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Focus and scope

The Teacher Education Through Flexible Learning in Africa journal is an independent, open-access publication, and serves as a medium for articles of interest to researchers and practitioners in distance teacher education. The journal provides a unique platform for researchers from faculties of education to share knowledge on educational issues that especially affect Africa. It gives particular issue preference to research presented at the DETA Conference, which takes place biennially.

The views expressed in the journal are those of the respective authors.

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Editorial

Teacher Education Practices in a Flexible, Higher Education Environment

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Although the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) world pandemic is almost over, the indelible mark it has left on teacher education, which this journal focuses on, cannot be easily erased. In their article on the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on teacher education in Portugal, Flores and Gago (2020) share the problems, trials, and prospects it brought, with the implications for teaching and teacher education in such inexact times. This aside, in a country like South Africa, a recent report has indicated a massive need for teachers in the next ten years due to almost half of the teaching force retiring by then (Van der Berg, Gustafsson and Burger 2022). Developing flexible learning pathways for all students is a crucial agenda in the Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goal 4 to meet the ever-increasing demand for higher education. Therefore, the field of teacher education needs to evolve innovative ways of staying relevant, irrespective of the demands.

Before the pandemic, most teacher education institutions were contented with face-to-face teaching and learning, including practicum, which is an essential part of in-service teacher training. For this volume, the call went out for manuscripts that will focus on the transformations teacher education has experienced in the face of pervasive technologies which the pandemic has forced on all institutions. Articles in the volume cover flexible teaching and learning pathways that some teacher training institutions had to grapple with, the lessons learnt, and their openness to further growth.

In their lead article in this volume, Jacobs and Ferreira-Meyers (2024) have rightly drawn attention to going forward, and the need for flexible teacher education which should directly speak to the context of the recipients.

In their response to this call, Wolhuter and Greyling (2024) shared their experience through comparative and international education case studies at their institution on how the pandemic has forced a major review and reshaping of the model the institution has used for over two decades. The lessons they learnt are invaluable.

One of the new trends that came along with the pandemic experience was moving the teaching practicum online. Using the Domestication Theory, Taole et al. (2024), in the third article, explore the challenges supervisors face with online supervision, using an online

platform. These included poor communication between supervisors and pre-service teachers, the lack of digital literacy among pre-service teachers, the difficulty of network coverage, providing feedback, and the need for training of supervisors and teachers in training in using the adopted platform with its diverse functions before supervision.

De Jager (2024), in the fourth article, shares the experiences of student teachers in acquiring practical online art skills during teaching practicum. Apart from sharing the challenges they face, some of which include a lack of in-person teaching and student-teacher support from mentors and lecturers, their valuable suggestions cover demonstrations posted on WhatsApp groups, peer tutoring, creating offline videos for learners to view and work on activities at their own pace, virtual museums, and using natural resources from learners' surroundings to develop practical art skills.

In the fifth article, Arfa-Kaboodvand et al. (2024) focuses on the perceptions of academics in international branch campuses on professional development and distance education in enhancing their capacity. This becomes necessary given the increasing number of such campuses and the need for upholding the integrity of the programmes despite the obvious contextual factors. Their findings portray the value the respondents place on the importance of professional development coupled with technological adeptness. Nonetheless, depending on the subject matter, they still prefer traditional face-to-face learning modalities for their CPD.

Lastly, Wolhuter (2024) extends his work to cover comparative and international education as a way of strengthening internationalisation in teacher education programmes at universities in Africa. This is because this is one of the huge gaps this field faces on the continent. He contends the different purposes served by comparative and international education courses in teacher education programmes can help to counteract Northern hegemony in education and model the course of the decolonisation of education move.

Overall, this volume draws attention to the need for more research into flexible teaching and learning pathways for teacher education. Although TETFLE received far more manuscripts than those published here, not many met the required standard of the journal.

It is our hope that our readers will enjoy reading and ruminating on the articles thereby inspiring to further work on this important theme.

I take this opportunity to profusely thank Dr. Mary Ooko, Etinosa Izevbigie, and Drs. Heather Thuynsma and Dominique Wnuczek-Lobaczewski with their team for their support and the publication of this volume.

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Teacher education in a flexible higher education environment: Considerations for the future

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Teacher education in a flexible higher education environment: Considerations for the future

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Abstract

Although teacher education practices had undergone major changes due to the possibilities that came with developments in the field of information and communication technologies and the introduction of online teaching and learning since the turn of the century, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about further major paradigm shifts and greater flexibility in the way teacher education for prospective and in-service teachers can be and are offered. The question can rightfully be asked by higher education institutions offering these programmes, what should inform their thinking and planning going forward, specifically in the Sub-Saharan context where the demand for education is ever-rising, amongst other, due to the relatively young population of the region and the massification of higher education. Yet the question can be asked now that the pandemic is almost over, how do higher education institutions move forward with teacher education programmes, and on what do they base decisions on. We thus highlight some considerations for universities on the future of flexible teacher education programmes. We start by discussion the concept of flexible learning, and specifically flexible modes of delivery for teacher education. We then provide some theoretical and contextual considerations for higher education institutions to take into account, after which we consider challenges, solutions and impact of such programmes. We argue that higher education institutions should embrace flexible learning as the way forward for teacher education programmes, but that they should make sure that it aligns with the context of the institution.

Keywords: Education theory; online learning; teacher education; student autonomy; blended learning

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Introduction

During the first two decades and more of the twenty-first century, the higher education space, like elsewhere, has undergone major changes due to the possibilities that came with developments in the field of information and communication technology (ICT). Specifically in South Africa, as a result of student protests in 2015, the introduction of online teaching and learning gained momentum at so-called contact universities where students were traditionally in lecture halls on campus (Czerniewicz, Trotter and Haupt 2019). This occurred even more in 2020, globally, when the COVID-19 pandemic caused institutions of higher learning to stop all face-to-face class attendance. This period saw major paradigm shifts and greater flexibility emerging in how learning and teaching can and should take place (Wolhuter and Jacobs 2021a). The well-defined division between distance education and on-campus education has become blurred. Möller (2020) maps the different ways of programme offering on two continuums:

1) various levels of engagement in real-time (ranging from fully synchronous to fully asynchronous learning and teaching)
2) the levels of use of technology during the process (ranging from 'low tech' to 'high tech')

The changes that occurred worldwide can also be seen specifically in the field of teacher education programmes in terms of how programmes for prospective and in-service teachers are offered. While impetuses such as the development of technology and other forces such as socio-economic changes, policy reforms and evolving student needs can result in significant changes, it can also be a matter of, as Wolhuter and Jacobs (2021b: 105) put it, of 'using new tools to advance the old'. In an environment that allows for flexibility, higher education institutions offering teacher education programmes should reflect on the future of those programmes and how the flexibility that is now possible will result in preparing not only future and current teachers, but also the learners they will teach, for the uncertain future. Indeed, the question that we consider in this paper is: Now that the pandemic is almost over, how can higher education institutions move forward with teacher education programmes, and what should they base decisions on? We thus first highlight some considerations for universities on the future of flexible teacher education programmes. We start by discussing the concept of flexible learning, specifically flexible modes of delivery for teacher education. We then provide some theoretical and contextual considerations that higher education institutions, specifically in the Sub-Saharan context, can take

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into account, whereafter we consider the challenges, solutions and impact of such programmes.

Concept of flexible learning

The concept of flexible learning is understood in many ways. For instance, Hammersley, Tallantyre and Le Cornu (2013: 4) refer to 'pace, place and mode of delivery' and emphasise that students are allowed to choose and control 'when, where, how and sometimes what they learn'. Joan (2013: 39) explains it as a 'different way of learning, namely e-learning, m-learning and online learning', while Hammersley et al. (2013: 4) again emphasise that flexibility allows students to choose to study where they want, including 'from tube trains to home to hotel rooms abroad'. To add to this, Lockee and Clark-Stallkamp (2022: 344) explain that if the learning content is made available through a range of media formats, which may include images, text, podcasts and video casts, it 'can support a wider array of critical student accessibility needs, as well as learner preferences'. Content and learning opportunities can specifically be offered in a flexible manner that allows students to pace their learning, and even choose the volume and sequence of what is learned. Flexible learning, therefore, not only provides students with choices but also expects students to have the agency and ability to navigate these choices towards success. Andrade (2023: 113) believes that flexible learning can 'unleash the powers of people within the organisation and give them autonomy to pursue work that has purpose and meaning, build their competencies, and develop mastery'.

Flexible modes of delivery for teacher education programmes

Hammersley et al. (2013: 4) explain that modes of delivery refer to the use of different 'learning technologies in delivering flexible learning and enhancing the students' learning experience'. As Möller (2020) puts it, these technologies can be used in a variety of ways, with various levels of synchronous and asynchronous teaching, and can include on-campus as well as distance education programmes. Flexibility in terms of modes often leads to other forms of flexibility and new ways of doing (Hammersley et al. 2013). For instance, Taole et al. (2024) report on how it can enable teaching practice supervision asynchronously using online tools.

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The use of ICT in education has evolved from 'paper behind screen', to interactive tools that allow flexibility and engagement. The tools which Möller (2020) describes as high-tech or low-tech, can include everyday communication tools to collaborate, but also sophisticated technology and fit-for-purpose software. Czerniewicz et al. (2019: 12) mention 'online learning platforms, third-party provider sites, social media and connectivity apps, online collaboration platforms, presentation software [and] digital teaching formats (such as lecture recordings, narrated slides, podcasts)' amongst others, and in what follows, we discuss some of the findings related to these.

Flexible learning using everyday communication tools

Relatively cheap, everyday tools to communicate via technologies such as WhatsApp on phones and other devices provide students and higher education institutions with accessible and easy-to-use technology that can be used for learning, which allows for flexibility (Jackson 2020). It is particularly handy in less affluent countries. Jackson (2020), for instance, reports that in Sierra Leone, WhatsApp has become a common tool for flexible teaching and learning and, importantly, it can accommodate more than text, as voice notes and videos can be sent and received, meaning that both audio and video teaching resources can assist students in understanding the work. Still, it requires students to own devices with this functionality. De Jager (2024) notes that such a WhatsApp can even be used in a flexible learning environment for teaching art.

An advantage of using everyday communication tools for teaching and learning is that it does not restrict communication between lecturers and students or amongst students, implying that students can help one another and contribute to one another's learning (Jackson 2020).

Flexible learning through dedicated platforms

Higher education institutions commonly use learning management systems such as BlackBoard or Moodle to facilitate learning in various degrees of synchronousness (Möller 2020). It does, however, come with challenges. Phejane (2022) shares how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, students struggled to access the learning material because of the size of the files, making it expensive. Students also struggled with

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poor directives on how to access and use these files. Furthermore, many students did not have access to their own computers; neither did they have access to affordable and consistent internet connectivity. Pietersen (2023: 147) cautions that to 'transform online higher education to become a socially just environment, lecturers need to adopt pedagogies of care towards their students' in the flexible learning environment.

