

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Student experiences of attending the first online Southern African Students Psychology Conference at an open distance e-learning university in South Africa

Maitemogelo a Baithuti a go tsenela Khonferentshe ya pele ya inthanete ya Saekoloji ya Baithuti ba Afrika Borwa yunibesithing ya e-learning ya kgole ye e bulegilego ka Afrika Borwa

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ABSTRACT

The devastation and aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic continue to pervade almost every sphere of human existence, albeit arguably increasingly nuanced. As we move into the post-pandemic world, it is essential to reflect on the lessons learned and forge transformed, decolonised ways of knowledge production in higher education. To ensure the continuation of academic socialisation, academic conference organizers have had to introduce virtual conferencing during the pandemic. In this article, we discuss the experiences of students who attended the first online Southern African Students Psychology Conference (SASPC) during the pandemic in South Africa within a distance e-learning context. We use academic socialisation as a theoretical framework to understand student experiences attending the first online SASPC and to discuss the student conference as a site for decolonisation. From the focus group discussion with student attendees, the historical and current format of the conference unexpectedly emerged as a colonised space of academic socialisation that the students challenged. Opportunities for using the student conference space as a site of decolonisation are explored to contribute to the dearth of scholarly literature aimed at actively incorporating students' voices in the decolonisation of academic spaces in the Global South.

KEYWORDS

Online academic conferences, students, psychology, COVID-19, South Africa, academic socialisation, student experience

NAGANWAGO

Tshenyego le ditlamorago tša leuba la COVID-19 di tšwela pele go aparela mahlakore a mantši a go phela ga batho, le ge ka nako yengwe koketšego ya se e se pepeneneng. Ge re tšwela pele go phela morago ga COVID-19, go bohlokwa go naganishiša ka maitemogelo le go hlama ditsela tše di fetotšwego tša go tlošwa ga bokoloniale tša tšweletšo ya tsebo thutong ya godimo. Go netefatša tšwelopele ya tša thuto, barulaganyi ba dikopano tša thuto ba ile ba swanelwa ke go tsebagatša

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dikhonferentshe tša mararankonding a inthanete nakong ya leuba. Mo sengwalong se, re ahlaahla maitemogelo a baithuti bao ba bilego karolo ya khonferentshe ya mathomo ya inthanete ya Southern African Students Psychology Conference (SASPC) nakong ya leuba la COVID-19 go la Afrika Borwa, mokgweng wa go ithuta o le kgole wa inthanete. Re šomiša academic socialisation bjalo ka teori go kwešiša maitemogelo a baithuti a go ba karolo ya SASPC ya mathomo ya inthanete le go ahlaahla khonferentshe ya baithuti bjalo ka lefelo la go tloša bokoloniale. Go tšwa poledišanong ka sehlopha le baithuti bao e bilego karolo ya khonferentshe, sebopego sa khonferentshe sa kgale le sa bjale se tšweletše bjalo ka lefelo la dikgopolo tša bokoloniale leo baithuti ba bilego kgahlanong le lona. Ka fao, go lebelelwa menyetla ya go šomiša khonferentshe ya baithuti bjalo ka lefelo la go tloša bokoloniale, go tsenya letsogo go tlhalelo ya dingwalo tša borutegi tšeo di lebišitšwego go hlohleletša dikgopolo tša baithuti ge go etla go go tloša bokoloniale mafelong a thuto go Borwa bja Lefase..

MANTŠU A BOHLOKWA

Dikhonferentshe tša thuto tša inthaneteng, baithuti, thuto ya monagano, COVID-19, Afrika Borwa, go gwerana ga thuto, maitemogelo a baithuti

Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 in South Africa instigated and indeed necessitated major transformations in many sectors, at a personal and professional level, accelerating technological change in the lives of many and changing the manner in which we interact with one another. Higher education in the Global South was no different (Devkota, 2021; Gelber et al., 2021; Seetal et al., 2021). Mandated social distancing measures forced rapid changes from the traditional face-to-face learning method towards online open distance e-learning (ODEL) to maintain student and staff access to academic programmes (Stanistreet et al., 2020). The ODeL university in which we teach was no exception, despite the university's strategic plans to move fully online before the pandemic. This accelerated movement to the online space created opportunities and challenges, particularly in hosting the 7th Southern African Students Psychology Conference (SASPC) online for the first time. Due to the relatively new emergence of research regarding the experiences of online conferencing concerning the COVID-19 pandemic, limited scholarly literature has explored student experiences of attending online conferences. However, it should also be noted that research concerning student experiences of online or in-person conference attendance is all but absent within the context of the Global South.

