An assessment of tutoring performance, challenges and support during COVID-19: A qualitative study in a South African university

Chioma S. Okoro
University of Johannesburg, South Africa, chiomao@uj.ac.za

Oliver Takawira
University of Johannesburg, South Africa, otakawira@uj.ac.za

Peter Baur
University of Johannesburg, South Africa, peterb@uj.ac.za

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought changes to the teaching and learning arena and posed challenges to efforts to support student performance. The study aims to identify challenges faced during online tutoring and ways to continue to support the tutoring function to teach and disseminate knowledge to students during lockdown. The study was conducted within a faculty in a higher education institution in South Africa using interviews of lecturers and tutors who were purposively selected. Thematic analysis was used to draw out themes on the challenges faced, support provided and suggestions to improve tutoring in online/blended learning. The study exposed several challenges, including internet connectivity, inadequate knowledge on the use of online platforms, lack of clear guidelines for tutors, disconnect with the students and lecturers on a personal level, insufficient internet data, and students' lack of participation and interest. Further findings supported the need for more innovative strategies in the areas of tutor professional development, standardisation of processes and information, regular tutor-lecturer interactions, and the establishment of a community of practice for tutors that feature peer mentoring and support. These findings provide evidence to inform targeted strategies to support tutors in the blended learning space.

Practitioner Notes

1. The choice of tutors goes beyond content knowledge. Additional skills, including digital capacity, are vital going forward.
2. Intervention is critical through developing tailored professional development for tutors through regular and functional training, and mentoring.
3. Standardising processes and information flow to facilitate and manage online tutoring is crucial.
4. Intervention strategies need to be implemented at the department and university level, irrespective of the investment cost.
5. Agile university systems, data and processes must align with each student's personal needs and circumstances and contribute to their experience before joining, during and after graduation.

Introduction

Student performance is impacted, amongst others, by pedagogical approaches used to deliver learning and content (Nyamupangedengu, 2017). Poor performance is characterised by students struggling to maintain the expected level of performance (Wu and Xin, 2019). Student outcomes depend heavily on the quality of teaching and learning provided by institutions in conjunction with additional support that the institution might provide. This is especially important during this online and blended learning period necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The education system around the world changed, with more than 1.5 billion students displaced from the traditional learning environments (Hannahan, 2021). Many schools, colleges, and universities were forced to partially close, and some had to slow down activities due to the home confinement mandated to alleviate the spread of the disease. Educational authorities swiftly had to redesign responses with specific contexts in mind, as the pandemic ran its course (Reimers et al., 2020). Universities changed from traditional face-to-face teaching activities to online teaching, while others combined these two modes to maintain performance and meet the unique needs of diverse students. Online learning, e-learning or distance education became the norm as classes moved online and face-to-face teaching remained closed for the rest of 2020 (Kim, 2020). However, students' performance became a concern (Realyvásquez-Vargas et al., 2020; Maslen, 2020).

A study among Jordanian students found that 59.5% believed face-to-face interaction contributes significantly to boosting academic achievement (Haider and Al-Salman, 2020). In comparison, 55.5% of them were concerned that the volume of assignments issued via e-learning led to confusion, frustration, and poor performance (Haider and Al-Salman, 2020). Further, providing students access to digital devices and the internet and freeing up institutional capacities and resources to redirect focus on delivering alternative learning and giving students similar opportunities helped in most countries (Reimers et al., 2020). In the United Kingdom (UK), there was a consideration about change and reorientation in the university teaching model and the characteristics of the new teacher committed to mentoring and advising students (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2020). This included synchronising online teaching with face-to-face instruction to improve performance (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2020).

Other studies suggest that the reduced time for learning during the pandemic decreased the quality of educational instruction and student performance in the United States, but acknowledged that support for online learning partly depends on the devices, resources and proficiency of teachers and tutors that deliver online learning (García and Weiss, 2020; Smalley, 2020). Teaching schedules and practicals were redesigned to meet learning outcomes (Kim, 2020). Further, a recent report showed that Australian students in Grade 12 in 2020 generally faced a 25% annual decline in mathematics learning and a 10% decline in English language skills when studying remotely, compared with those taught in the classroom (Maslen, 2020). This warrants research into ways to ensure that students who succeed in university entrance are motivated and supported to perform as expected. One way to sustain students' performance in online learning is through tutoring (McKay, 2016; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2020).

Tutorials complement sessions that help students understand complex power relations and writing skills (McKay, 2016). Tutors are not lecturers; they provide support by guiding, facilitating, helping, and providing supplementary instruction according to the pace of the lecturer (Chan et al., 2016).

Tutoring has many advantages – to support active learning and interactivity amongst students, communication between students and the creation of shared knowledge (Roux, 2009). Effective tutors provide motivation, personal individual attention, direct instruction and further explanation of concepts, focusing on individual student needs and integral development, both during uncertain times and otherwise (McPherson and Nunes, 2004; Simao et al., 2008; Peterson et al., 2014). In turn, tutors are encouraged to improve communication and interpersonal skills, refine personal confidence, solidify subject knowledge, acquire teaching experience, expand their networks, and strengthen their curriculum vitae (Evans and Moore, 2013).

Tutoring takes many different forms – from technology-mediated distance learning, contact skills (communication and social), use of timetables, formal and informal meetings to smaller class sizes, and a dedicated number of hours (Simao et al., 2008; Khumalo, 2018). The functions of a tutor may vary depending on institutional and program needs, such as assisting fresh (or first-year) students. In South Africa, just like in the United States of America and Canada, universities appoint student tutors and accord them crucial roles in facilitating student engagement and learning in higher educational systems (Clarence, 2016). Tutoring is an integral part of a university's teaching-learning process and can be characterised as an essential strategy for improving students' academic success and professional goals (Faroa, 2017). However, while the tutoring process has traditionally evolved within a physical space, little experience exists of tutoring on an online platform. While some institutions quickly acclimatised to the online learning mode, the tutoring function struggled with assisting and remaining relevant (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2020). In other universities, online learning has rendered the services of tutors irrelevant, as students can access lecture recordings after class. Students can send questions to the lecturer for clarification and get prompt feedback directly. Before COVID-19, students usually benefitted from tutorials since they could not get recordings or respond to their questions after hours (McKay, 2016; Ahmed, 2017; Ba et al., 2019). Universities are burdened with whether to continue supporting online tutoring and paying tutors since their function and presence to help improve student performance seem unnecessary in the virtual learning environment. The crisis offers a vital reflection point for education leaders to question the status quo and explore new approaches for delivering quality education (Hannahan, 2021).