Flexible internationalised learning

An emerging approach to flexible learning as a form of virtual exchange, labelled COIL (Collaborative Online International Learning). Rubin (2017: 34) explains COIL as 'based upon developing team-taught learning environments where teachers from two cultures work together to develop a shared syllabus, emphasizing experiential and collaborative student learning'. In essence, for a short period, students from different parts of the world work together on a task jointly designed by their lecturers, on which they are evaluated, and the mark they jointly obtain for the assignment contributes to their grades at their own institutions (Haug and Jacobs 2023). The engagements between students in small groups mostly take place outside formal teaching time, and students not only have to navigate effective groupwork but also intercultural collaboration, working across space and often different time zones, usually with students studying a different field, to solve a problem presented to them by lecturers. Such interdisciplinary learning brings together different cultures, knowledge, paradigms of thinking and scientific fields in a flexible learning environment to solve complex problems.

Theoretical considerations

Decisions regarding programmes on offer need to take a theoretical perspective into account. Some of these relate to the context in which higher education institutions find themselves, while others relate to aspects of teaching and learning. What we discuss is not a complete list, but some ideas of what might be considered. Below, the theories of neoliberalism, collectivism, critical thinking theory and connectivism are explored because they offer contrasting viewpoints on education and learning. This has a significant impact on how programmes are structured and delivered. By understanding the underlying philosophies of these theories, educators can make

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informed decisions about a programme's curriculum, teaching methods (pedagogy) and assessment practices. Neoliberalism and collectivism, for example, address how education serves individual versus societal needs, influencing what is taught and the skills graduates develop. Critical thinking theory emphasises developing analytical skills in students, while connectivism focuses on knowledge creation in a digital age. These theories inform how teachers are prepared to facilitate learning and adapt to the evolving educational landscape. Ultimately, considering these contrasting lenses allows educators to design well-rounded programmes that equip future teachers with the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions to thrive in today's complex classrooms.

Neoliberalism

The current neoliberal higher education space is driven by performativity and the economy, resulting in both academics and students to be viewed as commodities and sources of income (Page 2020). Although some resistance is building up against this, universities worldwide are in a race for the highest spots in global ranking indices (Wolhuter 2023). Part of the critique is that it renounces the origin and being of universities and it does not take context into account. Still, business considerations influence decisions concerning the offering of education programmes. For instance, Kumi-Yeboah, Young and Boadu (2014) report how the lack of resources and space at higher education institutions in Ghana, combined with the demand for education, led to an increase in distance education programme offerings. Zaayman (2021) reports on the business generator used by his institution to inform decisions about online teacher education offerings in South Africa to ensure that it makes business sense. Included in his model are considerations such as tuition fees, costs of equipment, pro-rata operational costs, teaching time allocation and so forth. While critique against the neoliberal nature of higher education abounds (see, for example, Shapiro 2020), institutions opting for flexible learning cannot ignore the business side of programme offerings.

Collectivism

In contrast with the individualistic and market-driven thinking that neoliberalism brings, in Africa, like in many parts of the Global South, communal thinking

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is engrained, and several theories refer to this notion. For instance, the Collective Fingers Theory (CFT) draws from the principles of the *Ubuntu* philosophy. An African principle behind the CFT is that 'a thumb although it is strong cannot kill aphids on its own; it would require the collective cooperation of the other fingers' (Mbigi 1997: 33). *Ubuntu* is a form of humanism or collectivism that is expressed in the Zulu language as *ubuntu ngumuntu ngabantu*, which can be translated into English as "I am because you are" (AFN 2020), referring to the interconnectedness of humans and the notion of compassion and care.

Several principles (Ngubane and Makua 2021) are engrained in *Ubuntu*, although we briefly touch upon them: deep solidarity and respect; coexistence in harmony, suggesting mutual interdependence; compassion, sharing and sympathy; and respect and dignity. Drawing from these, Ngubane and Makua (2021:6) explain that within a pedagogy of *Ubuntu* one works from the premise that all students can excel 'if their humanity is positioned at the forefront of their teaching and learning', irrespective of differences. Students are seen as 'significant others who bring unique backgrounds, experiences and prior knowledge for teachers to build on towards the development of new knowledge' (Ngubane and Makua 2021:6), recognising lecturers and students as co-creators of knowledge. In the context of flexible learning that often assumes individualism (Houlden and Veletsianos 2019), it is important to create possibilities to collaborate. This design feature, even if synchronous collaboration is intended, has to ensure that students not only feel connected and part of the community but are recognised as co-creators of knowledge and learning.

Critical thinking theory

An important consideration when planning for flexible learning in teacher education programmes is how to advance critical thinking skills. Al-Maawali (2022) points out that critical thinking is essential to prepare teachers for the future, yet is often overlooked. Fikriyati, Agustini and Suyatno (2022: 2) found in their study, focused on five critical thinking skills ('ability to interpret, ability to analyse, ability to evaluate, ability to make inferences, and ability to explain') amongst teacher education students that there was little uptake of these skills. While critical thinking is often linked to Bloom's higher-order skills (analyse, evaluate and create), Wilson (2016) adds that students must be able to recognise the underlying assumptions in spoken

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and written communication in texts, identify preconceptions and analyse differences and similarities. Critical thinking empowers learners to navigate the vast network of information emphasised by connectivism, fostering effective knowledge creation, collaboration and adaptation in a dynamic digital world. In designing for flexible learning, ways to develop these skills need to be included intentionally.

Connectivism

The theory of connectivism is based on the notion that learning and building knowledge happen through connecting different opinions, sources, ideas and perspectives, and that such a connection of knowledge can happen both in the same physical space or through non-human appliances (Siemens, Rudolph and Tan 2020; Downes 2023). Examples of tools in the learning management system that can be used are gamification (including functions such as leader boards, interactive quizzes, badges or certification and challenges) and social learning opportunities (for example internal Wikis and discussion forums) (360 Learning n.d.).

Domestication theory

The clear distinction between humans and technology became blurred over the last ten years, specifically where the connectedness between humans and their digital devices is no longer disputed and impact education (Wolhuter and Jacobs 2021b). Hynes and Richardson (2009) highlight the importance of considering the social construct that informs the purchasing and use of devices. Domestication theory refers to how technology and humans adjust to one another and co-exist, and how it is taken for granted (Hynes and Richardson 2009). In the context of teacher education aspects such as what devices and digital tools are owned (appropriation), how it is placed or available (objectification), how it is used (incorporation) and how relations between the technology and devices are built internally and externally (conversion) (Hynes and Richardson 2009) should be contemplated. During designing flexible learning, these considerations can be at an institutional as well as an individual level for both lecturer and student.

TPACK

A useful framework to consider in flexible learning environments is the expansion of Shulman's notion of pedagogical content knowledge (PCK), namely the TPACK (technology, pedagogy and content knowledge) framework. It describes 'how teachers' understanding of educational technologies and PCK interact with one another to produce effective teaching with technology' (Koehler & Mishra, 2009:66). Content knowledge refers to knowledge of the subject while pedagogical knowledge refers to knowledge of instructional methods. PCK, however, transcends these two knowledges with an understanding of how to represent and teach the subject to make it understandable to others (Cochran 2018). When technological knowledge is added and integrated relevantly and appropriately with pedagogical and instructional knowledge to advance learning within a context, the expertise of teachers can be seen (Koehler and Mishra 2009). Karlsson and Nilsson (2023) suggest that students in teacher education with programmes should be provided with a reflective tool (e.g. T-CoRe), which combined with self-recorded videos that include text, not only provide evidence of their TPACK, but can also improve the way teachers use technology in the classroom. Programmes for teacher education that purposefully prioritise TPACK development for both teaching professionals and students will see an increase in impact in flexible learning (Karlsson and Nilsson 2023).

Replacement, amplification and transformation: The R.A.T. model

When considering how an institution would intentionally implement flexible learning, a theoretical model that can guide such an institution's consideration is the R.A.T model regarding thinking about ICT (Hughes 2014). Hughes (2014) explains that technology can first be viewed as the replacement of instruction, while technology is just a digital means to the same instructional end. This means that the only change that occurs is the medium. Second, technology can amplify learning, meaning that the instruction remains the same, but technology is used to make instruction more efficient, effective and productive. It thus refers to the extension of capabilities through digital means. However, technology can be used as a transformative tool, meaning new inventions, richer instructional means and possibly new cognitive forms that might emerge. Of course, the one does not exclude the other, but planning and

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implementation should be intentional.

Transactional distance theory

The last theory we want to mention is Moore's theory of transactional distance, which warns about the communication gap and psychological distance between the lecturer and the student in a distance education mode (Falloon 2011). Falloon (2011: 189) explains that three factors need to be considered when planning and executing flexible learning in a distance education mode, namely 'dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy'. He found that while a synchronous virtual classroom might provide opportunities for collaboration and active engagement, this will only be possible if it were used for meaningful interaction and dialogue. To add, referring to Pietersen's (2023: 147) discussion of pedagogy of care, lecturers should refrain from just using 'the one-dimensional technological advances required in a 4IR higher education space', but deliberately advance 'relational engagements' in the online learning environment. Clearly quality interactions and dialogues cannot be taken for granted as other factors and their decision to participate or not, might influence how students experience it.

The theories discussed above are only some of the theories that institutions can consider when planning and executing flexible learning. It is important that the planning of flexible learning programmes should be informed by philosophical and theoretical perspectives that are aligned with their context.

Contextual considerations

While teacher education in Africa and other developing contexts has seen significant progress in recent years, achieving quality education for all remains a pressing challenge. Despite increased enrolment, the sector faces a critical shortage of qualified teachers, particularly in rural areas and specialised subjects (Boaduo, Milondzo and Gumbi 2011). Traditional teacher education systems often struggle to keep pace with this demand due to several key challenges while Boaduo et al. (2011) argue for a more globalised perspective and greater cross-border mobility.

Limited resources, infrastructure and qualified academics are significant constraints. Budgetary limitations restrict the provision of adequate learning materials, technology and professional development opportunities for existing teachers. Additionally,

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outdated infrastructure in many developing contexts limits access to quality learning environments for aspiring and practising teachers. Furthermore, the under-resourced systems often struggle to attract and retain qualified lecturers, further hindering the quality of teacher preparation (Alikor 2014; Jacobs 2016).

Innovative and flexible approaches are crucial to overcome these challenges and improve teacher education in developing contexts. These include leveraging technology for distance learning and online professional development programmes, utilising partnerships with universities and non-governmental organisations to share resources and expertise, and exploring alternative models such as community-based teacher training programmes. By embracing such innovative solutions, teacher education systems in Africa and other developing contexts can equip future educators with the skills and knowledge necessary to address the educational needs of their communities in the twenty-first century.