In this article, we discuss the experiences of students who attended the first online SASPC during the pandemic in South Africa within an ODeL context. We used a focus group comprising five students. Two of the five students also served on the conference organizing committee as the scientific chair and the media online liaison. The sixth participant was the conference chair, who also started their journey as a student at a previous SASPC. The conference chair acted as the facilitator of the discussion. We use academic socialisation as a theoretical framework to understand student experiences attending the first online SASPC. We also use academic socialisation to discuss the student conference as a site of contestation and decolonisation. Findings from the focus group discussion demonstrate the layered complexities of hosting the student conference during the pandemic within a context of structural inequalities and a

student-directed drive towards the decolonisation of academic spaces within the South African context.

Moving the SASPC online

The SASPC is a biannual conference that provides undergraduate and postgraduate students from Southern Africa, who are studying psychology, the opportunity to present their research in an appreciative and collegial space. Presenters at SASPC are masters and doctoral students, while undergraduate psychology students often participate in the conference as delegates. The conference rationale has been to academically socialise and create a learning space for postgraduate students to present their completed or in-progress research to their peers and academics from the host and collaborating universities. The structure of the conference replicated traditional academic conferences with a 15-minute presentation format and a 5-minute question-and-answer session. This structure was purposeful to academically socialise our students in the skills needed for presenting their postgraduate research to professional, national, and international audiences. In addition to the two days of postgraduate presentations, the conference hosted a day of strategically student-centred workshops. Since the first SASPC, held on 27 June 2009 (Southern African Students Psychology Conference, 2023), the conference has been successfully convened with in-person attendance only.

However, the pandemic forced us, as the conference organizers, to re-evaluate, and after much deliberation we decided to host the conference online. Initially, we approached two professional conference hosting companies for their expertise but could not secure funding since funders were facing financial challenges due to the pandemic. One of the conference organizers had experience attending an online conference, but none of us had any experience in organizing an online conference. Like many other industries, we had to adapt quickly. Indeed, we forged ahead, and the 7th SASPC was the first to be hosted fully online from 7 to 9 September 2021.

A 'new' reality

As virtual interactions became our new reality and academic conferences moved into online spaces as well, conference organizers were presented with novel challenges, as well as innovative, positive opportunities for inclusive reforms. This mode of conferencing, known as online conferencing, virtual conferencing, or web-based conferencing, has been explored and documented by researchers (Bray et al., 2022; Newman, 2021; Pedaste & Kasemets, 2021; Sarabipour, 2020; Woodruff et al., 2021), albeit in a limited scope due to the relatively new emergence of the phenomenon. Significant advantages of online conferencing include the reduction of costs associated with invited speaker and attendee travel, as well as no cost for venue hire, accommodation, and catering, resulting in conferences becoming more accessible (Pedaste & Kasemets, 2021). Most importantly, inclusivity is increased (Hacker et al., 2020) as the accessibility of online conferences improves attendance opportunities for those relegated by the lack of equity in terms of the costs and travel involved in attending in-person conferences: students and early-career researchers; researchers from developing countries; hospitalised

attendees, attendees who are parents with small children; and attendees living with a disability or with a chronic illness (Bray et al., 2022). Researchers have also noted that in addition to the fact that online conferences are cheaper to run and more inclusive, CO₂ emissions are reduced due to less long-distance air travel, thus improving the heavy carbon footprint of international conferences, making virtual events more sustainable (Newman, 2021). The advancement of digital skills literacy was also mentioned by researchers, with the virtual environment providing academics with opportunities to discover online presentation and moderation technologies, as well e-posters, electronic question forums, and polling tools (Newman, 2021).

