 2022): 286–304, https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.21.7.15.

[35] John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches - John W. Creswell - Google Books*, 3rd ed. (CA: Sage, 2012), https://books.google.com.gh/books/about/Qualitative_Inquiry_and_Research_Design.html?id=OJYEbDtkxq8C&redir_esc=y.

[36] Jan Nieuwenhuis, "Introducing Qualitative Research," in *First Steps in Research*, ed. K. Maree, 3rd ed. (Cape Town: Van Schaik, 2020), 56–76.

[37] Kazeem Ajasa Badaru, "Political Education as a Determinant of University Students' Political Participation in the Eastern Cape, South Africa" (University of Fort Hare; Faculty of Education, 2019).

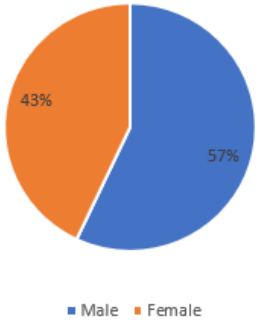

Figure 1: Gender distribution of participants

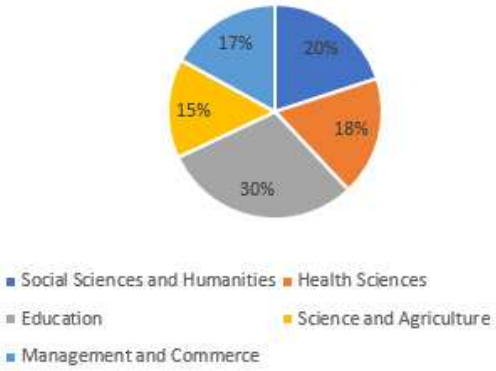

Figure 2: Faculty distribution of participants

As shown in Figure 1 above, 57 percent of the participants were female, while the remaining 43 percent were male. Figure 2 indicates that 20 percent of the participants were instructors in the faculty of social sciences and humanities; 18 percent of the participants were in the faculty of health sciences; 30 percent were in the education faculty; while 15 percent and 17 percent represent the participants from the faculties of science and agriculture as well as management and commerce respectively.

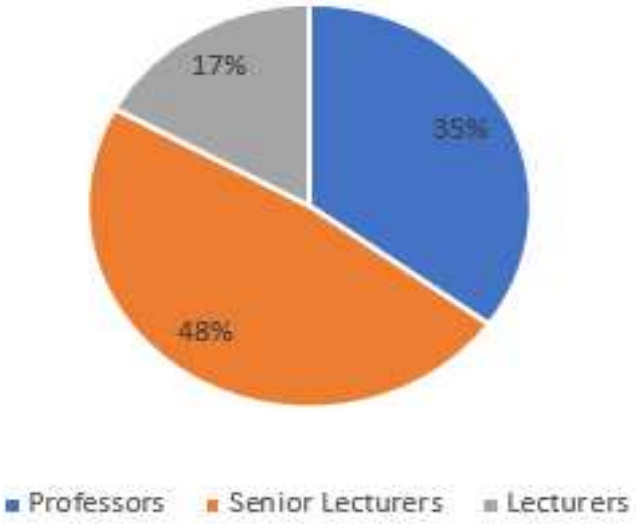

Figure 3: Professional ranks of participants

As figure 3 reveals above, most participants (48 %) were senior lecturers; 35 percent were professors and the remaining 17 percent were lecturers.