Institutional context

Andrade (2023) highlights the importance of a visionary and informed plan for flexible learning that aligns with institutional drivers but also takes contextual risks and possibilities into account. In her study, she recommends the following considerations:

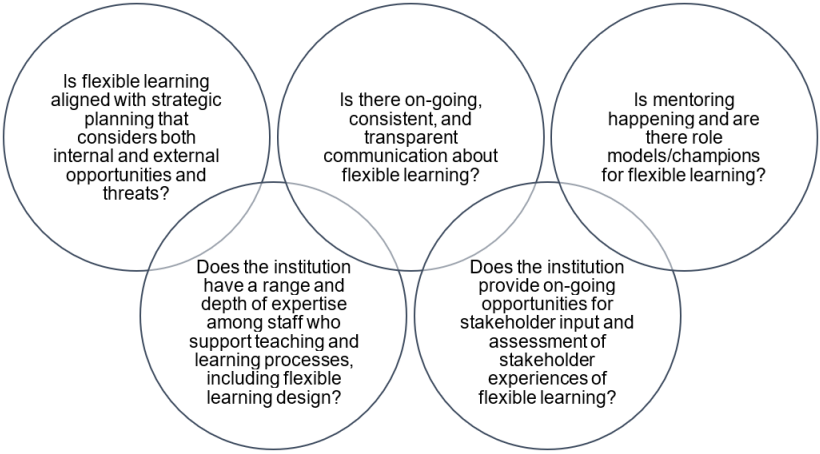

Figure 1: Institutional considerations (adapted from Andrade 2023)

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Stakeholder engagement

Pitikoe et al. (2021) stress the importance of getting stakeholders on board and harness their support. For instance, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Eswatini (UNESWA) negotiated with the two major mobile service providers in Eswatini to provide study bundles for students at affordable prices. Likewise, the Eswatini Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) negotiated with the local TV and radio stations to support education programmes. The question is, though, whether such support can continue and be expanded to support flexible learning as the new normal.

Importance of appropriate instructional design

Creating successful flexible learning programmes in teacher education requires careful consideration of several key elements. First, understanding the diverse needs and learning styles of aspiring teachers is crucial (Du Preez 2023). This involves conducting thorough needs assessments, offering multiple programme pathways, and providing personalised learning journeys within the programme structure. Additionally, ensuring accessibility across various locations and time zones is essential, fostering inclusivity and catering to the diverse backgrounds of learners.

The very essence of successful flexible learning lies in its learner-centred approach. Interactive learning activities designed to foster collaboration, critical thinking and problem-solving are crucial. This includes online discussions, peer-reviewed activities, simulations, and project-based learning tasks. Furthermore, building robust support mechanisms is essential (Omidire and Aluko, 2022). This includes readily accessible faculty support, peer mentoring programmes and online communities where learners can connect and share experiences. These elements create a supportive environment that fosters individual growth and help to navigate the challenges of independent learning.

Instructional design is regarded as a scarce skill in Southern Africa, yet it is essential for student success (Du Preez 2023). Müller, Mildenberger and Steingruber (2023: 1) argue that when flexible study programmes are implemented, design needs to focus on 'adequate course structure and guidance for students, activating learning tasks, stimulating interaction and social presence of teachers, and timely feedback on

learning process and outcomes'.

Technology plays a crucial role in supporting and enhancing flexible learning environments. Learning Management Systems (LMS) are central platforms for accessing curriculum materials, submitting assignments and engaging in online discussions (Bismala and Manurung 2021; Joan 2013; Omidire and Aluko 2022). Open educational resources (OERs) offer a wealth of free, high-quality materials that can be readily integrated into the programme. Additionally, communication tools like video-conferencing platforms and collaborative online documents enable real-time interaction and collaboration among learners and faculty, regardless of their physical location (Andrade 2023; Du Preez 2023). By leveraging technology effectively, flexible learning programmes in teacher education can overcome geographical boundaries, offer greater accessibility and ultimately provide future educators with the skills and knowledge to thrive in the ever-evolving educational landscape.

Importance of quality assurance and student feedback

Growing evidence demonstrates the significantly positive impact and effectiveness of flexible learning approaches on teacher education outcomes. Studies indicate that flexible learning can enhance teacher preparedness, improving student achievement within classrooms (Müller et al. 2023). Additionally, research suggests that flexible learning models foster greater learner autonomy, higher self-efficacy and enhanced reflective practice among teacher candidates, leading to long-lasting professional development benefits (Andrade 2023).

These perceptions should, however, be concisely monitored. Therefore, evaluating such programmes is crucial to ensure their quality and effectiveness. For instance, what can be considered, amongst others, are the directives and recognition by professional bodies, student satisfaction, student achievement, course completion rates and pathways for recognition of prior learning in the flexible learning environment (Bismala and Manurung 2021; IIEP-UNESCO 2021).

Both quantitative metrics (examination scores, skills-based assessments) and qualitative methods (interviews, focus groups, reflection journals) should be employed to gather holistic insights (Du Preez 2023; Pietersen 2023). Success stories and lessons learned from implementing these initiatives provide invaluable guidance. Programmes demonstrating exemplary outcomes often exhibit well-structured

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curricula, strong mentorship and student support, seamless technology integration and a focus on practical, classroom-ready skills (Bismala and Manurung, 2021; Joan 2013). The challenges encountered during implementation, such as ensuring adequate student motivation and technological accessibility, offer important lessons for future refinement of flexible teacher education programmes (Müller et al. 2023; Phejane 2022).

Still, although the potential of flexible learning in teacher education programmes is argued, one should not assume that students are necessarily positive about it. In a survey by Rakishevaa and Xua (2024) among undergraduate teacher education students in the United States of America, the students were not very positive about their experiences in the flexible online environment. The authors shared that the students were 'cautiously optimistic about online learning' and believed that although it 'could be effective and efficient, their attitude toward the outcomes of online teaching and learning was neutral' (Rakishevaa and Xua 2024:57).

Opportunities, challenges and solutions in implementing flexible learning for teacher education

Above, we included several theories and considerations relevant to implementing flexible learning in teacher education programmes given the tensions between the neoliberal, market-driven approach to higher education and the more collectivist *Ubuntu* philosophy prevalent in parts of the Global South. Designing flexible learning should foster critical thinking skills, connectivity of ideas (connectivism), integration of technology with pedagogy and content (TPACK) and high-quality student-instructor dialogue (transactional distance theory). The domestication theory points to understanding how technology is adopted and used by individuals, while the R.A.T. model provides a framework for viewing technology as replacing, amplifying or transforming instruction.

There is often resistance from lecturing staff to move towards flexible learning (Hammersley et al. 2013; Xavier and Meneses 2021; Salama and Hinton 2023), specifically fearing that they might become redundant. Yet even asynchronous learning requires support by humans, even if not in the same form as traditional teaching and learning. Flexible learning design requires instructional designers who have a fair range of technological skills, as well as ensuring that substantial time is available for

the upfront development of content. As learning by students will happen at different times without the synchronous presence of the lecturer, students need to be guided clearly on the platforms to enable student success (Lockee and Clark-Stallkamp 2022), and lecturers need guidance from skilled instructional designers.

Another issue that is often mentioned is to make sure that assessment is in line with an institution's assessment policy and that it is trustworthy and rigorous (Hammersley et al. 2013). Hira and Anderson (2021) recommend project-based learning in a flexible learning environment, specifically because it provides students with a task that has meaning and relevance personally but enables autonomy and agency in learners. In addition, specifically given the importance of the communal values in the Southern African context, project-based group work allows for collaboration outside the typical framework of class time (Hira and Anderson 2021).

Flexible learning not only provides individual students with the opportunity to take control of their own learning but also provides opportunities for institutions. Wolhuter (2024) explains that flexible learning provides the opportunity for teacher education programmes to be internationalised in a decolonised mindset. Higher education institutions can enrol students from many parts of the world, but at the same time provide a curriculum that resembles epistemic diversity and include previously marginalised voices (Jacobs & De Winter, 2021).

In short, flexible learning presents exciting opportunities to amplify and transform teacher education through thoughtful integration of technology. By leveraging tools like gamification, discussion forums and self-reflection activities, institutions can foster critical thinking skills, connectivity of ideas, and the development of technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPACK) in pre-service teachers. Moreover, asynchronous collaboration and co-creation of knowledge can be designed in alignment with the *Ubuntu* philosophy's emphasis on human interconnectedness and collective wisdom.

A key challenge lies in navigating the tensions between the neoliberal, market-driven approach that treats education as a commodity, and *Ubuntu's* communal, human-centric values of compassion and dignity. Another critical issue is ensuring meaningful student-instructor dialogue and sustained engagement in online or blended learning environments. Additionally, varying levels of technology access, digital literacies, and domestication of technology among students and faculty can impede the effective implementation of flexible learning initiatives.

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To address these challenges, institutions should adopt a holistic approach that balances economic viability with technological integration and *Ubuntu's* principles of caring and human dignity. Providing comprehensive instructor training on building online learning communities, facilitating discussions and using technology effectively is crucial. Needs analyses to understand students' technological access, skills and preferred learning modes can inform universal design. Offering robust technology and academic support services is also recommended. Most importantly, flexible learning initiatives should continuously be evaluated through the lenses of critical pedagogies, connectivism, TPACK and culturally responsive teaching.

Recommendations

The article provides several considerations regarding the opportunities offered by flexible learning to transform teacher education through technology-enabled critical thinking, connectivity and TPACK development and align with *Ubuntu's* collaborative ideals regarding the challenges of navigating market-driven versus human-centric educational models. While ensuring meaningful online engagement across diverse digital literacies and the holistic solutions involving balancing economic viability with *Ubuntu's* compassion, comprehensive instructor training, technology/academic support services and continuous evaluation through critical pedagogical lenses, certain insights came to the fore which higher education institutions can use to plan for teacher education programmes in the future. First, they should embrace the possibilities that come with flexible learning approaches. At the same time, there should be structural support for flexible learning, including policy renewal and institutional support, such as ICT support, training and appropriate software.

Second, sufficient consideration of how to balance the business needs with the need for social justice is required. While institutions cannot ignore the need to be financially sustainable and to promote their reputation, they should remain true to the values of the region, which calls for care and compassion, the dignity of the student and student success.

Instructional design should receive due consideration, and again a balance is needed between content that enables autonomous learning and the consideration for data usage. It is important to provide enough support for students and to create opportunities for building community within the online learning environment where

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collaboration and knowledge sharing are possible.

Hand in hand with the above is monitoring and evaluation of the quality of the programmes. Sufficient room for student feedback and other quality assurance mechanisms must be built into the programme.

Last, contextual realities should be considered when planning for flexible teacher programmes, including demographical and geographical considerations, language, infrastructure, timelines and so forth.