The increase in technology use and adaptation to online learning has given rise to research on tutoring in teaching and learning. For instance, on students' satisfaction with tutoring models in a Spanish university (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2020), tutoring models in South African universities (Pather et al., 2020), peer tutoring (Evans and Moore, 2013; Chan et al., 2016), and blended learning tutoring models (Copaci and Rusu, 2015; Krasnova and Demshko, 2015; Khumalo, 2018). Hurtado (2014) shared personal experiences as an e-tutor, and thus the results cannot be generalised. Therefore, it appears that limited studies focus on the traditional tutoring style with a designated and structured tutor assisting the lecturer in the teaching and learning process. In addition, most of these studies were conducted in education faculties and thus, the findings may not be generalisable to modules with more technical content, which may have different teaching styles and contexts.

Further, tutors' experiences in an online environment have not been explored using qualitative techniques. It remains a concern in particular contexts for specific intents and purposes. In addition, pedagogical practices are not a one-size-fits-all and therefore, what is deemed suitable and effective in one context may not be so in a different context (Nyamupangedengu, 2017). Moreover, higher education institutions must adapt to new learning modes, practices and conditions, alternative models of guidance, and support for students in the volatile and uncertain future (Pather et al., 2020; Pérez-Jorge et al., 2020; Realyvásquez-Vargas et al., 2020).

This study examined the nature of these changing experiences on the tutoring programme during 2020 and 2021 in a higher education institution in South Africa. It aims to understand how to support tutors in the virtual learning environment. The study's objectives were to: 1) identify tutoring practices and performance during online and blended learning; 2) establish challenges encountered during online learning concerning the tutoring function; and 3) develop possible strategies to support the tutoring function in the blended learning environment. The study argues that online tutoring is not a wasteful expenditure as universities can leverage the opportunities presented by the crisis to devise innovative strategies to support tutors to offer the appropriate assistance. The remaining sections of this paper present an overview of the literature on tutoring models, challenges and possible improvement strategies. The methodology, findings, discussion, and conclusions are then presented.

Review of literature

Tutoring models and practices in universities

Earlier tutoring models utilised non-real-time tools, "asynchronous" (for example, web boards) as academic support in online classes and quickly developed to content-specific support for face-to-face students and eventually for hybrid tutoring (Speidel, 2003). Synchronous tutoring platforms give room for an experience similar to face-to-face tutoring via video and shared whiteboard, while a lower-technology text-based (asynchronous) option could be more suitable and effective for students lacking access to high-speed internet. The progression of online tutoring has revealed that the achievement or outcome may not necessarily depend on the tool or resources used but on developing a suitable culture for online tutoring and understanding the process and parameters involved (Turrentine and Macdonald, 2006).

Pérez-Jorge et al. (2020) evaluated student satisfaction with the tutoring models used and the effect of the different forms of tutoring among students in education qualifications in a Spanish university during the pandemic. Face-to-face and WhatsApp platforms were highlighted as the predominant tutoring models. Likewise, Pather et al. (2020) revealed tutor models in education in their study of good practices in tutoring programmes in tertiary institutions within South Africa. It was found that, based on design and implementation, education lecturers adapted tutor practices that best catered to their needs in enhancing student learning. Although the study adopted a qualitative study among lecturers, the focus was not on teaching in an online learning environment.

The above studies concur that tutoring is essential, and the model adapted in an online environment may vary depending on the needs and the interaction between the tutor's role and skills and available technology. This suggests that challenges may be encountered in delivering the tutoring functions.

Challenges of tutoring in an online environment

Studies have highlighted challenges encountered by tutors in delivering their responsibilities during online learning. According to Youde (2019), the biggest challenge is that tutors and students lack experience of blended learning or tutoring. Kebritchi et al. (2017) summarised concerns in online courses and identified issues associated with online students, tutors, and content development. Tutors' issues included varying faculty roles, transitioning from physical to online, time management, and teaching methods. Content issues involved the role of tutors in content development, incorporation of multimedia in content, and deliberations for content development.

Joubert and Snyman (2018) identified the lack of commitment by students, tutors' feelings of isolation, insufficient training and restricted access to technology, and administrative problems as critical challenges faced with online tutoring. Yusuf and Ahmad (2020) identified problems encountered with the transition to online learning, including unsatisfactory learning platforms, as the lack of necessary tools and equipment for learning, poor-quality internet connection, and inadequate infrastructure in terms of computers. Further, Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) noted the problem of compatibility as another significant challenge connected to online learning. As online learning appears to be more suitable for certain academic courses, such as social and linguistic studies, it might be unsuitable for practical disciplines such as sports, engineering, and medical training because they require real-time experiences as part of their instructional activities. In Cambodia, where digital infrastructure and resources are deficient, teaching such hands-on disciplines online is indeed a demanding challenge (Chea et al., 2020).

Towards supporting the tutoring function

The literature reveals various strategies, which can be used to support tutors in their role as teaching assistants. These include training, communication, provision of resources/infrastructure, participation in the tutor community, reporting and feedback from students. It is critical for institutions to be committed to tutorial programmes to facilitate student engagement, social integration and ultimately, student success (Braxton et al., 2004). Institutes of higher education must take proactive steps to ensure that human resources and infrastructure are accessible and adequately suited to cater for the staff, students, and tutors (Faroa, 2017).

The study by Kebritchi et al. (2017) recommended that professional training for learners andtutors, and technical support for content development is needed to address challenges faced in online education. Van Dijk (2013) emphasised a greater devotion to ensuring structured, well-funded, and adequately human resourced tutorial programmes, which operate in an atmosphere that accommodates ICT infrastructure (Faroa, 2017). Maton (2015) supported that to enhance student engagement via tutorials, there should be support and development programmes that are comprehensible, directed and underpinned by contextually applicable theory and research to build tutors' knowledge and expertise effectively.