Data Collection Instrument and Procedure

The instrument used for data collection in this study was a semi-structured interview guide drafted in English. Its validation was carried out by colleagues with expertise in qualitative research design. The interview sessions were conducted so that the participants were freely probed on any responses that needed to be deepened and clarified by the participants. The researchers (interviewers) had to ensure that a rapport was well-established with the interviewees (respondents) for the IPA to be effectively carried out in a qualitative research design. Before data collection, the researchers had sought and secured an ethical clearance for the conduct of the study from their institution's research and ethics committee. The participants also were each made to sign a consent form in which their voluntary participation was sought and granted. The interviews were subsequently conducted over six weeks; it was a kind of F2F interview with some of the participants, while arrangements were made for a virtual

interview with others who seemed to be unavailable because there was still a need to avoid contact with other people amid the strict observance of the COVID-19 pandemic's protocols on the university campuses and elsewhere in South Africa. The interview proceedings were recorded via the interviewer's android phone's voice recorder with the participants' permission. After completing the interview sessions, the researchers carefully transcribed the recordings verbatim. The textual data were sent back to the participants via their emails for confirmation that they represented the participants' views as expressed during the data collection phase of this study. Having confirmed the textual data (transcriptions), they were further subjected to coding, categorisation, and thematic analysis in a way that answers to the study's research question were yielded. In the final analysis, the researchers had to conduct an audit trail on the transcribed (textual) data to ensure the dependability of the study's findings.

Data Trustworthiness

In a qualitative research design, data trustworthiness is required in place of reliability, as is evident in a quantitative study. Data trustworthiness implies that the quality of research findings or data is worthy of attention.[38] To ensure the data trustworthiness in this study, the researchers strictly followed the criteria, which included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability during the data collection and analysis process. The data analysis was independently done, and the researchers discussed and compared the different themes to ensure an "intercoder agreement" to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Data Analysis

The thematic analysis method was used in this study. This data analysis method involves transcribing data, meticulous perusal of the transcribed data, identification of emerging themes, and report writing. The researchers considered this data analysis method appropriate because they could examine and interpret the data holistically.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For this study, the research question remains: What do university instructors think about the prospects of blended learning for higher education in the post-COVID-19 context in South Africa? The study is a qualitative exploration of the perspectives of university instructors in South Africa on the prospects of the BL approach for higher education in the post-COVID-19 era. The above research question will be answered using the narratives and relevant themes that emerged from the analysed interview data. The themes are discussed as follows:

Accommodating vulnerable students

A majority of the participants (67 percent) believed that the BL approach had the prospect of accommodating vulnerable students since it is a meld of all sorts of instructional modalities involving in-class and online web-based technologies. The participants' belief was reinforced by the fact that BL was a delivery system that emphasised student-centredness. It is an approach to learning that accounts for individual differences such as learning styles, cognitive skills, and several other diverse capacities and inabilities of students, especially vulnerable students. One of the participants narrates their thought on this as follows:

> *Yes, if there is blended learning, this will assist both students and lecturer to have face-to-face interaction as well as accommodate vulnerable students who may not be able to use online or remote teaching due to technical issues such as connectivity, due to the types of devices that students have or are using as well as*

[38] Badaru, and Adu, "Preservice teachers' perception of the usability of telephone conferencing,"168-180.

> *the network which is sometimes low or unavailable in the rural areas where some students reside. All these are not peculiar to students only, even some lecturers are also affected (Female instructor, Education Faculty).*

The above finding is consistent with what Muhuro and Kang'ethe found in their study that BL yields to accommodating adversity in a way that students with different learning abilities are supported through the adoption of multimodal teaching methodologies such as a meld of video, audio, audio-visual contents and other technology-enabled or web-based platforms.[39] The BL delivery is flexible and student-centred when instructors adapt activities to students' individual needs. This fact has been supported by Azizan et al., who affirm that BL fosters a student-centred generation of new knowledge while engagement with instructors leads to effective collaboration and development of students' creative and critical thinking.[40]

Increased use of technologies for teaching and learning

The responses of most of the participants (72 percent) indicated that the BL approach had the prospects of increasing instructors' skills in the use of technologies for teaching and learning in higher education in the post-COVID-19 period. A participant's narrative highlights the finding as stated below:

> *Blended learning can be used for its multiple benefits. The COVID-19 lockdown made me realise that I was not doing enough blended learning for my students before the pandemic, as I was not compelled to use it. Lockdown made me realise the importance of using blended learning instead of mostly face-to-face. I used learning management systems (LMS) to complement face-to-face teaching and learning. The good thing is that blended learning will make us continue using technologies for teaching even after the pandemic. It is very interesting (Female instructor, Science, and Agriculture Faculty).*

In essence, the participants believed that the COVID-19 lockdown had opened their minds to several ways by which technologies can be used either to facilitate online teaching and learning processes or to complement F2F instructional delivery in the traditional classroom setting. This finding is supported by the positions of Badaru and Adu, as well as Muhuro and Kang'ethe, who opined that instructors could use the LMSs and other online platforms for teaching and learning.[41] From another perspective, BL is believed to have the prospect of honing instructors' skills in the use of technology. The response below aptly captures this expression:

> *It (BL) has the prospect of honing my skills in ICT– ensuring that I can always reach my students virtually and in person, as the case may be. I also managed to learn to conduct lessons online and mark online during the COVID-19 online classes too. We can continue with this system to help increase our digital skills as lecturers (Male instructor, Health Sciences faculty).*

Of course, some instructors have been compelled to turn to the use of technology for teaching during the COVID-19 lockdown period because they had no other option. In the process, they learned more about the adaptation of technology for teaching and learning, in agreement with the finding of a

[39] Muhuro, and Kangethe, "Prospects and pitfalls associated with implementing blended learning."
[40] Buran, and Evseeva, "Prospects of blended learning implementation at Technical University." 177-182; Azizan, et.al. "Academic staff's perspective on blended learning practices in higher education post COVID-19."
[41]Badaru, and Adu, "Preservice teachers' perception of the usability of telephone conferencing,"168-180; Muhuro, and Kangethe, "Prospects and pitfalls associated with implementing blended learning."

study by Ntim et al. that BL offers a cohesive and effective learning delivery that helps to overcome certain challenges associated with the F2F classroom-based teaching.[42]

Facilitation of teaching and learning without restrictions

With the BL approach, teaching and learning activities would become ubiquitous in the view of the participants; instructors and students can meet using F2F and online modes for their engagements and lessons. A participant stated this perspective as follows:

> *Yes, blended learning has facilitated unrestricted teaching and learning anytime and anywhere. I have always thought I use technology to teach, but it was only during COVID-19 that I realised I could teach students from anywhere. I can have students at one venue while also teaching those who could not make it to the venue virtually (Male instructor, Social Sciences and Humanities Faculty).*

This finding indicates there is no reason for teaching and learning to be suspended or postponed. Instructors who use the BL delivery system for their courses can decide when to use each F2F and online web-based instruction. This finding is in tandem with Muhuro and Kang'ethe's study, which indicates that instructors who cannot be physically present on campus should be able to engage their students online while it is also possible for the F2F delivery system to be complemented by an online instructional mode.[43]

Solving problems of classroom overcrowding

The participants stated that the F2F classroom is associated with the problem of overcrowding. In this case, they believed that BL had the prospect of solving this problem. A large class can be divided into two groups, or students are given the option of joining the in-person class or online class; so that the physical classroom will not be unnecessarily congested. A participant added their voice as follows:

> *The blended learning approach will help us solve the problem of overcrowding in our classrooms. Before the COVID-19 lockdown, I was already following a blended approach to learning in most of my modules (where student enrolment is very high). I think the move to online classes has solved several problems. For example, we have large classes with over 1000 students and it is hard to find a venue to put them in for a scheduled class at a time. So, for those modules, I think a blended approach is more suitable after the pandemic must have gone (Male instructor, Management and Commerce Faculty).*

The above finding appears to be a good solution to the overcrowding of lecture rooms for any module or course which have to be taken by a large number of students. According to Matheos and Cleveland-Innes, this would improve learning outcomes and teaching resources would be judiciously utilised.[44]