Conclusion

This introductory article discusses the implementation of flexible learning in teacher education programmes, particularly in the context of Sub-Saharan Africa and the Global South. The purpose of the article was to explore the opportunities, challenges and potential solutions associated with adopting flexible learning approaches in teacher education. The main concern expressed in the article is how to navigate the tensions between the neoliberal, market-driven approach to higher education, which treats education as a commodity, and leveraging on the more collectivist, *Ubuntu* philosophy prevalent in parts of the Global South, which emphasises human interconnectedness, compassion and dignity. Additionally, we highlight the challenge of ensuring meaningful student-instructor dialogue and sustained engagement in online or blended learning environments, as well as addressing varying levels of technology access, digital literacies and domestication of technology among students and faculty.

We wish to conclude by recommending a holistic approach that balances economic viability with technological integration and *Ubuntu's* principles of caring and human dignity. It emphasises the importance of comprehensive instructor training, conducting needs analyses to understand students' technological access and preferences; offering robust technology and academic support services and continuously evaluating flexible learning initiatives through the lenses of critical pedagogies, connectivism, TPACK and culturally responsive teaching. We also highlight the need for instructional design, monitoring and evaluation of programme quality, and consideration of contextual realities when planning flexible teacher education programmes.

While teacher education practices had already undergone major changes before the COVID-19 pandemic due to the possibilities that came with developments in the field of information and communication technologies, and the introduction of online

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teaching and learning, it is trite to say that the pandemic brought about further major paradigm shifts in the way prospective and in-service teachers are skilled, upskilled and reskilled. Not only has this led to the blurring of the lines between so-called contact teacher education programmes and those that are described as being part of the open, distance and e-learning (ODeL) mode, but it has also opened up pathways to engage.

Some of the changes brought about by the pandemic were temporary, while others seem to be the new trend. With the disruptions brought about due to the pandemic being almost a thing of the past, it was now an opportune time to reflect on the changes and also the way forward for teacher education practices within a flexible higher education environment.

What follows in this volume are articles related to the changes teacher education has undergone because of the pandemic, due to the focus on innovative technology and the possible opportunities this offers to the way societies educate their prospective and in-service teachers. Still, more research is necessary to ensure that while we take advantage of the possibilities that come with digital means, one has to make sure that critical thinking is advanced and meaningful learning takes place to enhance the quality of teacher education programmes.

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Teacher Education Practices in a Flexible, Higher Education Environment: The Case of the Distance Education Unit of North-West University, South Africa

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Abstract

The Distance Higher Education Unit at North-West University, South Africa, has now been operating for more than twenty years, having been created and crafted in response to the societal and educational context of South Africa. Besides the University of South Africa, this Distance Education Unit is the second largest supplier of distance higher education in South Africa. A substantial part of the unit's activities is teacher education. The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has induced a major reassessment and redesign of the model introduced twenty years ago with the vision to ensure access to growing numbers of students and to supply quality education programmes, making maximum use of available technology to achieve these goals. Against the backdrop of teacher education and challenges surrounding teacher education in Africa and South Africa, this article aims to survey and assess the unit's experience with distance education and the reform induced by COVID-19. The research method used was that of comparative and international education, at the level of the case study. The conclusion reached is that at the North-West University Distance Education Unit, COVID-19 had the effect of accelerating the imperative to harness the best contemporary technology can offer to enhance the teaching-learning effort of the unit. This change has created a new normal, which had a knock-on effect on the contact education sector of the university as well. The majority of students in the Distance Education Unit are education students. This unit constitutes a case study other universities in Africa can learn from in responding to the need to increase teacher education capacity on the continent urgently.

Keywords: Africa; COVID-19; Distance Education; South Africa; Teacher Education

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Introduction

The article aims to present the Distance Unit of North-West University, especially regarding teacher education, specifically given its effecting changes induced by COVID-19 as a case study for other institutions of higher education in Africa and beyond to learn from.

The significance of this case study of a South African university engaging in teacher education through distance education, should be assessed against the background of global developments in the higher education sector. For the past thirty-five years, a global higher education revolution has been sweeping all over the world (see Altbach et al. 2010). While the signature feature of this revolution has been massification, one of the other features has been the growth of distance education. Using the technology of the age in creating distance education reaching more students, was one of the major factors making the massification of higher education possible. Noteworthy is that the largest university in the world by enrolment numbers, Indira Ghandi National Open University in India, which commenced as late as 1985 and currently boasts 4.3 million students, is a distance education institution.

In the global higher education landscape, higher education in Africa is, for a variety of reasons, mostly underdeveloped. The global, aggregate, gross, tertiary education enrolment ratio stands at 40 per cent (2020 figure, latest available figure at time of writing) (World Bank 2023). As per region, it stands at 87 per cent for North America, 78 per cent for Europe, 54 per cent for Latin America, and 51 per cent for East Asia-Pacific (Ibid.). By contrast, for the Middle East-North-Africa region the figure comes to 41 per cent, and for Sub-Saharan Africa to 10 per cent (Ibid.). What aggravates the situation is the growing number of young people in Africa. The recently published report of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), setting out a blueprint for education globally in the future, draws attention to the estimation that by 2050 the continent will be home to the world's largest share of youth (UNESCO 2021b: 134).

While distance education seems like the obvious way to accelerate the supply of education in such a disadvantaged continent, the irony is that in Africa distance education is comparatively undeveloped, and literature on distance education in Africa and South Africa is scarce (Janse Van Rensburg and Ogutto 2022: 285). Cheung, Lam, Lau and Shim, (2010) remark that despite the increasing use of web-based distance learning and its potential to revolutionise higher education, the uptake

of blended learning by institutions in the past has been very slow, not only in Africa but globally. That makes it essential that instances of distance education be subjected to case studies, to be showcased as examples and also as to how to craft the supply of distance education to the societal contextual ecology of Africa, and how to overcome impediments in the supply of quality distance education.

For universities as suppliers of teacher education programmes, reaching out at the possibility of distance education has at the present junction in history become imperative because of two reasons or developments. First, the COVID-19 Pandemic has resulted in educational institutions harnessing everything modern technology has to offer, to enhance their education effort; actually, precipitating or accelerating a movement towards distance and hybrid forms of education, where the pressure and opportunities had in any case already existed for quite some time. Second (and here the demographic pressure on the continent referred to above should be kept in mind), the existing shortage of qualified teachers and the looming bigger shortage in the near future necessitates using what distance or hybrid modes of education can offer, to supply a corps of teachers in adequate numbers and of satisfactory quality regarding their education. In Sub-Saharan Africa the share of primary school teachers with minimum qualifications declined from 85 per cent in 2000 to 65 per cent in 2020 (UNESCO 2021b: 23)—the UNESCO report on the state of education globally referred to earlier, identifies that as one of the challenges facing education in the world today (*Ibid*.).

This article commences with a clarification of key concepts used in the manuscript, and an explanation of the theoretical framework and research methodology. Then one of the effects of COVID-19, namely to pressurise institutions of higher education to capitalise on the possibilities of modern technology by employing distance education to increase the supply and the quality of higher education, will be discussed. The Distance Unit of North-West University is then presented as a case study.

Three sets of explanations regarding the theoretical framework and research methodology of this article are apt. The first is an explanation of comparative and international education upon which this article is based, then how the single case study fits into the framework of comparative and international education, and finally the epistemology of the case study.

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Theoretical framework

Comparative and international education entails threefold perspectives or views on education. These are an education system perspective, a contextual perspective, and a comparative perspective (Wolhuter et al. 2018). Comparative and enternational education focuses in the first place on education *systems*. As, even in this age of globalisation, the most salient education systems are *national* education systems, most studies in the field are about national education systems (Carnoy 2019). However, education systems do not exist in isolation, nor did these systems emerge out of nothing. Education systems have been created by society to fulfil certain functions. Education systems are also shaped by societal and contextual factors or forces. Education systems can therefore only be comprehended within the societal contexts in which they function.

Therefore, the second perspective of comparative and international education is the contextual perspective. It is a field of study that explores education systems and practices in different countries and cultures, with the aim of understanding and analysing the similarities and differences between them. Education systems are being studied in their interrelationships with the societal contexts in which they are embedded. The contextual perspective emphasises that education is not a universal or homogeneous phenomenon but rather a complex and dynamic process that is shaped by local and global contexts. This involves comparing education systems and practices across different contexts and analysing how these contexts influence the development, implementation, and outcomes of education policies and practices.

Third, various education systems in their intertwinement with societal contexts, are being compared with one another. That is the comparative perspective, and is done to derive general and nuanced statements about education systems—societal and contextual interrelationships. The comparative perspective is an important aspect because it allows researchers to identify common challenges and opportunities for improving education globally, and to learn from the successes and failures of different education systems and policies. By comparing education systems and practices across different contexts, researchers can also gain insights into the complex interactions between education and broader societal issues such as inequality, social mobility, and economic development.

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Research methodology

From the above comparative and international education has a dual nature: it denotes simultaneously an object of study and a method of study. To understand its value as method of research in the constellation of research methods, it is useful to turn to the scheme of Robson (2011). Robson (2011) distinguishes between research methods at three levels of the research process. These are methods of data collection, data processing, and data interpretation. The value of the comparative method in education comes to the fore at the level of data interpretation, while scholars of comparative and international education can serve themselves from a plethora of methods at the levels of data collection (such as interviews, surveys, documentary analyses, or literature surveys) and data processing (such as coding, inferential statistics, descriptive statistics, and content analysis). In this article, a literature study and the authors' own experience (a combined total of more than forty years) of the Distance Education Unit at North-West University and the case study method figure at the levels of data collection and processing.

Turning to the case study method and how it fits with comparative and international education, as was stated above the most salient geographical level at which comparative and international education research takes place is the national level. However, as the oft-cited and well-known Bray and Thomas Cue (Bray and Thomas 1995) indicate, comparative education research can take place at any of eight geographical levels, being (1) world regions/continents; (2) countries; (3) states/provinces; (4) districts; (5) schools or institutions; (6) classrooms; and (7) individuals. Wolhuter (2008) later extended this level to include a global level at the beginning. At each of these levels, the structure of (an) education system(s) can be detected, as well as a surrounding societal context, with which the education system stands in a reciprocal interrelationship. In this study, the focus is on a single institution (level five in the Bray and Thomas Cube).

In the corpus of published literature in the field, at all levels most studies are single-unit studies (see Wolhuter 2008). Although this is an apparent annulation of the comparative in comparative education, comparativists frequently cite several reasons why single-unit studies still qualify as comparative research. These include the fact that such studies contribute to the total stock of knowledge of education in particular contexts, and that such studies tie into general concepts used in comparative

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educational scholarship. Their value also lies in the fact that these studies contribute to the refinement and modification of existing theories and ultimately to the creation of new theories when existing explanatory frameworks prove to be inadequate (Arnove 2001). The general belief is further that, rather than meaning the study and comparison of two or more education systems, the term 'comparative education' denotes the study of reciprocal education and society relations in particular contexts. This is evident in David Wilson's (1994) analysis of definitions of comparative education and Erwin Epstein's (1992) study on the meaning of the term comparison in comparative education.