However, while researchers have noted the online conference dimension of equitable access, which facilitates broader participation by reducing inequalities that can result from factors such as gender, race/ethnicity, social class or (dis)ability (Hanson et al., 2017, cited in Sá et al., 2019), there are significant issues that arise from this complex socio-technical mode of conferencing that cannot be overlooked. Unfortunately, research (Mpungose, 2021; Sá et al., 2019) conducted with organizers and attendees of online conferences has noted numerous challenges encountered in online conferencing, which include technical issues related to data costs and internet connectivity, exclusion of attendees who may not have a sufficient level of digital literacy or access to the digital infrastructure needed to participate; the lack of informal and social interaction among participants; and the limiting factor of the number of participants allowed due to technical restrictions on online conference platforms. These concerns are significantly compounded within the South African context of structural inequalities due to our history of colonialization, apartheid, and poor governance.

Structural inequalities

While advances in ODeL offer great opportunities for access to education and have the potential to address education inequalities in a context such as South Africa, considering its history of exclusionary practices (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Maphalala & Adigun, 2021), successful ODeL requires resources for both students and members of staff and the necessary digital infrastructure. Reliable internet connection and access to digital devices are common issues across many countries, and access to digital devices is of concern, particularly in many developing countries (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The digital divide and inequalities in the South African context pose challenges heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the major hindrances to ODeL is infrastructure and its related costs (Mpungose, 2020; Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021), which disadvantage those from rural, and/or poor communities from accessing information and education.

Challenges of learner support have long been identified in the ODeL context (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2014). Learner support is defined here according to Thorpe, (2002, p. 107) and refers to “meeting of needs that *all* learners have because they are central to high quality learning – guidance about course choice, preparatory diagnosis, study skills, access to group learning in seminars and tutorials, and so on”. However, the migration to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated new ways of thinking about student support. To address issues of data costs during the lockdown

period in South Africa, the government partnered with network providers to offer zero-rated applications and educational websites (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). This meant that students could use these applications and websites without cost. However, some still did not have access. Similarly, some universities partnered with network providers to afford students free data during their examination periods. Research also indicates that students used social media sites (mainly for communication) via free data bundles provided by network service providers. However, universities did not support these as learning platforms (Mpungose, 2020). Researchers have reported challenges with the use of an e-learning platform such as IT infrastructure, internet access, insufficient technical support, and inadequate training (Maphalala & Adigun, 2020). Issues of training relate to the preparedness to use digital platforms during the emergency online learning space (Olawale & Mutongoza, 2021).

In addition to the material impact of the pandemic, students and university staff experienced psychosocial impacts on their well-being, which affected productivity (Laher et al., 2021; Olawale et al., 2021). For example, findings revealed that a majority of participants from two rural South African universities indicated that an undefined work schedule affected their psychosocial wellness in the domain of workload management and productivity (Olawale et al., 2021) it is expected to be very significant considering the high incidence of emotional reactions amongst university students and staff. While fears around COVID-19 exposure, anxieties, and the challenges of support normalize stress, anxiety, and depression as emotional reactions in the face of the pandemic, this psychosocial impact has negative consequences for the university community. Thus, in order to salvage the higher education institutions from the debilitating effects of the pandemic, there is a clear need to safeguard the welfare of students and staff. Hence, it becomes vital to examine the experience of members of the university community during the COVID-19 crisis in order to develop measures and implement interventions that will assist in navigating psychosocial challenges. To achieve this objective, the study employed a mixed-method research approach in which data was collected using web-based survey and online interviews. Concurrent triangulation sampling technique was employed to select a sample of fifteen (15). The increased workload led to increased work-related stress. Another concern related to online spaces is the lack of in-person interaction. Undergraduate psychology students at a traditional (contact) university in South Africa reported difficulties with understanding their course material in the absence of face-to-face interaction (Laher et al., 2021). In this study, some students experienced symptoms of depression, anxiety, and burnout. Due to limited social interactions, students also reported feelings of isolation. Indeed, as Olawale and Mutongoza (2021) posit, it is important to cultivate opportunities and ways of collaboration for ODeL students intentionally.