Method

Research design

This paper reports on the qualitative phase of a wider mixed-method study, which sought to examine the influence of tutoring on teaching efficiency and student performance. The findings from the qualitative phase undertaken among lecturers and tutors to determine how tutors are performing in the online teaching and learning process, their challenges, and possible support strategies are presented. The qualitative approach was observed to be suitable in obtaining in-depth information about the tutors' performance, from the lecturers who work closely with them. In addition, tutors were engaged to obtain a first-hand account of their challenges and what support they need in order to improve their performance, where necessary. Qualitative research is useful in studying an occurrence within the setting in which it naturally takes place and is usually supported by collective meaning from the people involved (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). It provides strong insights from experiences in a real-life setting and protects the anticipated meaning, which creates knowledge of fundamental social practices and significance in a business or management environment and which

would prove problematic to produce given a quantitative research standpoint (van Maanen, 1998; Mohajan, 2018).

Data collection

The use of interviews allowed the researchers to explore the responses from the sample group while providing quality outcomes (van Esch and van Esch, 2013). One-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to elicit in-depth information from the participants using probing, open-ended questions that still allowed participants to be candid and share independent thoughts and experiences, which may not be possible in a focus-group setting (Harrel and Bradley, 2009). The guide was developed from the literature review; and it was piloted between two other participants not included in the main study. This face validity check ensured that the questions were appropriately structured to guide the researchers in obtaining the desired outcomes.

The population for the study included tutors and lecturers working with tutors. The purposeful sampling technique was used to include lecturers and tutors of first-year students within a faculty. Therefore, those experienced about the phenomenon of interest, available, and willing to participate were sought (Palinkas et al., 2015). In addition, it was important to obtain diverse views from both lecturers and tutors of various students (comprising Black, Coloured/Mixed, Indian, White and international students) within the faculty.

Thirty participants were engaged for the interviews. In determining the sample size for this study, the principle of information power was applied, whereby the number of participants included during a specified period for data collection was observed to be sufficient. This is because the more information generated from an analytically relevant participant category, the smaller the sample size needs to be (Vasileiou et al., 2018). Moreover, the study estimated a minimum of 12 participants, at which point saturation (no new information) may be expected (Boddy, 2016), and added a few more, as Francis et al. (2010) suggested, within the set period for the qualitative phase of the study. An effort was made to include as many tutors as possible through their lecturers; however, only those who came forward and gave consent during the data collection period were included. Additionally, in some programmes, there is only one tutor working with two or three lecturers; thus, the tutors included in the study were fewer. Nonetheless, the study was robust due to a high level of particular interest in the study; thus, the findings can be deemed reliable (Anderson, 2010).

Prior to conducting the interviews, ethical clearance was obtained from the institution. The interviews were conducted over four weeks, from 15 March to 9 April 2021. Due to the lockdown restrictions, the interviews were conducted using an online platform, Microsoft (MS) Teams. The participants' anonymity was protected to an extent as their video was turned off. The sessions were conducted in English, with an average duration of 35 minutes. They were audio-recorded for ease of transcription and analysis. Raw notes were also taken during the sessions.

The participants were from seven departments within the Business and Economics faculty in the higher education institution. There were four male and twelve female lecturers, mostly teaching first-year students (13) and higher years and working with one or more tutors (Table 1). The tutors (Table 2) comprised seven male and female students, respectively, mostly in their fourth/Honours year, who had tutored for two years mainly and could thus comment on their experiences in the online learning environment during the period under investigation.

Table 1:
Profile of lecturers

Demographics	Responses	*n*
Gender	Male	4
	Female	12
Department	Tourism and Hospitality	4
	Marketing Management	4
	Commercial Accounting	2
	Economics	2
	Industrial Psychology and People Management	2
	Finance and Investment Management	1
	Public Management, Governance and Public Policy	1
Level of teaching	Pre-first-year (bridging programme)	1
	1st year students	13
	2nd year students	3
	3rd year students	2
Number of tutors working with	One	4
	Two	8
	Seven	1
	Eight	1
	Fifteen	1

Table 2:
Profile of tutors

Interviewee	Gender	Number of years tutoring (experience)	Tutees level	Current level at school
Tutor 1	Male	2	3rd year	Honours
Tutor 2	Female	2	2nd year	Honours
Tutor 3	Female	3	2nd year	Honours
Tutor 4	Male	2	3rd year	Masters
Tutor 5	Female	1	3rd year	Honours
Tutor 6	Male	1	3rd year	Honours
Tutor 7	Male	2	2nd year	3rd year / final diploma
Tutor 8	Female	1	1st year	3rd year
Tutor 9	Male	1	1st year	Honours
Tutor 10	Female	2	1st year	3rd year
Tutor 11	Female	4	1st, 2nd and Honours	Masters
Tutor 12	Male	2	1st, 2nd and 3rd	Honours
Tutor 13	Male	1	1st year	Honours
Tutor 14	Female	2	1st year	Honours

Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed. The transcribed data and raw notes were analysed using thematic analysis. An inductive approach was used to identify themes emerging from the data on the practices, challenges and support strategies. Thematic embedded analysis was undertaken with the aid of ATLAS.ti software for qualitative data analysis. The ATLAS.ti software (version 9) assisted in managing the data for ease of handling (Burnard et al., 2008). The qualitative analysis entailed the six-phase, thematic analytical process defined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The steps were as follows (Braun and Clarke, 2006):

1) Familiarisation with the data (reading thoroughly to search for themes, identify patterns and meanings, and initial ideas).

2) Generation of initial codes related to the study's objectives in a meaningful and systematic manner within the ATLAS.ti software.

3) Searching for themes (analysing final codes to determine which ones presented a similarity and sorting into potential themes reflecting important aspects of the data in conjunction with the research objectives).

4)   Reviewing and refining the themes.

5)   Defining the themes/categories (to distinguish the essence of what each theme is about).

6)   Writing the report.

The findings are presented in the next section.

Findings

Following the themes related to the study's objectives, the participants' statements were broadly categorised into the tutors' practices and performance, challenges, support received and perceptions on different strategies to support the tutoring function. The findings are presented in this section.