This article then reports on a case study. A case study can be defined as a research approach that is used to generate an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context (Crow et al. 2011). It is an established research design that is used extensively in a wide variety of disciplines, particularly in the social sciences.

One of the purposes or roles of comparative and international education is to learn from foreign or other education projects, to improve the domestic education project (for example, see Milne and Mhlolo 2021; Sappleton and Adams 2022). One proviso for such an exercise, speaking from the perspective and corpus of knowledge of comparative and international education, is that contextual similarities and differences between the exporting system or project and that of the importing system or project should be thoroughly accounted for (Li and Pilz 2019: 613-614; Schweisfurth and Elliot 2019)

The impact of COVID-19

At the beginning of 2020, the world was caught off-guard by the unexpected and sudden outbreak of the coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) pandemic. Two years after the outbreak, by April 2022, a global life loss of over six million had already been reported, and more than 491 million cases of which 426 859 271 people have recovered (Worldometers 2022).

Schools are among the worst institutional casualties of complex disasters (Ensign and Jacob, 2021). When the immediate response to COVID-19 of governments around the globe was to impose (often hard) national lockdowns, the immediate reaction to the outbreak of COVID-19, in the field of education, followed suit and

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and closed education institutions. Statistically, this has affected about 91 per cent of the global student population (UNESCO 2020a, 2020b). At its peak, COVID-19 forced 1.6 billion students out of school, the largest education disruption since World War II. Even a full year after the outbreak, by March 2021, the education institutions of 26 countries were still fully closed (UNESCO 2021a). The general response, particularly at the level of higher education, was that education should move towards a distance education model, with teaching taking place online and learning taking place at home.

It should now be noted that technology to enhance higher education employing a hybrid model of teaching and learning, has existed for a long time, but the uptake was slow. Education is known to be a notoriously conservative sector of society, showing itself and its institutions to be resistant to change. This dinosaur-like depiction of education institutions was perhaps best publicised in Benjamin's satirical book *The Saber Tooth Curriculum* (1939), which has assumed classical status in education because he brought to the fore what he saw as the obsolete and anachronistic features of institutions of education. One example to illustrate this—pertinent to the theme of this article—the dominance of traditional lecture theatres, with students sitting at desks or in rows facing a professor behind a lectern, characterising the architecture of even those institutions regarded as leading world-class universities. The word 'lecture' is derived from the Latin word lectura, meaning 'to read'. Ironically, this was an arrangement predating even the invention of the printing press in the mid-fifteenth century when the only way to duplicate literature was for the lecturer to read the text word for word, and for students to copy the text verbatim. Already becoming obsolete with the invention of printing in 1453, more than five hundred years later, today, it is still the dominant mode of teaching at universities. Thus also, while technology was available for the movement towards distance and hybrid models, and while there was much pressure to do so from the point of view of the social and economic demand for higher education, the uptake had been slow. The reasons are manifold and the obstacles in the societal contexts of higher education were certainly many (these obstacles are enumerated by Van Rensburg and Ogutto 2022). COVID-19 precipitated a movement that had to be made by necessity to these modes of teaching and learning in higher education sectors all over the world (see Reimers et al. 2022). For the exercise to succeed and to maintain the momentum using technology to enhance the effort to supply African education systems with quality educated teachers using technology-supported distance and hybrid models, institutions and systems

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must learn from each other's experience. While in Africa the University of South Africa has been the pioneering distance higher education institution, the second largest such supplier of distance and hybrid higher education in South Africa is the Distance Unit of North-West University, South Africa. This unit has thus far been very poorly represented in the literature on distance higher education in Africa. This article aims to fill that gap.

The Distance Education Unit at North-West University

Measured by student numbers, North-West University is currently the third largest university in South Africa (after the University of South Africa and the Tshwane University of Technology). North-West University came into existence on 1 January 2004, from an amalgamation of two universities, Potchefstroom University and the University of North-West. North-West University has eight faculties situated at three campuses. The faculty of education's contact programmes are being offered at the Mahikeng, Potchefstroom, and Vanderbijlpark campuses and the faculty's administration of distance programmes is being managed by the Distance Unit of North-West University (UDL). With the onset of COVID-19, the faculty embraced synchronous and asynchronous teaching and students must have an electronic device (e.g. computer) linked to the internet to fully participate in academic programmes.

After the University of South Africa (an exclusive distance education institution) North-West University has the largest distance education unit of all universities in South Africa. In the 2023 *Times Higher Education Global University Rankings* North-West University is graded in the 600-800 position of all universities in the world (Times Higher Education 2023), meaning it is among the top three per cent of the roughly 31,000 universities in the world.

In 2020, 11,640 of the total student body of 56,425 were distance education students (North-West University 2023). The distance education unit is located in Potchefstroom, and commenced in its present form at the Potchefstroom Campus at about the same time as the merger in 2004. The distance education unit teaching and learning model is based on an electronic web-based platform (named e-fundi). Students communicate with lecturers by means of emails; telephone calls; mobile telephone calls; the electronic teaching-learning platform; and personal, physical consultations with lecturers.

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According to the UDL Statistics of April 2023 diagram 1 shows the 2020 enrolment of the actual first time entrants (FTEN) (students that enrolled for the first time at a higher education institution) and the decrease of actual FTEN students in 2021. This is a direct effect of COVID-19. In 2022 the numbers picked up and in 2023 the actual FTEN students were more than the number that was planned for (North-West University, SALA 2023).

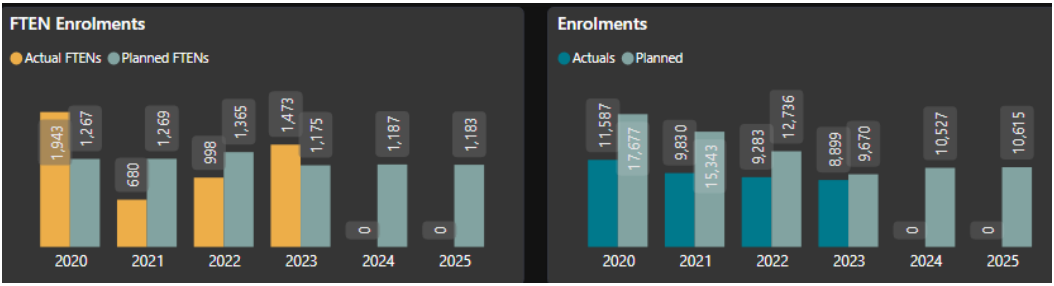

Diagram 1: UDL statistics 2023

According to the UDL Statistics of April 2023, diagram 2 shows the FTEN students for the faculty of education distance students as 1,374 enrolments and the total education distance students for the Faculty of Education is 7,777 for 2023 (North-West University, SALA 2023).

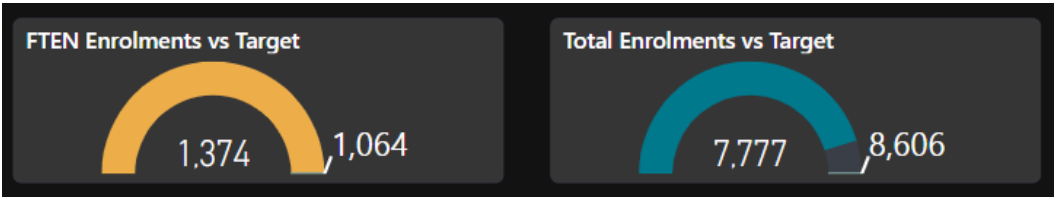

Diagram 2: FTEN enrolments for the Faculty of Education

Diagram 3, according to the UDL Statistics of April 2023, shows the FTEN students for all the other faculties that enrolled FTEN students in distance. There are only 99 FTEN students. The total enrolments of all distance students for 2023 are 8,899 (North-West University, SALA 2023).

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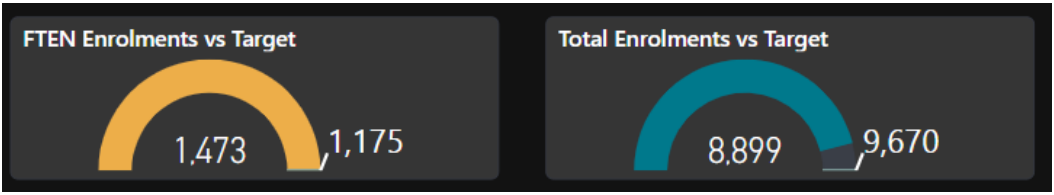

Diagram 3: FTEN enrolments of all distance programmes

Originally the unit was paper-based as far as study material and assignments of students were concerned, but during recent years there was pressure to move towards online, computer-based teaching, in line with technologial developments. However, when COVID-19 broke out, the mode was still predominantly paper-based. Classes are presented in English via interactive whiteboards (IWBs). For each module, there were typically three contact sessions scheduled during a semester or six for a year module. These lessons, typically on a Saturday to accommodate part-time or working students, can be attended at one of the many learning support centres where computers with internet access are available or may be downloaded from there. Highly qualified academic staff from the three campuses present these lectures and students are urged to attend these broadcasts/online sessions—or download the lectures the following week—as they will further assist students to navigate their studies with greater success. Our academic staff members are experts in their respective subject disciplines and they are best equipped to support students as they fully understand the challenges faced by students studying in the distance mode.

COVID-19 and the hybrid mode tuition at North-West University

COVID-19 had a major impact on the UDL at North-West University, as it had on universities elsewhere. As the original hard lockdown rendered the submission of hard-copy assignments impossible, the unit had to make contingency plans very quickly. The move to online submission and grading of assignments was made. A decision was taken that an assessment submission and a downloadable page will be created for submission of the first assignment as well as a COVID-19 continuous assessment that would replace the examination assessment for both semesters—the hard lockdown also ruled out the historical end-of-term examinations, which were always high stakes summative assessments.

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At learner support centres (LSC's) which the ODL unit has across South Africa and Namibia, technology/equipment has been installed that will enable students to link to Wi-Fi free of charge, that will enable students to download resources and recorded sessions. However, to make provision for students who had no access to the internet, to Wi-Fi, or data to use the electronic platform, an additional hard copy assessment had to be slotted in at the end of the hard lockdown; this also doubled up as a second opportunity assessment for those students who failed the first round of assessments or who could not attend to their assessment assignments because of the disruption brought by COVID-19. The same protocol was applied to the second semester.