Academic socialisation

Pre- and post-pandemic, academic conferences have offered researchers the platform to share their expertise and research. Scientific conferences have themselves been the focus of research attention, especially since the advent of COVID-19 (Becerra et al., 2020;

Bray et al., 2022; Fakunle et al., 2019; Lortie, 2020; Raby & Madden, 2021). Becerra et al. (2020) provided three purposes for attending academic or professional conferences, namely, advancing existing skills, discovering and exploring new areas of interest, and networking. However, networking and other social dimensions of professional spaces, such as conferences, are diminished in online spaces (Cassidy et al., 2023). In South Africa, scientific research is an important aspect of psychology studies and professional training. Healthcare practitioners are registered with the Health Professions Council of South Africa (HPCSA) and have the responsibility to update their professional knowledge and skills (HPCSA, 2023) through Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programmes, such as conferences. As such, academic conferences are valuable for advancing existing skills or being exposed to new areas of research and practice. For students, as novice researchers, conferences are a space to connect with new (and established) collaborators, to co-learn and build community (Lortie, 2020). Participation in academic conferences is therefore crucial in developing students' research expertise, presentation skills, and professional networks.

One of the primary objectives of the SASPC, and a major instigator of its inception, was the identified need for a space for psychology students to improve their academic socialisation. Prior to the pandemic, the in-person conferences had indeed provided the opportunity for students to network, share their research interests and endeavours, as well as develop new research interests and collaborations. The development of skills in public speaking and debate to improve academic solicitation was also encouraged. Therefore, a major challenge encountered by conference organizers and attendees of online conferencing is the lack of academic socialisation. This absence of informal and spontaneous in-person interactions is noted with serious concern for academic advancement, particularly in relation to community of practice functions such as professional networking and discussions where academics interact and develop new research intentions and collaborations (Bray et al., 2022). Similarly, at the International Conference on Advanced Learning Technologies and Technology-Enhanced Learning in July 2020 at the University of Tartu in Estonia, Pedaste and Kasemets (2021) noted the lack of support for socialisation, with many of the 131 attendees reporting difficulties in engaging and socialising with people at the online event. In addition, researchers have documented professional development concerns raised by attendees, who felt hampered in this regard, as they could not practise public speaking skills in answering questions, taking feedback, and defending their research (Medina & Shrum, 2022; Woodruff et al., 2021).

Across the globe, academics and students alike have had to face numerous challenges in the wake of the pandemic, in particular feelings of isolation and anxiety, compounded by the lack of in person communication with colleagues, classmates, friends and relatives (Alghamdi, 2021; Al-Maskari et al., 2022; Leal Filho et al., 2021; Muthuprasad et al., 2021). The shift to online classes and conferencing has seen researcher reports of students, most often students from vulnerable backgrounds, struggling with disengagement, digital exclusion, and poor technology management (Bennett et al., 2022; Estien et al, 2021; Drane et al., 2020, cited in Al-Maskari et al.,

2022; Mpungose, 2021). These factors impact students' ability to engage and develop within the academic context as essentially there is a loss of 'community of practice' in online conferencing. This convention, which sees academics interact formally through presentations and informally through networking at in-person conferences, is considered crucial to scientific advancement and not easily replicated in online spaces (Bray et al., 2022). Therefore, the loss of academic socialisation for students can have dire implications for these emerging scholars attempting to start their professional development in academia.

The process of socialisation

In the field of psychology, a person's development includes the complex process of socialisation, that is, how we interact with individuals, groups and institutions. Indeed, socialisation theory most commonly "refers to the developmental processes through which individuals acquire the values, behaviors, and motivations necessary to become competent members of a culture" (Morawski, 2014, p. 1820). Agents of socialisation which exert the most impact on a person's early development include parental figures, siblings and other family members, and, in later years, their peer groups. As we grow older, social institutions also inform our socialisation, with formal institutions, such as our schools and workplaces, informing us on how to behave in, and navigate through, these systems (Little & McGivern, 2012).

In academia, socialisation practices start during the student's undergraduate years and support their transitional processes towards starting their academic careers and subsequent professional development (Farnese et al., 2022). As such, it is a dynamic process that is both complex and diverse, dependant on "the student's past experiences, the reflective nature of the process and the beliefs and values promoted in the course" (Howkins & Ewens, 1999). For students in academic institutions, the socialisation process includes a radical reappraisal of their role perceptions, and follows a transition through which they learn about, adjust to, and change their knowledge base, skillsets and attitudes. International research conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic (Fúzi et al, 2022; Li & Zhang, 2022), indicates that there is a dynamic interconnection between digitalisation and socialisation, and that the digitalisation of learning has actually increased the need for academic socialisation, with institutions of higher learning needing to do more to facilitate students' professional identity development.