Tutoring practices and performance during online learning

Regarding the practices and modes utilised by the tutors in the virtual learning environment, the most common response was Blackboard (BB). Some tutors also used WhatsApp and Microsoft (MS) Teams to communicate with students and lecturers regularly. They also stated that they used different platforms for ease of communication, which was more convenient to assist more people in a group chat. As the tutors (1 and 8) pointed out: "We used different platforms. Sometimes we use MS Teams and BB Collaborate; BB Collaborate and WhatsApp, like last time I opened the group to assist them the whole day". One educator (16) reflected thus: "Some of our tutors have been doing Facebook live sessions, Zoom sessions, Blackboard Collaborate sessions, but they arrange that with their group of students".

In addition, the educators reported on how their tutors had performed based on their experience and feedback from students. Feedback is central to the performance of those tasked with learning outcomes. Therefore, to establish how the tutors performed, the lecturers' perceptions, complaints, and comments received from their students were sought. The educators appreciated the work done so far, and some expressed that their expectations were met. According to the participants (educators 4, 14 and 16): "The work that my tutors did last year was phenomenal, I would give them credit. They exceeded my expectations by bringing in initiatives that could help me to conduct my lectures; I cannot tell you the number of queries which the tutors have managed to sort out without coming to me; this year, in my bridging programme, I would not have managed without my two tutors".

The lecturers also expressed that students were satisfied with the way tutoring was conducted. The feedback was mostly good. As some of the educators reported: "Good feedback; No complaints; they are really happy with the tutor as she is explaining things; the tutor is so good". One negative comment received was about a tutor's lateness. Nonetheless, from the above account, the tutor's role seemed to be beneficial and appreciated. Understanding how the tutors performed from the educators' perception, who worked closely with them, was essential in identifying the extent to which they assisted in the teaching and learning process during these difficult times.

Challenges encountered during online learning

The challenges faced by tutors in the online tutoring space were identified. Feedback from the lecturers also provided insights on challenges or bottlenecks in the system. Overall, the participants considered the pandemic as a time of change but highlighted personal proclivities and work ethic, unclear guidelines for tutoring in an online environment, access to working devices, technology, internet connectivity, and data insufficiency as the main challenges faced at the inception of virtual learning.

As far as the personal problems were concerned, the dual responsibilities of being a tutor and student, seeking an extra source of income, and personal stress or family circumstances were raised. According to the participants: "Tutors have lives as well, assignments and tests to study for; so a tutor would like to prepare for his or her test or exam, but they also have tutoring responsibilities". These personal problems may hinder work concerning the online transition, with

time and schedule demands posing significant stress.

On the concern of tutoring guidelines, the tutors indicated that there were no guidelines in place on how tutors should undertake their activities at the beginning of the pandemic. One tutor reported (2): "Unclear instructions of tasks upfront. It was like - do this, do that, do it this way, no, that way. I'd prefer it to be a set of guidelines on what needs to be done, how you would like it to be done before the actual work is done". Although one tutor reported this challenge, it may cause concern since activities that may take a short time to deliver would take more time to complete. This may affect the effectiveness of tutors.

Further, a crucial topic raised was relational challenges that could lead to a relationship breakdown. It was indicated that poor communication and relationships existed between lecturers and tutors; and between the students and tutors. During the lockdown, regular interaction and guidance were crucial as everyone faced uncertainties during the transition and needed to keep in touch to adjust as a team (in their respective roles). However, some tutors (2 and 12) reported that they had challenges communicating with the lecturer: "Sometimes, communication was very little and brief; I came across challenges mainly due to lack of support from the lecturer and had a little breakdown in the relationship". One of the lecturers also proffered: "A tutor was actually demanding work to be done, because it was a month later and there was no communication from the lecturer". Further, some tutors complained about the lack of boundaries, which students were fully aware of, but chose to ignore. According to Tutor 12 and 14: "The lack of respect and etiquette, like sending messages in the wee hours, is not appreciated. There should be a certain amount of respect within the hierarchy; the only challenge I had was the students asking questions at 2:30am. They are not supposed to have my direct contact and should send queries to my student email". It appears that tutors and students may not be clear about the tutor's role and etiquette in the online learning environment and may need more support and guidance than ever given the stressful times presented by the pandemic.

Other challenges highlighted by the participants were technical, for example, data insufficiency, internet instability and inadequate knowledge on the use of the online platforms. Eleven tutors reported that sufficient data was not availed for tutorial purposes. Although they doubly received data as tutors-cum-students, they needed extra to stay online or download, mark and score assignments or tutorials, and check who is accessing uploaded material to monitor progress. Some of the statements on data and connectivity issues from the tutors were: "It was a 20GB day and night, but my data finishes faster during the day; data issues were tricky; the network kicks me out of the tutorial; Wi-Fi, sometimes you get kicked out, online problems". On their part, the educators explained: "Sometimes, tutors do not always have electricity to run their sessions on Blackboard; they do not have the best internet connection. As soon as it becomes a problem in an online environment, the entire meeting falls away; I do not want to overburden them with work because of data issues; sometimes, I actually feel bad because I know they are wasting so much data". These technical problems can therefore affect tutors' performance in delivering their duties as expected. Unsurprisingly, tutors resorted to recording tutorials so that students could access them later.

Additionally, tutors were thrown into the deep end when the pandemic started; some had little or no knowledge of using or navigating the available virtual learning environment. This was indicated in the following statements by a tutor: "We were not necessarily trained on it so it is something we had to think about"; and educators: "We do have some that embraced it and others that were not yet comfortable with it; some of them struggle with the online marking". Therefore, there was an indication that some tutors did not know how to use Blackboard and therefore had to learn.

While some tutors did not know how to use the platforms, others knew but could not get access to devices and software packages to enable them to undertake some responsibilities. This was especially difficult since they could not travel to campus when the lockdown started. Two tutors (9 and 14) explained: "My device just crashed, my laptop is very tiny, it crashed and then I tried to reach out to the department to get another device, but that was another struggle; I am struggling with devices because my laptop has been having a serious problem this entire semester". One educator (14) also proffered that: "Some of them do not have proper devices. Our tutors know how to use Blackboard but we do not give them access to Blackboard. If a tutor is supposed to mark, then he is supposed to have access to Blackboard more or less the same way that I have as a lecturer". On the contrary, another educator (16) mentioned that the tutor has full access to the module on Blackboard to assist with more tasks, including recording marks and hosting discussions. If tutors do not have the necessary equipment and access to certain functions to assist lecturers or conduct their work (i.e. laptop), including software applications (i.e. Blackboard, MS Teams), this can have an impact on their efficiency.