Increasing opportunities for higher education enrolment

The participants also expressed optimism that the BL approach would bolster opportunities for higher education enrolment. Students who cannot attend F2F classes can attend lectures virtually through the institution's LMS or other online platforms available for such purposes. One of the participants put it as follows:

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[42] Ntim, Opoku-Manu, and Kwarteng, "Post COVID-19 and the potential of blended learning in higher institutions."
[43] Muhuro, and Kangethe, "Prospects and pitfalls associated with implementing blended learning."
[44] Matheos, and Cleveland-Innes, "Blended learning: Enabling higher education reform."

> *I think blended learning will create opportunities for a wider range of students to enrol at universities (Female instructor, Health Sciences Faculty).*

This finding is in line with what Buran and Evseeva described as the advantage of the BL approach.[45] Accordingly, these scholars posit that the BL approach can be easily adapted to the student's academic needs by the instructor.

Removing barriers to effective communications

Most of the participants (64 percent) believed that BL had the prospect of breaking down any barrier to effective communication between instructors and students. This was stated by one of them as follows:

> *With modern technologies, we are in touch with students 24 hours. There is more time for consultation than from an office on campus. A blended learning approach will help close communication gaps and improve the lecturer-students relationship (Male instructor, Education Faculty).*

This finding is a pointer to the ubiquity of technologies and the prospect of instructors delivering their courses by using the BL approach. It is buttressed by Gqokonqana et al., who also found that BL makes possible the exchange of synchronous and asynchronous feedback between instructors and students.[46] This implies that communication between instructors and students does not necessarily have to be face-to-face alone. It can also happen virtually via various technology-enabled platforms, both on-campus and off-campus.

Solving problems of truancy and unavoidable absence in class

The participants interestingly identified another prospect of the BL approach which is solving the problems of truancy and absence from the traditional F2F lecture rooms. One of the responses summed up this thought in the following way:

> *The prospect of blended learning for higher education is that with the choice of an online or in-person class, lecturers now use both interactive class teaching and virtual/remote teaching. There is no more excuse for running away from class or missing lectures because of other unforeseen situations like sickness or what have you. I think that is the future of higher education in the post-COVID-19 period (Male instructor, Health Sciences Faculty).*

The above finding can be explained in two ways: students may be absent from class for genuine reasons, including sickness and other unforeseen contingencies. When this happens, the BL approach offers such students to attend lectures online from their homes or anywhere they are. The second way is when it becomes impossible for lectures to hold in the physical class owing to the instructor's absences. Then, the BL approach allows instructors to switch to the virtual mode, just as it was done during the period of the COVID-19 lockdown.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study show that the BL approach has prospects for higher education in the post-COVID-19 context, especially in South Africa. The responses of a majority of the university instructors are clear indications that the BL approach is suitable for accommodating vulnerable students without access to the internet and devices, increased use of technologies for teaching and learning, facilitation

[45] Buran, and Evseeva, "Prospects of blended learning implementation at Technical University." 177-182.
[46] Gqokonqana, Olarewaju, and Cloete, "Blended learning challenges during COVID-19."

of teaching and learning ubiquitously, and solving problems of classroom overcrowding, increasing opportunities for higher education enrolments, breaking barriers to effective communications between university instructors and students, and solving problems of truancy and absence of students and lecturers during the face-to-face lecture hours.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Be that as it may, it is apposite to recommend as follows:

1. HEIs should increase investment in the use of technologies for teaching and learning.
2. HEIs should also ensure that there is continuous training of instructors in the use of emerging technologies for educational purposes.
3. Government at all levels in South Africa must continue to support HEIs for implementation of BL delivery system.
4. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) should, as a matter of urgency, increase funding in the area of application of web-based online technologies for HEIs to access affordable and effective internet services as may be needed, especially by those low-resourced institutions in the rural areas.

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