Although the general theoretical framework for the socialisation process is well established, there is a scarcity of literature exploring academic conferences specifically for psychology students in this context, particularly in the Global South. Research is lacking in terms of understanding both undergraduate and postgraduate students' experiences at conferences and how these events contribute to academic and professional socialisation. Therefore, this dearth of research regarding these students' experiences of conference attendance online versus in person, will be addressed through the course of this article, more specifically from the context of the Global South.

The *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall* student protest campaigns in South Africa radicalised the decolonisation movement in higher education in South Africa (Mashiya et

al., 2020). Student protests called for a decolonisation of the curriculum and questioned the slow transformation in higher education sector post democracy (Chukwuere & Chukwuere, 2017). The student protests unearthed other issues of access and inclusion, and issues relating to the physical spaces of learning (i.e. racial and colonial symbols in universities). We, like many other academics, struggled to decolonise subject content that we were academically socialised to accept as the only truth. Additionally, the decolonisation debate focused on content. We neglected to interrogate how we could decolonise the spaces and modes of teaching and learning in higher education. We neglected to consider how academic socialisation through the student conference could be seen as sites for further colonisation. The student conference, therefore, provided an appropriate, yet unexpected space from which we could contribute to practical steps towards decolonising not just knowledge production but also the spaces within which we become academically (colonised) socialised (Kehdinga et al., 2019).

Using student experiences to reflect on academic socialisation as a space for decolonisation was essential in challenging traditional pedagogical practice that inadvertently perpetuates the status quo. This was an essential step in challenging what Cummins et al. (2022, pp. 66, 73) call “entrenched power dynamics and patterns of knowledge creation and use that have emerged from the accidental historical power relations of colonial domination” through the use of student voices. In so doing, challenging our academic socialisation of our students in traditionally accepted academic ways of being takes us to a ‘post-normal; decolonial practice of challenging established ways of doing within the academia (Khoo, 2024, p. 4). We view this as necessary in moving from ethnocentric traditions to self-aware pedagogical practices that speak to the needs of our students.

Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research design and followed a social constructivist approach. Social constructivist theory is premised on the understanding that we make meaning of social phenomena through active engagement and collaboration with each other (Amineh & Asi, 2015). Data were collected using a focus group of 6 participants, five students, and the conference chair, lasting approximately 2 hours. Two of the five students were part of the conference organizing team. Four students were female, and one was male, all above the age of 25 years. The aim of the focus group discussion was to understand the experiences of students who attended the first online SASPC. The discussion was guided by semi-structured interviews and open-ended guiding questions (Kornbluh, 2022). The use of a focus group discussion allowed us to collect rich, in-depth information in a relatively short period through reciprocal meaning-making and collective participation (Kornbluh, 2022).

We had originally wanted to host the focus group during the conference but, unfortunately, did not receive ethics clearance in time. Ethics clearance was eventually received from our institutional ethics committee. We encountered a series of delays with our information and communications department (ICT), which was responsible for sending out the invitation emails to our students. The emails contained information

about the research study and invited participants to contact us if they were interested in participating in the study. It also contained the informed consent form that needed to be signed by each study participant. University policy, in line with the Protection of Information Act (POPIA) in South Africa, dictated that even though we had access to our conference attendees' email addresses, we could not contact them for reasons other than the original intention of the initial interaction. We, therefore, used purposive sampling to send the list of student participants to ICT for their consent to participate in the study. The delays we experienced with ICT resulted in us collecting data only 6 months after the conference and a small sample size. Many of the email addresses we had were not in use because they were student email addresses that had since been deactivated. This was not ideal, but we believe that our informal conversations with our students during the conference confirmed the results we obtained from our focus group through their recall of the conference and their personal reflections.

Ethics and self-reflexivity

The study obtained ethics clearance from the College Research Ethics Committee (CREC) of the College of Human Sciences of the University of South Africa. Additionally, ethical clearance was also obtained from the university's Research Ethics Committee (REC) because the study involved the institution's members of staff and students. We used pseudonyms to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. As academics, psychological researchers and psychological practitioners, we are cognisant of the importance of critically reflecting on the research process and our engagement with our participants. Organizing our first online conference was extremely stressful because it was at the height of the pandemic in South Africa. Even though we had been involved with SASPC before in various organizing and participatory capacities, this was the first online conference we had organized. We were inexperienced in the online space. This inexperience of organizing a conference in the online space was framed within our own personal experiences of the pandemic.