The results also revealed that tutors had to put in extra work and sometimes overtime, to accommodate the students, who were receiving several emails and assignments and not keeping up with the information overload. Tutor 4 replied: "The period of consultation was very weird. Students are always calling, asking about this and that". One educator (14) supported that: "Tutors are working overtime, because I mean if you are answering student questions at 9pm, 10pm". Increased workload seemed to be felt across the board, with everyone feeling the added pressure to achieve targets and deliver on set deadlines.

Other challenges highlighted by the participants were not directly related to the tutors themselves or teaching and learning difficulties per se, but behavioural factors, as students seemed to exhibit a lack of interest and participation during tutorials. The statements below from the tutors illustrate these findings: "Lectures were recorded on PowerPoint slides so even though they had questions, they did not get back to us. We did not really know what they got and what they did not get; When you are having a session, you cannot feel the participation; Sometimes it feels like you are speaking to yourself and you lack engagement; You talk into this void space. Some students are not willing to participate and it discourages you as a tutor. So you do not know if they understand what you are saying or not. You do not get the same feedback as face-to-face; The sessions in contact learning are interactive, but in online learning, not as much. You ask questions and they do not respond; Students do not participate that much. Last time I opened the group to assist them the whole day no one even asked questions; They do not deliver work during online sessions. They just go through it for the sake of going through it. They find the online sessions boring because even the participation is low".

The above indicate that students also struggled with the online transition. Some students missed lectures and tutorials and as a result, received unclear instructions from their classmates and mixed up information from different modules. One tutor (5) expressed: "I feel like it was a wasted year for a bunch of the students when it comes to grasping concepts on some specific modules". Another offered why some students were challenged: "The whole data thing, some students could not connect".

Overall, there was an indication that the abovementioned challenges may interfere with the delivery of quality tutoring going forward, which can continue to impact the performance of tutors, lecturers, and students.

Support provided during the online transition

This theme relates to support from the educators to tutors (including sending tutors to relevant training, electing a senior tutor to mediate issues, and educators getting involved on issues needing attention). Research seems to suggest that support for online learning partly depends on the devices, resources and proficiency of teachers and tutors to deliver online learning (García and Weiss, 2020; Smalley, 2020). The matters presented here are therefore fundamental in this regard.

The participants reported on the support received by the tutors during the online transition. These include additional training on the use of online platforms, data, and regular meetings. However, some tutors reported not receiving additional support and were confused about their role and responsibilities. These mixed responses are evident in the following statements. Tutors who indicated little or no support expressed: "No support from the lecturer; there was not really much. They just show you where to upload the videos or recordings or go to have the class. Besides that, it was finding your way. I guess it became easier with time".

Others indicated that there was some form of support from different avenues, including the lecturers, head/senior tutors, department and/or faculty, and the university, as evinced thus: "We have training. Every week we have meetings with the head tutor, and we discuss what we will be tutoring that week; The training at the beginning of the year is worthwhile. We had meetings on Mondays, which helped us prepare; We did some courses, more based on the in-person basis of learning, and looking at the knowledge now, it is outdated; It depends on the module; They once provided some training, and I do attend the training and they provide proper support; I did receive support. The lecturer asks how she can help data wise; The lecturer is always there to assist if we have questions, makes sure that our work is allocated and it does not affect our academics, and other tutors assist with the content, textbooks and materials; The lecturers guided us saying we have to be firm when giving the students consultation times".

Further support was received from the head tutor within the department: "If you do not understand a concept, the head tutor will always explain; We had a head tutor who provided support beyond what he needed to. His support was beneficial; We had check-in from the head tutor. He is very supportive". In addition, the Academic Development Centre (ADC), on a university level, provides training on how to undertake the tutoring functions, as reported: "They helped us with giving us short courses on how we use BB as a learning tool".

Some educators also informed that they offer informal training related to the module, provide relevant materials, and request feedback after tutorial sessions. These were evident in the following statements: "We ran a little training session on Blackboard marking, but apart from that we do not offer any formal training; Every week, I send an email to outline what I need them to do; I prepared them for tests and tutorials and explained contents well; Part of our effort as the department is to train and give them the appropriate material that they are supposed to deliver in class; I created a shared drive to upload weekly activities and resources; We have regular contact sessions for feedback, I encourage open conversation; We have a Telegram group to post announcements, and I make sure that I am accessible to them as much as possible".

Furthermore, support was received from the department, faculty, and institution through workshops and data disbursements. Tutors 3, 4 and 6 informed: "They sent 30GB data every month, in addition to the one you get as a student; We have our personal computers, and effective communication with the liaison with the head tutor; The department provided most of the things that I needed. The Department was quite supportive. They tried by all means to create ways to assist the students. We managed to get full support and assistance in how to structure the work and to get online going". On their part, educators (7 and 14) proffered: "The College has some workshops that they attend. The College is very supportive in giving training to the tutors and making sure that they are well equipped for the job; We have an open communication system within our department that our tutors feel comfortable coming and telling us what is happening".

The above indicates that some effort was made to ensure a smooth transition to online learning and to carry the tutors along. Support was received from lecturers and head tutors in the course of undertaking their duties during the pandemic. Although there were mixed responses from the educators and tutors, it was emphasised that support was necessary to enable tutors to deliver on their responsibilities. The need to support the tutoring function was therefore highlighted. These perceptions may contribute to performance discussions. More needs to be done to ensure that the tutors are adequately supported with their resources to assist lecturers and students.

Suggestions to improve the tutoring function for online/ blended learning

The participants suggested that to improve the tutoring function during this period of online learning, many resources and structures should be implemented. These include more tutor training aligned to online requirements, a tutor community or centre to share their struggles, mentoring or coaching programmes, and clarity of roles. Few educators voiced adequate remuneration to support tutors during these difficult times with extra workload.

The following statements from tutors reflect these suggestions: "The ADC should incorporate more courses and training for online learning; More guidance to know what's happening, certain things need to be discussed and announcements need to be made in time; Take attendance during tutorials; Having a set job description in writing to provide more clarity in terms of the expectations".