After the contingency plans were made a pilot group was put together for a trial run to determine if an upload and download of assignments would be possible through NWU's e-fundi platform. For the phasing-in period, students could make use of the technology/equipment that have been installed at some LSCs, that could enable students to link to Wi-Fi, free of charge, which could enable them to download resources and assessments and upload assessments after having completed. Turning to the teaching side, the unit resorted to video recordings during COVID-19. The lecturers could record all their lectures through whiteboard sessions—that is, PowerPoint voice-overs, etc.—from home and upload them on the video platform, Panopto. Lecturers were welcome to make use of the whiteboard media rooms on campus at the UDL but had to arrange this before their arrival. In the absence of a scheduled interactive whiteboard timetable, students might be more inclined to feel uncertain, especially during the ongoing COVID-19. Therefore, instead of the timetable, lecturers had to make sure they drew up a semester programme that indicated when they would upload lecture recordings as well as assignments due dates. This benefited both the lecturer as well as the students. This new contingency set-up system became a new normal.

From experience—before the lockdown and mostly online studies—the lecturers started to use the three scheduled classes as feedback sessions. According to the attendance registers, few distance students attended these scheduled classes in real-time. They normally downloaded the recordings at times that suited them better. In this respect, the new system benefitted lecturers and students, as students could now at any time convenient to them use the pre-recorded classes, which are available on e-fundi.

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For the duration of COVID-19, these online lectures were made available to contact students too, through e-fundi.

Although not always easy, the lecturers prefer to have the whole site ready at the start of the semester, or at least within the first month of the semester. Distance students should be able to have online access to everything at times which suit them. Serious distance students would do their planning ahead and would spend time on their studies in a self-directed manner, therefore teaching resources should be easily accessible and available to distance students. This enabled students to plan and pace their studies, tailored to their situations. After COVID-19, the contact wing of the university commenced to investigate the implementation of these elements into their mode of teaching and learning as a permanent arrangement.

The UDL has ten multimedia venues onsite (Building 11a) and an additional three venues offsite (Building 14). These venues are equipped with relevant technological and physical infrastructure that allows for hybrid learning. There are learner support centres (LSCs) across South Africa and Namibia that support the hybrid learning model. The e-learning unit at the UDL has implemented the use of the Microsoft Teams platform as the medium for synchronous learning and is responsible for the maintenance of the multimedia venues. During COVID-19, the UDL immediately responded and rolled out its own device use for lecturers to record video/lecture content and share with students via e-fundi. Lecturers further have the option to schedule additional online synchronous 'connect' sessions with their students and share digital material via e-fundi. Some of the UDL's programmes are offered fully online via e-fundi and bichronous learning is deployed via the same platform because e-Learning is responsible for video capture management platforms and training lecturers on the use of relevant teaching and learning technologies. The UDL lecturers have the option to book one of the multimedia venues to record lecture content or host a live session with online participants with the e-learning unit that facilitates the bookings and provides support to lecturers using the multimedia venues.

The findings gathered and lessons learned about the submissions and online tuition during COVID-19, illustrate the resolve of the process to move the paper-based programmes of North-West Univerity Distance Education Unit to online distance programmes in 2024. Due to various logistical challenges and the upcoming implementation of a new Student Information System program, we proposed that the mode of delivery for the paper-based programmes be changed from distance paper-

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based to distance online. These programmes already rolled out e-fundi sites for the first- and second-year students and in 2023 all year groups will be able to download and upload assessments on e-fundi. The move to an online mode of delivery will enable lecturers to better meet the needs of our students as they will have the opportunity to provide additional resources to students, be in frequent communication with students, promote collaborative learning, and increased student engagement. If the programmes were to move online, students would also receive more timely feedback on their assignments, have more opportunities to be assessed and can monitor their progress more efficiently throughout the semester. The decision was taken that the phasing out of the paper-based students who must repeat a module will still be served with hard copies as they were originally registered. These students will not be required to transfer to the electronic platform. If these students should prefer to make use of the online platform they will be accommodated. It will be a two to three-year phasing-out process before it will be a completed online programme.

Conclusion

At the North-West University Distance Education Unit, the COVID-19 pandemic had the effect of accelerating the imperative to harness the best contemporary technology can offer to enhance the teaching-learning effort of the Unit. This change has created a new normal, which had a knock-on effect on the contact education sector of the university as well. The majority of students in the Distance Education Unit are education students.

In the beginning of the article, mention was made of the shortage or deficit of teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa. South Africa is not an exception, at least not if the best of projections for the near future are also brought into the picture. Van der Berg, Gustaffson and Burger (2020) came to the conclusion that by 2025 South Africa will need approximately 39,500 new teachers annually, and this can rise to 52,000 by 2030. By contrast, the current higher education system can supply at present only 25,000 new teachers per year, of which only 17,000 accept appointments as teachers in South Africa (*Ibid.*). Extending the capacity of on-campus physical mode teacher education is time-consuming and difficult. This makes it imperative that other universities in South Africa also consider the extension of their teacher education by means of distance or hybrid education models. It is in this regard that this case study is offered

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as an example and inspiration to scholars and teacher educators at other universities in South Africa and Africa.

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TETFLE TEACHER EDUCATION THROUGH FLEXIBLE LEARNING IN AFRICA
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Supervisors' Challenges with Online Supervision Using Microsoft Teams in Supervising Open Distance and E-Learning (ODeL) Pre-Service Teachers

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Supervisors' Challenges with Online Supervision Using Microsoft Teams in Supervising Open Distance and E-Learning (ODeL) Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

Online supervision has been introduced to the field of education. However, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, university pre-service programmes did not provide pre-service teachers and supervisors with online teaching practice experience. Microsoft Teams (MS Teams) has proven to be an indispensable tool in facilitating online supervision. The Domestication Theory was used as a lens to explore the challenges supervisors faced with online supervision, using MS Teams in an Open Distance and e-Learning (ODeL) institution in South Africa. This study adopted an exploratory case study design, using semi-structured interviews. Eight supervisors were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Thematic analysis was employed to analyse the data. The findings of this study showed that poor communication between supervisors and pre-service teachers, the lack of digital literacy among pre-service teachers, the difficulty of network coverage, and providing feedback were some of the challenges that supervisors experienced during online supervision. This study recommends that training be conducted for supervisors and pre-service teachers in using MS Teams and its various functions before supervision. Further research should explore pre-service teachers' engagement with online supervision tools to inform the future practice of teacher education programmes.

Keywords: online supervision, pre-service teachers, supervisors' challenges, teaching practice, Microsoft Teams, ODeL

Introduction

Teaching practice supervision is regarded as a vital component in teacher education as it determines the quality of teachers produced (Abdullaha, Sulongb, & Abdul, 2020). Abdullaha et al. (2020) further argue that teaching practice supervision aims at providing support to pre-service teachers and ensures that guidance is provided to them as they prepare to become teachers. However, research has shown that supervisors and pre-service teachers face challenges during the teaching practice supervision process. Pre-service teachers reported challenges such as placement and mentorship (Mokoena, 2017), and supervisors highlighted the substantial number of pre-service teachers they supervise and the great distance they travel during supervision (Ngara & Magwa, 2018).

Online teaching practice supervision by employing technology, has recently been introduced to the field of education (Kim, Park, & Jang, 2019). The benefits of online supervision have been documented in the literature. Online supervision enables university supervisors to offer technical and emotional support to pre-service teachers while observing them in the classroom (Sepulveda-Escobar et al., 2020); it enhances communication between pre-service teachers and supervisors (Nel & Marais, 2020); it increases the accessibility of supervisors to pre-service teachers and reduces visits to remote areas (Paulsen & Schmidt-Crawford, 2017); and it provides feedback to pre-service teachers through video conferencing (Rock et al., 2013). The success of teaching practice supervision depends on supervisors and pre-service teachers always having open lines of communication (Rice & Deschaine, 2020). Online teaching practice supervision includes the use of learning tools such as MS Teams, Zoom, and so forth. The idea of integrating MS Teams for learning has received a lot of attention due to its popularity. It is currently being used by more than 270 million people each day (Curry, 2023). As an online platform, MS Teams has features that allow video meetings, audio calls, and instant messaging (Hubbard, Bailey, Hess & Hellebro, 2021). The application, commonly referred to as MS Teams, provides an opportunity for supervisors to collaborate with pre-service teachers on an online platform (Çankaya & Durak, 2020). Another feature is that MS Teams can record meetings and provide automatic transcription. The MS Teams application is easily accessible to its users via the internet through desktops, laptops, and mobile phones. Supervisors can schedule meetings in advance to allow pre-service teachers to prepare for online supervision.

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Each participant can join, view, or listen to the meeting.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, most university pre-service programmes did not offer online teaching practice experience to pre-service teachers or their supervisors (Loose & Ryan, 2020; Rice & Deschaine, 2020). However, during the pandemic, supervisors were expected to use online platforms such as MS Teams to supervise pre-service teachers. Despite the plethora of literature on students' use of online learning platforms such as MS Teams and Zoom (Allison & Hudson, 2020; Buchal & Songsore, 2019; Mathisen & Bjorndai, 2016), there are little data relating to the potential of technology in supervising pre-service teachers during teaching practice (Mathisen & Bjørndal, 2016). The use of digital video in student-teacher supervision has been the topic of research, but Mathisen and Bjrondal (2016) point out that this only applies to micro-teaching on campuses and not to actual teaching practice supervision in schools. Set against this backdrop, the primary aim of this paper was to explore the challenges supervisors faced with online supervision, using MS Teams in an ODeL institution in South Africa. The following research question guided the study:

> What were the challenges experienced by supervisors when conducting online teaching practice supervision using MS Teams?

The findings from this research will have positive implications for the successful implementation of online pre-service teaching practice supervision in an ODeL context and will contribute to the debate on the use of technology for online pre-service teacher supervision.

Literature Review

Remote supervision via the Microsoft Teams application

Existing literature commends the use of MS Teams to conduct online supervision (Stolte, 2021). Paksuniemi, Keskitalo, Frangou and Korkko (2021) mentioned that the use of MS Teams in online supervision brings new dimensions to the supervision process, such as systematised interaction between supervisors and pre-service teachers throughout the supervision process. This is because MS Teams allows participants to chat, share files, and have meetings (Nemec, Berkova & Hubalovsky, 2020). Supervisors

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can schedule meetings with pre-service teachers and explain to them what is required during the actual supervision. Important documents such as lesson plans, curriculum documents, and lesson evaluation forms can be shared, using MS Teams.

Supervising pre-service teachers remotely allows the supervisor to observe classroom activities without disturbing the classroom setting and the school timetable (Rice & Deschaine, 2020). During face-to-face supervision, supervisors need to be accommodated in the classroom; however, when MS Teams is used such challenges are eliminated. Moreover, the use of MS Teams during supervision saves supervisors from travelling long distances to supervise pre-service teachers (Stolte, 2021). This saves resources and time for supervisors and teacher training institutions.