We were grateful that the conference was a success, and we were eager to then learn from this success by engaging with the conference attendees. However, delays in hosting the focus group were frustrating because we knew that we would have decreased participation with each passing month. Interacting with our focus group did reinforce the sentiments that were expressed to us during the conference. But it also highlighted the deep need for human interaction and the sense of craving normalcy. However, this normalcy seemed almost mythical at times. We, therefore, had to make the online space productive.

Results and discussion

Challenges with the online space

The first challenge we experienced at the conference was the unmet expectations that students had. The early in-person formats of the conference were rigid in their structure based on international best practices. However, during an open student dialogue at the

5th SASPC, held in 2017, students expressed a need for open dialogue and for their voices to be heard in the wake of the *#RhodesMustFall* and *#FeesMustFall*. We subsequently modified the 6th SASPC conference format to include roundtable discussions and symposiums that were student led. Despite reaching out personally to colleagues from various universities in Southern Africa to submit student-led roundtable discussions and symposiums for the online 7th SASPC, we did not receive any submissions. The reasons given were personal and professional obligations that were overwhelming within the context of the raging pandemic. As a result, the gains we achieved in the format change from the 6th SASPC were lost. What we did learn, however, was a consistent need for more student engagement within the ODeL context. Even though students were studying psychology within an ODeL context, there were knowledge gaps that are taken for granted in contact universities:

MM: Eish yeah. I want to learn more about the psychology as a topic mm-hmm and then again, on the side of research ...

KS: ... as I've mentioned before, our opinions, our perspectives, and more also learning, uh, from each other and the other one, definitely networking. Um, I believe in the space we need each other, uh, in, in all that we do as [other participant name] spoke, uh, we need more learning in, in the field that we in, but we also need to learn each other as well. Yeah. That is my expectation for future, um, conferences.

The students' unmet expectations left them unsettled and wanting more:

KS: Yes. I, I, I can concur that, that, that's what I was looking forward to, to be more involved with the presenters. Um, I felt that, you know, many of them merely read you know, as, you know, portions of what they prepared and then, you know, left us kind of not, not being able to, to ask more questions and get engaged, you know, on a more, more call it personal level.

There were a variety of challenges that our participants experienced with the online space. The lack of interaction and connection that we experienced during face-to-face conferences was evident. The social dimension of conferences diminished in the online spaces (Cassidy et al., 2023) as similarly experienced in virtual classes. This is a concern even for presenters with an invisible audience:

KS: ... I don't know. Um, you know, we just felt like we were just part of the crowd and, you know, some people asked questions and then, then everything fell flat kind of thing. You left wanting a little bit more and, you know, hence the interaction was uhm, lacking, which I, which I realise is difficult to achieve or on a virtual platform.

AB: Um, I have attended online conferences, but there were not, uh, psychologically or academically, uh, related. Um, but in terms of the, the very conference, um, as for students, um, the expectations were honestly not that bad. Uh, but I think as KS, uh, mentioned, um, I, I also expected more interactions, you know, I, I believe when it all started, there were a lot of us, you know, who wanted to be there, wanted to listen. And I think most of us wanted to participate as well, but as I've learned, it was more of,

uh, presentations and then questions are followed later and that's how, um, most of us participated in a sense, and how most of us actually, um, as well, our answers were not, um, our questions rather, sorry, were not answered, or some other aspects, um, were probably hanging in our heads, uh, when it was all finished. But in all essence, it was a great platform. Um, as KS said as well, I do not have much more experience, but it was very great.

AB elaborated further on their expectations:

... I thought it was gonna be a discussion, like if there's a topic that way to come about, we would all pitch in and give in our ideas, our opinions as well ... I honestly thought it was gonna be more of a discussion, uh, instead of just, uh, presentations.

In South Africa, we experience unique structural issues such as scheduled electricity outages (due to ailing infrastructure and poor governance) called 'loadshedding'. These power outages typically last two and a half hours at a time and can occur multiple times in a day:

AB: ... I think the first three days I were having loadshedding when the conference started ...