Furthermore, the need to improve on the quality of the tutor's content delivery was highlighted: "Students tend to struggle about the same thing. Gather feedback from students, in terms of a poll before a tutorial to know which areas to dwell on; The marking memo should be provided with clear explanations". According to the educators: "The department should have a formal orientation session with them; Mentoring programme; Coaching in terms of presentation content and skills; A tutor resource centre; Some assistance with time management; Evaluating tutors' academic performance too; Regular sessions throughout the semester to get feedback from tutors; Get feedback from students too on how tutors can improve their skills". The above strategies could contribute to performance improvement discussions to support the tutoring function. These are further discussed and supported with extant literature.

Discussion

Lecturers and tutors create knowledge through interactions and practices at the core of social constructivism, influencing students' learning (Faroa, 2017). The tutoring practices used during the lockdown included educational platforms like Blackboard and consultations via Zoom, MS Teams and WhatsApp. This aligns with Pérez-Jorge et al.'s (2020) findings that Blackboard and WhatsApp were the predominant tutoring platforms during the lockdown. Before the pandemic, tutors had access to the online platform, Blackboard, used in the institution. However, it was mainly utilised for information dissemination as students could receive instant emails and messaging from the platform. Therefore, tutors seldom had more access to other features except announcements and discussion forums. During the pandemic, tutors were granted more access to assist lecturers in marking assignments, monitoring student performance and uploading content. Lecturers, on their part, prioritised online content delivery with recorded lectures that the tutors could access. Research also shows that online tutoring practices tend to include technology-mediated distance learning, contact skills (communication and social), use of timetables, formal and informal meetings, smaller class sizes, and the dedicated number of hours (Simao et al., 2008; Khumalo, 2018). Therefore, the tutoring platforms used were suitable, convenient, and adaptable during the transition to online learning.

The findings showed that most of the lecturers were satisfied with their tutors' performance and valued their assistance during the transition to online learning. However, challenges encountered by tutors during the online transition included work ethic, administrative issues, unclear guidelines for tutoring in an online environment, technology, internet connectivity, data and access to devices and online platforms. With an increased reliance on internet connections for learning, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant connectivity issues in South Africa and, indeed, globally (Thorburn, 2021). The tutoring function was also not spared. These were consistent with the findings in Yusuf and Ahmad (2020), who identified a lack of necessary tools and equipment for learning, poor-quality internet connection, and inadequate infrastructure in terms of computers. Online teaching and learning are effective with consistent access to the internet and computers and if tutors receive targeted training and support for online instruction. Because these needed requirements for effectiveness have been largely absent for many, tutoring during the pandemic has impeded teaching and learning. These findings were also in line with Joubert and Snyman (2018) and Mishra et al.'s (2020) views that restricted access to online platforms, administrative problems, low participation and lack of commitment by students, tutors' feeling of isolation, limited or no interaction between lecturers and tutors and insufficient training were critical challenges faced with online tutoring.

Before the pandemic, lecturer-tutor interactions were mostly physical but frequent (sometimes unscheduled) meetings. Tutors had the freedom to consult with lecturers at the office before classes, exercises or group activities to obtain materials and clarify content and expected outcomes. Lecturers also guided tutorial content based on the perceived needs of students communicated during weekly interactions (Faroa, 2017). Therefore, while it was clearly expressed that everyone was unprepared without proper support, coupled with hastily placed criteria and imposed guidelines by institutions, at the onset of the pandemic, more regular interaction between tutors and lecturers was necessary to help in clarifying responsibilities and dealing with the magnitude of the situation (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020; Milosievski, 2020).

The findings on the limited understanding of role requirements and lack of consistency are consonant with results from Walker (2020) undertaken within a UK university. Although the participants in Walker's study were personal tutors, these factors could be demotivating irrespective of the mode of tutoring. The tutor-educator problems expressed could be because educators themselves are not totally committed to the training of their tutors. There are some reasons for this. One of the most obvious is that the staff are focused on research-related activities but are not obliged to commit to teaching related tasks, including the training of their tutors. Tutors are expected to study the related chapter, understand the content, and then deliver the same to the students, freeing the educator to focus on other roles as professionals (including research and collaboration with industry) (Rahmat, 2021).

Therefore, coordinated action between the lecturer and the tutor needs to be enhanced, with outcomes designed and specified with the flexibility of shifting nimbly between roles, even while acknowledging the culturally nuanced responsibility of the tutor as 'support or complementary" (Rapanta et al., 2020). Tutors are not necessarily always seen as the right people to give advice and instruction as a lecturer; however, with some subsidiary objectives, directed and constantly reviewed by the lecturer, tutors can develop teaching techniques and skills necessary to provide the support needed by students (Kneale, 2009). Tutors must be equipped with an appropriate set of skills and attributes in addition

to subject matter expertise. Additionally, coaching and regular meetings to monitor the progress of tutorials and keep abreast of what is going on with the tutors and students are critical (McKay, 2016).

Further, the guidance could come in the form of a tutor mentorship programme, which, if sufficient training is provided, will create the tools to promote suitable tutoring strategies. Mentoring on this level would provide a platform to support feedback initiatives adequately, orient them to the procedures and create a proper channel to communicate information between the educators and the students in such a way as to integrate institutional and societal views and challenges. Furthermore, while mentoring has focused on socio-emotional support, a better method of understanding the mentor's role in developing pedagogical content is needed. Few researchers have explored a knowledge/practice base for content-focused mentoring. According to Achinstein and Davis (2014), developing content teaching is a distinct mentor role within a content area. Mentoring appeared to be specifically valuable in developing practices to guide tutors in assessing and developing students' disciplinary thinking. These strategies may alleviate some of the relationship problems and enhance the overall performance of tutors, educators, and the students themselves.

Concerning other relationship problems between tutors and students that may affect tutors' performance, the findings of this study are corroborated in Mckay (2016), which revealed that tutorials are flexible and that could be the reason for the lack of strict rules and guidelines on student behaviour. In addition, tutors are expected to be friendly and approachable and thus students may feel free to contact tutors anytime. This may also result from students needing more attention and guidance given the pressure to perform as expected even with stressful times. Although the use of some online platforms like WhatsApp do not conform to specific timetables or response times, there should be boundaries and mentoring on dealing with difficult students and situations (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2020). Tutors can set aside specific times when they are available, advertise these to the students, and inform the lecturer (Gosling, 2009).