Further, scholars endorse the use of MS Teams because this tool appeals to pre-service teachers and young people in general (Mavuru, Pila, & Kuhudzai, 2022; Nemec et al., 2020). Many young people, including pre-service teachers, are familiar with using various technological software and hardware (Azizan, 2021). As a result, they usually find it easy to use MS Teams, which is also accessible to many people through smartphones, computers, and laptops (Wijayanto & Sumarwati, 2021). Adopting MS Teams to conduct online supervision may be favourable to both pre-service teachers and teacher training institutions because teacher training institutions "meet" pre-service teachers where they are on online platforms (Pal & Vanijja, 2020).

Lack of digital skills

Digital skills are the cornerstone of online supervision for both supervisors and pre-service teachers (Liu et al., 2018). Supervisors often receive training before engaging with online supervision; however, pre-service teachers are overlooked in such training. There is a common belief that being young gives pre-service teachers the prerequisite skills to engage in online supervision. Flores and Gago (2020) argue that this is not always the case, and some pre-service teachers lack the required digital skills to engage in online supervision. Lee (2007) postulates that teacher training institutions should recognise that some pre-service teachers are at an advanced age and need intensive support to engage in online supervision. Strydom et al. (2021) reveal that pre-service teachers who lack digital skills are excluded from online supervision. Overall, teacher training institutions should recognise that not all pre-service teachers and supervisors have the required digital skills to engage in online supervision, and even after training

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there may be some pre-service teachers and supervisors who may still experience challenges with online supervision. Hence, digital literacy training should be ongoing.

Communication between supervisors and pre-service teachers

Communication between supervisors and pre-service teachers is key to the success of online supervision. According to Rice and Deschaine (2020), supervision relies on clear and consistent communication. Online communication transcends the boundaries of time and space (Kim, 2020). Communication between supervisors and pre-service teachers before, during, and after teaching practice helps pre-service teachers receive guidance and support from their supervisors (Paulsen & Schmidt-Crawford, 2017). Online communication platforms allow for sharing of information between parties (Kim, 2020). To maximise communication between supervisors and pre-service teachers, teacher training institutions employ various tools of online communication such as emails, Zoom, MS Teams, and Social Media platforms (Kim, 2020).

Online communication tools used by teacher training institutions come with numerous benefits to pre-service teachers. The study conducted by Kim (2020) revealed the adoption of tools such as emails after online supervision allowed supervisors to provide feedback to each pre-service teacher. This suggests that online communication tools enable supervisors to provide individualised feedback to pre-service teachers after online supervision. Furthermore, the use of online communication platforms to facilitate communication between supervisors and pre-service teachers improves the quality of the online supervision process (Cavanagh, 2021). This is due to the use of WhatsApp groups, Zoom and emails by supervisors to communicate with pre-service teachers. Online communication tools, such as MS Teams, allow synchronous and asynchronous communication which is critical for distance education pre-service teachers (Poston, Apostel, & Richardson, 2020).

Nurlaelawati and Gunawan (2019) found the use of social media networks during teaching practice useful as it enabled pre-service teachers to form and belong to a community of practice. The creation of such a platform may lead to pre-service teachers learning from one another and sharing ideas on how to engage in online supervision (Kidd & Murray, 2020). Pre-service teachers can take advantage of online communication tools to reach their counterparts and receive support during the journey of teaching practice. For distance education pre-service teachers, this can

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be a great benefit because they are normally separated from their counterparts and supervisors.

Theoretical framework

This study used the Domestication Theory as the theoretical lens to understand the phenomenon under investigation. The Domestication Theory refers to the integration of novel technology by the users in their formal and informal activities (Lindeman, Suensson, & Enochsson, 2021). In the context of this study, the Domestication Theory involves supervisors integrating MS Teams into their formal task of supervising pre-service teachers during teaching practice. The attempt to integrate MS Teams in teaching practice supervision is deemed new in the field of education. Therefore, adopting the Domestication Theory helped the researchers to understand and interpret the challenges faced by supervisors when it comes to adopting MS Teams to conduct teaching practice supervision. The Domestication Theory helps to understand the dynamics between users and various kinds of technology (Yere-Arne, 2019). Haddon (2006) adds that Domestication Theory looks beyond the adoption of technology by the users and asks what technology means to the users, how they experience it, and the role technology plays in their everyday lives.

The proponents of this theory indicate that individuals go through four stages of domesticating modern technology in their daily activities. These are the appropriation, objectification, incorporation, and conversion stages. The appropriation stage involves the users' motivation to use technology by embedding it in their practice through understanding its effectiveness and functionalities (Lindeman et al., 2021). At this stage, supervisors are expected to integrate MS Teams into their teaching practice supervision, because they understand the advantages that come with integrating the tool in performing their supervision task. In the objectification stage users give meaning to the tool by appreciating its practical value and usefulness in their daily practices. Through MS Teams, supervisors can observe the classroom, the pre-service teacher teaching, learners in the classroom, and provide feedback. In the incorporation stage, users use the novel technology for purposes other than what they initially used it for (Lindeman et al., 2019). At this stage, supervisors can use MS Teams to perform other activities beyond supervising pre-service teachers. The conversion stage is the final stage of the Domestication Theory. This stage occurs when individuals use modern

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technology to interact and communicate with others (Lindermann et al., 2019). This will not only smoothen the process of teaching practice supervision but can also strengthen relations between the supervisors and pre-service teachers.

Methodology

This study followed a qualitative approach. Qualitative research provided the researchers with in-depth insight and an understanding of the real-life experiences of supervisors in their social and cultural context (Gumbo 2018). This case study was conducted at the University of South Africa (UNISA) to gain in-depth information about the phenomenon under study (Yin 2003).

Research site

Unisa is an open, distance, and e-learning (ODeL) university. This means there is a physical distance between the students and the university, student-centeredness, and the use of technology to enhance teaching and learning (van den Berg 2020). The study was conducted at the College of Education where more than 30 000 students are enrolled in two programmes. These programmes are a four-year BEd (Bachelor of Education) degree and a one-year Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). The Foundation Phase, the Intermediate Phase, and the Senior and Further Education and Training Phase are the three phases that make up the BEd degree programme at the ODeL institution under consideration. This framework covers all levels of teacher education in South Africa.

Teaching practice is recognised as essential and mandatory by the Council of Higher Education (CHE) and the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC) in South Africa (DBE 2015). The students enrolled in the BEd and PGCE programmes are expected to apply the theory they learned in real-life situations in schools. The BEd students do five weeks of teaching practice each year and the PGCE students are expected to do ten weeks of teaching practice. These students are supposed to be supervised, but the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible for in-person supervision. As a result, the Teaching Practice Office (TPO) launched a pilot project to explore the use of digital platforms in supervising pre-service teachers who are doing teaching practice. The results of this pilot project are presented in this study.

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Sampling and participants

The sampling strategy adopted in this study was a purposive and convenient sampling method. The researchers targeted individuals who were supervisors involved in the pilot project of online supervision and were willing to engage in the study and to discuss their experiences. Participants were advised that their participation was entirely voluntary, and they might end it at any time. Eight of the department's ten teaching practice supervisors volunteered to take part in the online supervision experiment. The goal of this pilot project was to determine whether online supervision could be a practical option for teacher training institutions.

Data collection and analysis

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Even though the researchers employed pre-planned questions, probing was used to shed light on challenges and to follow up on crucial issues that participants had raised. Interviews were recorded and the participants were asked for their consent before using the voice recorder. Data were transcribed verbatim, and the participants received interview transcripts to ensure that their opinions were accurately represented. This gave the participants the chance to refute any inaccurate inferences that the researchers made. Pseudonyms S1-S8 were used to preserve the identity of the participants.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the raw data, frequent and dominant occurrences revealed research findings. Data collection and analysis were done simultaneously. Line-by-line coding at the initial stage was followed by focused coding (Charmaz, 2006). This led to the development of themes and categories that are presented in this study.

Findings

During data analysis, two dominant themes emerged. These are communication challenges and technical challenges experienced during online supervision. The findings are discussed below under each theme.

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Theme I: Communication challenges with online supervision

A key element of successful coordination is effective communication. This study found that communication between the different role players posed a challenge to successful online supervision.

Communication between supervisors and the TPO

During discussions, supervisors had several challenges that were caused by a lack of communication between the TPO and the supervisors. *S6* stated: *'I was given a list of 20 students to supervise and of these 20 students, 11 students had finished doing their TP.'*

Another challenge that supervisors experienced when contacting pre-service teachers was that the telephone numbers that the TPO provided were not the pre-service teachers' numbers. In some instances, the home telephone numbers of the pre-service teachers, the school telephone number, or an incorrect number were given. One of the participants explained:

> *'We were given incomplete telephone numbers. I remember in one instance I was given the student's cell phone number with 9 digits, but because I knew the school, it was a local school, I was able to get the number of the teacher in the school.' (S2)*

S1 said: *'I was sometimes given cellphone numbers that do not belong to the student.'* Similarly, *S4* mentioned:

> *'You know TPO do not communicate with us properly when it comes to supervision, the numbers I was given belonged to schools and when I called the number some were not answered, and others were not going through.'*

The supervisors' responses indicate that there was a lack of communication between the TPO and the supervisors. Their responses suggest that the office did not facilitate communication between themselves and the supervisors, thus impacting online supervision. Having the correct contact details would have given pre-service teachers and supervisors ample time to plan for supervision.

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Communication between supervisors and pre-service teachers

Effective communication between pre-service teachers and supervisors is important because it ensures that pre-service teachers feel comfortable and supported throughout their teaching practice experience. In this study, supervisors reported many challenges they experienced when communicating with pre-service teachers. One of the challenges was the difficulty of contacting pre-service teachers. As one participant explained: *'I found communication with students to be a stumbling block, I called every student between three and five times before I could speak to them. This was very time-consuming.' (S5)*

Another challenge was arranging the actual supervision with pre-service teachers. Supervisors needed to brief pre-service teachers about the supervision process and the documents that needed to be completed before the supervision began. Some found this part of the process overwhelming, as one participant described:

> *'For me, it was a lot of administration before the supervision because one student was emailing me a lot asking about how to fill in the documents. What must she do with this? She was very frustrated and nervous. I think from an administrative point of view online supervision is very labour intensive and it takes a lot of time to arrange and conduct.' (S3)*

Even when the supervisors communicated the requirements to pre-service teachers for online supervision to run smoothly, some pre-service teachers did not comply. *S8* explains:

> *'I communicated to students and asked them to send me their lesson plans a day before the supervision, some did, and others sent their lesson plans on the day of the supervision, and this made the supervision process difficult as I could not prepare for my observation of the lesson.' (S8)*

Other supervisors complained about the postponements by pre-service teachers concerning the date of supervision. One of the participants stated:

> *'There were continual changes with my students, although I only had three students to supervise, none of them stuck to the original date and time they were going to*

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teach their lesson. They either sent you a sick note or on one of the dates there was a SADTU strike, so I had to continually shuffle these students' supervision around my work responsibilities.' (S2)

In this sub-theme, it emerged that supervisors perceived communication between themselves and pre-service teachers as a challenge. This was due to the administrative work in arranging the online supervision. This administrative challenge was also compounded by the unavailability of some pre-service teachers when the supervisors tried to call them. The level of pre-service teachers' dependence on supervisors also appeared to be challenging for some supervisors because they had to engage in administrative work, even before the actual supervision.