Socio-economic issues such as the affordability of the devices needed to connect to the conference in addition to the cost of data also emerged as barriers to accessing the online space:

AB: ... there are also students who don't have devices, you know, uh, where they can access the, the conference, whether it be a smartphone or a laptop, um, especially those who, who are in rural areas. They might make a plan to write exams and assignments to submit, but not to attend a conference, just to prioritise.

MM: ... I was struggling, struggling with the network ... Uh, if times allows and then considering the situation we are right now with this thing, the pandemic things mm-hmm I think, uh, if it was possible to be better, maybe we do it face-to-face so that we can able to discuss whatever the problem that we have, but still with the online thing, it's also a, a productive, irrespective of networks and everything where people, where other people are, are struggling with. I, for one, it took me some 45 minutes to get a network where I am.

Participants also noted a challenge in using the online platform:

KS: ... And one other thing from my side was, um, and this is my own criticism of my inadequacies dealing with technology is that I wasn't that, um, clued up about MS Teams. So that, that became a bit of an issue for me. Um, so I, I found myself, you know, getting lost, um, within the, within the MS Teams, um, environment. So, um, you know, but, but that's, that's something for me to sort out. I mean, there, there must be, you know, a hundred thousand YouTube videos that I could watch on how to navigate, um, you know, the platform.

AB: I think for me, it's also having the difference between Teams and Zoom. Uh, like today, I, I always forget that, uh, when I'm using my, my, my phone, I have to put it on speaker, uh, uh, the, not the device itself, but I have to put it on speaker so that I can be more audible and, and everyone can hear me. Uh, it's not like Zoom, uh, Zoom, you just plug and play.

KS: You know, I was expecting a little bit more, um, into interaction and I dunno if that's possible on Teams. Um, because I've, I've, I've participated in some Zoom meetings mm-hmm and, and they seem to, to work a little, little better than Microsoft Teams.

This is another example of feedback from the students which highlights the importance of democratised access to online higher education and academic conferences, and the need to improve digital literacy across a variety of online platforms to improve their experiences of active engagement.

SASPC as a site for academic socialisation but also decolonialisation

As previously stated, since its inception the SASCP has been student-centred in its aim to academically socialise students within the conference space:

AB: Cause I was doing my final year, in my BA. So, it was something that actually made me look forward into, um, viewing or seeing something, um, in related to academics if I may put it that way. But what was interesting for me was the topics, the different and random topics that were given. And from that day on I never looked back, and just to cut the story short, and here I am today interested, um, willing to learn, and as I've said before, I've never been in such a platform, be it live, me being there or online, but yeah, I'm very much thankful for such platforms.

However, despite the student conference being a site of academic socialisation, it was also surprisingly a site for decolonisation, with students actively debating the need for creating innovative South African spaces for student learning. The need to create uniquely South African learning spaces emerged as a surprising discovery. Prior to this, we believed that we had created an innovative space for our students, but they felt that they needed something that was sensitive to their context and the challenges within those contexts:

KS: ... we need to acknowledge that we are South Africans, and, um, I always feel that sometimes we base a lot of our decisions on Western ... And, and, and, you know, that, that always feel, um, disappointed in not only with psychology, but with other, other conferences that I do attend, you know, it's always, you know, you know, the, the United States is the best in this mm-hmm or maybe then they, they are for them, but not for us.

We probed our students further to understand what they meant by uniquely South African. Their primary concern was with the structure of the conference. They voiced the need to discuss each presentation in-depth instead of the 5-minutes allocated to the question-and-answer session. They also communicated the need to have roundtable discussions on papers that were already published so that they could learn and gain knowledge and skills through active engagement with one another. They, therefore,

highlighted the need for active learning through engagement and interaction rather than being passive recipients of knowledge dissemination:

AB: And then in terms of, uh, interaction, um, hence I'm saying uh, I never had any experience with psychology, uh, conferences. Uhm, particularly this one, I thought it was gonna be a discussion, like if there's a topic that way to come about, we would all pitch in and give in our ideas, our opinions as well. Uh, as what we have learned from, university and, what we look forward to, um, I honestly thought it was gonna be more of a discussion, uh, instead of just, uh, presentations, um, as you've mentioned, uh, JM that, would separate and have those interesting discussions and as peers and all of that and we come together and discuss our additional views and, yes.