The lack of interest in tutorials, which most of the tutors raised, should be attended to, as efforts are being made with tutors, which will be in vain if students do not value tutorials. This concern was also expressed in a study among Czech and Polish students, where many students could only exchange chat messages or listen to voice notes from the tutor (Klimova et al., 2021). On the contrary, students in the UK found online engagements more interesting and interactive than face-to-face tutorials, as reported in a recent study among higher education institutions (Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC)) (2021b). According to this report, students expressed that it was hard to concentrate, staring at a screen all day, and thus appreciated some engagement and interaction. The differences in opinion could be due to personal reasons for reduced students' participation, as expressed in the JISC report. These reasons, for example, attitude and perceived usefulness of technology use in skills development could be beyond the tutors' or university authorities' control, but the tutor's central role should not be neglected (Klimova et al., 2021). Data issues were also highlighted as a major concern as tutors and students need sufficient data to stay online for the sessions, as was the case globally (Milosievski, 2020; Yusuf and Ahmad, 2020; JISC, 2021a).

Common anxieties associated with COVID-19 were also likely to have affected students' mental health and learning (degree of concentration), resulting in mixed-up information from different modules and lack of motivation (Klimova et al., 2021). The extreme academic pressure and transition for high school (for first-year students) may also place them under stress as they need to learn more independence in the new academic environment, thus it could not have been easy with the pandemic (Laher et al., 2021). Nonetheless, the importance of continued support with tutorials is crucial. As revealed in McKay (2016), students who attended most of the assigned tutorials improved their marks by an average of 20%. Perhaps feedback forms should be encouraged to hear the students' voices and concerns. This will help a tutor in the online environment to be aware of the students' needs and context (Hurtado, 2014). Many students who come from disadvantaged areas or communities have relied on tutoring or group study to voice their concerns and assist each other where the educator has been ineffectual in teaching (Mukhari, 2016).

Further, to motivate students and encourage participation, tutors could host interactive sessions and ask questions that elicit instant thinking and responses in a cognitive coaching approach, as explained by Wood and Tanner (2012) in their study on tutor effectiveness. Students can also be assessed and graded on tutoring activities to maximize the impact; and provided with sufficient but succinct guidance with the online materials (Walker, 2020; Klimova et al., 2021). Working in smaller groups can help increase student participation, as in Malaysia (Yusuf and Ahmad, 2020). Griffiths (2009) suggested ways of managing small group sessions and the use of emails and online discussion groups provided within virtual learning environments, which have the advantage that tutors can monitor what is being discussed.

Regarding support received, some form of support was received from some educators and the department, including sending tutors to relevant training, electing a senior tutor to mediate issues, and educators getting involved on issues needing attention. Research suggests that support for online learning partly depends on tutors' skills, resources, and proficiency to deliver online learning (García and Weiss, 2020; Smalley, 2020). In addition to well-prepared tutors and students, successful online learning requires pedagogically sound, well-designed online learning resources (McPherson and Nunes, 2004).

Further, it is crucial to equip tutors with instructional training and access to undertake certain duties to support the lecturers, especially since the lecturers were also thrown into the deep end with the incidence of the pandemic. New and extended skills are needed to guide, support, communicate and relate with lecturers and students via the current means like WhatsApp and Blackboard (Pérez-Jorge et al., 2020). The JISC (2021a) revealed that building tutors' digital capability and providing access to university support services including information technology (IT) support and training are crucial going forward. No matter what skills a person has, active training through repetition plus practice is needed to improve (Yurt and Aktas, 2016). Additionally, the integration of technology is inevitable in the learning process, not only to navigate the challenges of the pandemic-imposed new norm, but also to meet the demands of the fourth industrial revolution. Restricted access to technology as corroborated in Joubert and Snyman (2018) is a challenge. Integrating technology in the teaching and learning process allows for imparting knowledge using methods they would feel comfortable with while matching the demands of technology in the 21st century (Mishra et al., 2020).

The identified strategies to further support tutors in an online environment include training on the use of online platforms, granting access to tutors to wider applications, finding ways to increase participation and student interest in tutorials (interactive), having a formal conversation about responsibilities and boundaries, and providing a mentoring structure to support tutors. In addition, evaluating how tutors perform from time to time, assisting them with time management and planning could help to improve their effectiveness. These findings are supported in other research that points to management and governance factors, including; training responsiveness, student support services, and infrastructure, to impact on the quality of learning and the success rates of students (Khumalo, 2018). These are critical and can make the online learning process seamless despite the challenges that come with this uncharted territory. This understanding seems to concur with research in this area that the ultimate goal of quality teaching policies is to improve the quality of students' learning experiences and, ultimately, learning outcomes (Hénard and Roseveare, 2012). It is even more critical in developing countries, which felt the impact of the pandemic the most.

Comparisons of higher education student performance have been focused in countries where there are IT resources and reliable government support, financial and technical support, and skills; thus the challenges of online learning were not felt to such a great extent as it was felt in developing countries (El Said, 2021; Jain et al., 2021). Therefore, these suggested strategies can be developed to equip and support tutors in delivering their responsibilities in universities in developing countries. As research concurs, management in higher educational institutions will have to adapt to new learning modes, practices and conditions as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic (Realyvásquez-Vargas et al., 2020). Perhaps, what is needed is a transformative learning environment to encourage independent learning to promote lifelong learning with appropriate guidance (Hurtado, 2014).

In addition to the digital upskilling of tutors, the use of learning analytics could help to amass information about the students and context, as was successfully done in the UK (JISC, 2021a). Although Blackboard is available and used in the subject institution in South Africa, more could be done to upgrade the inherent tools and services to encourage interaction and provide relevant and targeted support, knowing the context of weaker student performance. This will provide support and pre-identification of troubling content areas using a poll, as suggested by the interviewed tutors.