The participants also expressed the need for a space to discuss psychology student-related issues and concerns through networking with other students and psychological professionals already working in the field:

AB: Um, I believe in the space we need each other, uh, in, in all that we do as MM spoke, uh, we need more learning in, in the field that we in, but we also need to learn each other as well. Yeah. That is my expectation for future, um, conferences.

JM: there's a dire need for greater networking opportunities, greater collaboration, greater opportunities for undergraduate and honour students to also have the voice, um, in discussing topical issues.

Additionally, they expressed a need for a wider variety of conference presentation topics. However, we explained that the content of the topics was largely dependent on the paper presentation abstract submissions that we received:

BP: I think, I think to give you a bit of an idea of the structure, we do just open up for anybody to submit, um, a paper pre, uh, presentation. Okay. Um, and, and abstracts that we get those submissions of those abstracts. We accept, I would say all of them. I, I, there's no student who turn away. So the scientific committee will read that abstract and they will, um, you know, find merits in it, help the student to improve it a little if necessary, but we accept every abstract that comes through for a presentation.

Conclusion and recommendations

Our research participants alerted us to several useful suggestions for future conferences. The first was the necessity of a hybrid model allowing conference attendees to attend online or in person. Such hybridised solutions would include both the utilisation of virtual formats for conferences with increased participation, and so a wider dissemination of knowledge, whilst providing on-site participation of attendees and speakers as well. As stated by Newman (2021, p. 1) it will fall to the organizers of such events in the future “to ensure an equitable participation for both categories, respecting not only the contingencies but also the ethos of each participant, and by making these events more accessible, affordable, inclusive, and environmentally friendly”. The need to use our institution’s satellite campuses as a contact point for students around the country also

emerged as a possible solution for structural inequalities such as the high costs of data and out-of-town travel.

Additionally, our research participants wanted to see a broader scope of research topics. This is not easily solvable because the topics for the presentation are dependent on the topics that we receive from presenters. It did, however, highlight the need for including student symposiums and roundtable discussions for students, and by students so that they are able to discuss psychological discourses of relevance to them that may be outside their curricula. The conference team has traditionally formulated a conference theme that is socially relevant at the time. We were deliberate in leaving the interpretation of the theme as broad as possible to ensure that we remain student-focused and inclusive. However, we realised from the focus group discussions that students do not want to be passive recipients in this process but rather want to be included in every detail of the conference. We shall, therefore, be incorporating students throughout the planning stages of the student conference.

Participants were also eager for increased opportunities for engagement, especially within the context of the pandemic. While feelings of isolation, loneliness and distance can be attributed to the pandemic, the experiences of our students also speak to the distance they feel within an ODeL context. We believe that creating spaces for conversation for our students throughout the year may facilitate their feeling connected in an ODeL context. It would therefore be additionally beneficial for us to schedule structured and unstructured sessions with our students before the conference to ensure continuous conversation that culminates in the next SASPC conference.

The academic shift towards a decolonisation of knowledge systems in South Africa has become pervasive in students demanding knowledge and the delivery of knowledge in uniquely African ways. This is not an easily reconcilable task since we are academics trained in western dominated ways of thinking, learning and teaching. However, from the insights we gained from our students; we realise the importance of talking as a form of catharsis for our students within the ODeL contexts. They are eager to learn and grow in the field of psychology. They have a hunger to know more which is indicative of the social inequalities that most students in our ODeL context are subject to. Decolonial perspectives of and democratised access to online higher education and academic conferences emphasise the need to open up the “space for new interdisciplinary encounters” and in times of instability and insecurity, form a refuge for some as “alternatives to large on-site conferences which require excessive and extensive academic mobility” (Goebel et al., 2020, p. 797).

Ethics statement

Ethical clearance for the project was obtained from the College of Human Sciences Research Ethics and Integrity Committee at the University of South Africa (reference number 90206223_CREC_CHS_2021). Ethics approval was also obtained from the University of South Africa’s Research Permissions Subcommittee because staff members and students from the university were involved in data collection.

Potential conflict of interest

We confirm that there is no conflict of interests.

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