Overall, three specific domains should be drawn from this study, as annotated in Figure 1: resources and monitoring, content, and motivation. Resources and monitoring of the tutoring process are critical parallels. The educator should monitor students' access to resources and the interaction between the tutor and the student. Such systems are often disciple-specific and require specialised training and skills. Even with the right training and programme-specific developments, the process still requires sufficient motivation to function adequately within the system. Therefore, the motivation should include digital and data support, guidance, and mentoring to the tutors.
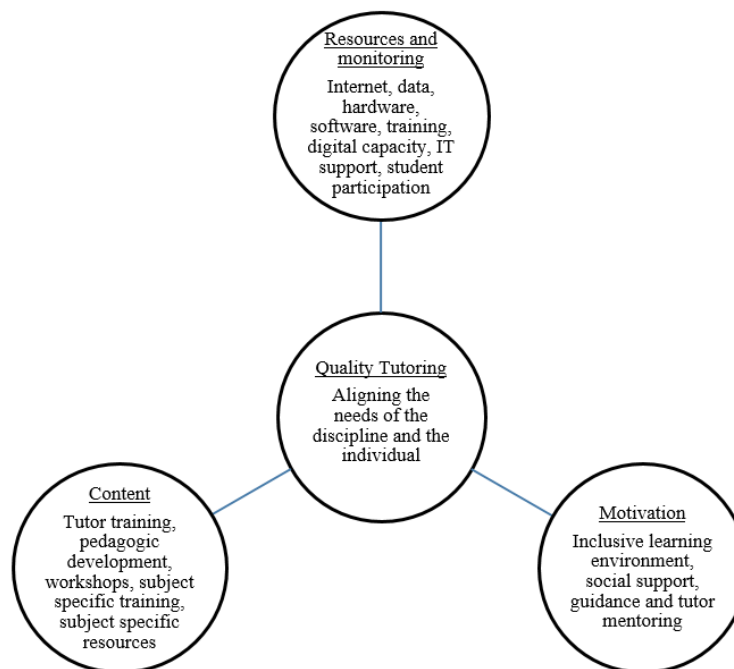
Figure 1:
Tutor model within an online environment

The abovementioned domains have severe policy implications that can run both upstream and downstream. Looking downstream would imply that there could be space for a transmission process as students move from level to level within the education system. In other words, tutors should be trained at different levels to deal with content-based challenges at each stage of the qualification process. This would also facilitate a handover process as students move along the institution's corridors. This would possibly require a more centrally administered tutor programme, which would monitor and facilitate the change in expectations and the range of challenges experienced along the way while further providing support to the educators.

Upstream would require the tutoring process to begin with engaging with students before engaging with the university. This could come in the form of working with groups of potential students prior to the commencement of their activities but familiarising young people with the workings of the academic system by becoming more familiar with the technology and online environment. Given the devastating consequences of COVID-19, such a process would allow for more online engagement at an earlier stage of students' academic careers.

In addition to aligning instruction to relevant content and providing training and infrastructure, digital transformation is needed to achieve transformation within the university concerned (JISC, 2021a). Currently, robust discussions and training have been undertaken with the unit responsible for the quality promotion and academic staff development within the university around module design and digital transformation for teaching, learning and assessment in the virtual environment. This ensures that designed courses are adapted to meet expectations based on international standards and practices. It is also vital to adapt the designs with essential characteristics that meet the needs in a specific context (requisite skills and competencies), and develop further as the need arises, as advocated in Rapanta et al.'s (2020) qualitative study among experts in Switzerland, Spain, Australia and Canada, and Faroa (2017), Coullie (2020) and Pather et al. (2020) in South Africa. According to the JISC (2021a), agile university systems, data, and processes must align with each student's personal needs and circumstances and contribute to their experience before joining, during and after higher education.

Although the digital transformation of teaching and learning requires a considerable investment, university governing

bodies and executive teams, need to make short-term investments going forward to cater to students' needs in these uncertain times. For this investment to be worthwhile and to have a lasting impact on tutors and students, it must be aligned with a longer-term strategic intent to ensure that every pound spent improves a student's journey throughout their time at university and beyond into the workplace (JISC, 2021a).

Conclusion

This qualitative enquiry aimed to identify tutoring practices, challenges and support received during online learning. The tutors sampled utilised Blackboard for tutorial sessions, instruction and communication. They were mostly reported to perform satisfactorily. However, they faced challenges including an increased workload, inadequate access to devices and platforms, inadequate knowledge on the use of online platforms, students' reduced interest and participation in tutorials, data and connectivity, unclear expectations, and relational- and personal problems. There was an indication of some support provided from the lecturers, departments and/or the university as a whole, and there were mixed responses. Some lecturers reported that they supported their tutors with the transition to online learning, while some tutors reported that they received no support from the department or university, except to the extent of data provision and head tutor's support.

Supporting the tutoring function goes beyond selecting a tutor with content knowledge. The need to support increasingly diverse students with varying levels of understanding has emphasised tutors' expected responsibilities and functions. Universities should review their individualised support for tutors to include more aligned training to the current tutorial arrangements, more structure and certainty with roles and administrative procedures. Additional skills and support are required in the online teaching environment to assist lecturers and help students manage content across modules, and to encourage participation. Going forward, intervention through developing tailored professional development of materials and skills and standardisation of processes and information to facilitate and manage online learning is critical. Digital capacity building is vital. Tutors need to be provided with regular support and functional training in integrating technology, time-management, mentoring and coaching programmes, and a tutor resource centre for peer learning. These strategies need to be implemented at the department and university level, irrespective of the investment cost.

By giving attention to the challenges of tutoring during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown and identifying ways to support tutoring in a blended learning environment, especially in the views of both lecturers and students, the study provides an understanding of the current challenges faced by tutors and the required support. In addition, few studies have used interviews to elicit information from the tutors on their challenges and how they think they should be supported to help them to manage the learning environment while complementing the lecturer. While students need support, more than ever, in these challenging times to manage and understand concepts faster, tutors equally need support to withstand the additional pressure from lecturers and students. Therefore, attention to ways to support the tutoring function is essential.

In addition, the choice of tutors will be a paramount consideration going forward. Further studies could focus on that. Further studies are ongoing to explore the perception of the students on their expectations and experiences from tutors during online learning. The limitation of this study is that the sample included participants from one faculty in a higher education institution. Therefore, future studies can include a wider sample. Further studies can also employ quantitative techniques to investigate tutoring practices, challenges, and possible practical support for the tutoring function.

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