Theme 2: Technical challenges with online supervision

A recurrent theme in the interviews was the technical challenges experienced by pre-service teachers during online supervision which also affected the supervisors' work.

Pre-service teachers' inability to use Microsoft Teams

The skill of using digital technology is important as it ensures that pre-service teachers benefit from the affordances of technology. A common view among the participants was that pre-service teachers did not know how to use MS Teams as a digital tool. See their comments:

'Students didn't know how to use Teams and it took me a lot of time to explain to them how Teams works. they did not even know how to download the app onto their gadget" (S5). Similarly, S6 added: "They needed a lot of help, and facilitating this process took/wasted a lot of time'.

The above comments suggest that pre-service teachers were not prepared for online supervision because the MS Teams application was not downloaded on their gadgets. Therefore, supervisors had to assist them in downloading the MS Teams application and explaining to them how it works. Supervisors felt that they spent a lot of time providing technical support to some pre-service teachers. One participant

said:

> *'It was also quite a big task on my part because I had to type out how to download teams and I had to explain to each student how it works and with some students, supervision would take nearly the whole day because the first step was to help them set up the required tools and the app before I can supervise them.' (S4)*

These comments from the supervisors indicate that pre-service teachers were not familiar with MS Teams. Further, pre-service teachers were not trained in advance in how to navigate MS Teams during their online supervision. The pre-service teachers' lack of technical knowledge concerning MS Teams had the potential to negatively affect the process of online supervision, as the university used MS Teams to conduct online supervision. Furthermore, the pre-service teachers' inability to use MS Teams compelled supervisors to provide technical support to pre-service teachers to ensure that online supervision is a success.

Devices that pre-service teachers used

This sub-theme reports on the gadgets that pre-service teachers used during online supervision. Supervisors indicated that most of the pre-service teachers used cell phones instead of laptops during supervision. *S8* noted:

> *'Most students used their cell phones for online supervision instead of a laptop as cell phones are widely used by students. The school didn't have laptops and students used their cell phones', and S7 made another comment: 'They also weren't laptops at the school, so they were stuck using their cell phones.'*

It appears from the supervisors' statements above that pre-service teachers opted to use cell phones because they had no laptops, and they had no access to the schools' laptops. Supervisors seemed to be unhappy with the use of cell phones during supervision.

> *'I had three or five students that were using their cell phones and they put their cell phones in one position. So, you can see one position in the classroom. And it's difficult for you as a supervisor to say to the student that as you teach, please*

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go around with your cell phone, and show me the class. For me, observing lessons through a cell phone was difficult, I only saw one position of the classroom.' (S3)

The responses from the supervisors suggest that the use of cell phones by pre-service teachers limited their lesson observations to one position. In some instances, school-based mentors had to walk around in the classroom carrying a cell phone to enable the supervisor to see what was happening in the class.

One participant mentioned:

'I couldn't see what was going on in the class, so the mentor teacher had to walk around with the phone to show what was happening in the class, it was very challenging because the volume wasn't great either.' (S1)

The supervisors indicated that they prefer laptops or computers to be used during online supervision rather than cell phones. *S7* said:

'I would have loved my students to use a computer or laptop during supervision because the screen of the computer is bigger than the screen of the cell phone. When the computer is used, I can see the whole class.' (S7).

Similarly, *S2* preferred a laptop instead of a cell phone:

'I think using a laptop was going to be more effective and help me do my job effectively as a supervisor. You know, when the student uses a cellphone, you can't even see what is written on the chalkboard and you mainly depend on listening to what the student says as he/she teaches.'

S5 indicated that most of her students used laptops during online supervision.

'Although I had two students who used cell phones during supervision, but most of my students' used laptops. Since they used laptops, I was able to see everything that was happening inside the classroom.' (S5).

It appeared from the sentiments of the supervisors that the use of cell phones

during online supervision limited them in observing the activities that were happening in the classrooms. Therefore, it was clear that online supervision could be effectively conducted when laptops or computers were used.

Network coverage

Connectivity on the part of students was also a challenge that supervisors faced. Pre-service teachers' lessons were interrupted due to intermittent connectivity.

The participants commented as follows:

> *'Students also had network problems, so the connection kept getting cut off because of a loss of network. This made it difficult to view the students' lessons.' (S7)*
> *'Connecting to the internet was a serious issue, we had to wait for some time to get them connected, and when that happened, we constantly had to pause because their internet was disrupted. This disruption affected the students' lesson presentation. Because every time they get disconnected, they start the lesson from scratch, and we did not have time to finish the lesson.' (S3)*

It is evident from the quotation above that *S3* and *S7* struggled to supervise some pre-service teachers due to connectivity issues. Poor connectivity had the potential to frustrate pre-service teachers who prepared the lesson, only to find they could not present and finish the lesson smoothly. Supervisors were likely to be frustrated as well because they had set aside time to supervise pre-service teachers, only to find that they were unable to appropriately supervise due to poor connectivity.

It also transpired during the interviews that, although some of the supervisors successfully planned lesson supervision with pre-service teachers, their lesson observations and feedback were interrupted due to poor connectivity. For instance, *S1* indicated that she managed to observe the lesson successfully but could not provide feedback to the pre-service teacher after the supervision.

> *'One of my students got cut just after presenting the lesson. I did not get the opportunity to give feedback to her and I had to rearrange the meeting for after hours, so I can give proper feedback on her lesson.' (S6)*

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It is evident from S6's assertions that poor connectivity presented a nightmare for her because the crucial aspect of supervision was interrupted by the lack of connectivity. Providing feedback to a pre-service teacher is key to the supervision process because this is where both the supervisor and the pre-service teacher reflect on the lesson. During the feedback process the pre-service teacher reflects on their lesson and could see where they needed to improve. The feedback session is even more important for the ODeL pre-service teachers because this is where they can interact with their supervisors and are mentored and coached to help them develop professionally.

Discussion of findings

This study aimed to explore challenges faced by the supervisors when conducting online supervision, using MS Teams. This study found that communication between pre-service teachers and supervisors was lacking. Supervisors' attempts to reach pre-service teachers were challenging as some pre-service teachers did not answer their cell phones. This affected the planning of the teaching practice supervision process. The findings imply that the supervisors were not using MS Teams optimally, as MS Teams has functions that allow participants to chat, call, share files, and have meetings (Nemec et al., 2020). This finding indicates that although supervisors have 'appropriated' MS Teams for their daily work as academics, they have not fully 'domesticated' it for their online supervision (Lindeman et al., 2021). In other words, the supervisors have not embedded MS Teams in their daily practices of online supervision; hence, they are not yet at advanced stages of 'incorporation' and 'conversion'. as discussed in the section on Domestication Theory above (Lindeman et al., 2021).

Another finding from this study indicated that some pre-service teachers who were supervised online lacked the required digital skills for online supervision. This appeared to be a serious challenge for supervisors because it meant that they had to go beyond providing professional and technical support to pre-service teachers. The participants had to help pre-service teachers install MS Teams on their gadgets and orientate them on the use of MS Teams before they could start with the actual supervision process.

Another challenge that supervisors had to contend with during online supervision was the lack of digital tools suitable for online supervision. Many pre-service teachers

used MS Teams on their cell phones instead of laptops. This limited the supervisors' view of the classroom as cell phones have smaller screens. This resulted in some mentor teachers walking around the classroom with the cell phone allowing the supervisor greater viewing potential. One of the benefits of online supervision is that supervisors observe classroom activities without disturbing the classroom (Schmidt et al., 2015). However, the constant movement of the school-based mentor in the classroom has the potential to hamper the observation of online supervision.

Supervisors' challenges during online supervision were further compounded by poor connectivity from the side of pre-service teachers. Although the MS Teams application functions well with poor connectivity (Mohmad et al., 2021), some of our pre-service teachers still struggled to connect with MS Teams. Participants reported that poor connectivity led to the failure of some supervisors to provide feedback to pre-service teachers immediately after online supervision. This finding is worrisome because feedback to pre-service teachers is a critical aspect of supervision where pre-service teachers get professional development from their supervisors (Mufidah, 2019). However, feedback is even more important for pre-service teachers in ODeL because their interaction with supervisors is limited. It is during online supervision when they get a chance to interact with their supervisors and learn from them. Despite the challenges faced by supervisors regarding connectivity, this study revealed that some supervisors rearranged meetings with pre-service teachers to provide feedback. This is an indication that supervisors appreciate the importance of feedback to pre-service teachers after supervision.

Based on the findings of this study, we note that supervisors have 'appropriated' MS Teams in their online supervision. Furthermore, the findings indicate that supervisors have 'objectified' MS Teams as a platform that is effective in conducting online supervision. Although the supervisors' use of MS Teams was limited to calling pre-service teachers, organising supervision sessions, and conducting the actual supervision, when examining the responses of supervisors, one gets a sense that supervisors appreciate and see the value of MS Teams for online supervision. Finally, supervisors did not tap into the other functions offered by MS Teams, and this revealed that they are not yet at the 'incorporation' and 'conversion' stages where they can fully engage with pre-service teachers before, during, and after the supervision to improve pre-service teachers' experiences with online supervision.

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Recommendations

Teaching practice is a vital component in pre-service teachers' education programmes. Owing to the increasing number of pre-service teachers requiring supervision, an online technology tool has been incorporated to assist supervisors with the supervision process. This study found that using MS Teams to supervise pre-service teachers presented supervisors with many technical challenges. For this reason, we recommend that pre-service teachers and supervisors be trained in using MS Teams and its different functions before any supervision takes place. Supervisors should also be encouraged to use MS Teams throughout the supervision process which includes communication with pre-service teachers; observation of the classroom lesson; the post-lesson discussion; and sharing documents, files, and any other relevant material for the success of pre-service teacher supervision. Another recommendation to strengthen the online supervision process would be for the university to make data available for pre-service teachers and to ensure that they have access to laptops during their online teaching practice supervision.

Conclusion

This study reports on supervisors' challenges of online pre-service teacher supervision using MS Teams in an ODeL university. The findings confirm that although MS Teams can be beneficial for online pre-service teacher supervision, supervisors experience many challenges. These challenges include the lack of digital literacy among pre-service teachers; the lack of connectivity, especially for pre-service teachers living in rural areas; the use of MS Teams on a cell phone instead of a laptop owing to a lack of laptops and shortage of storage facilities for laptops in schools; the difficulty of effective communication with all stakeholders responsible for the teaching practice supervision process. The challenge of digital literacy skills and communication skills can be resolved by the university by providing training to supervisors and pre-service teachers on the effective use of MS Teams and its various functionalities. Only when this happens will the affordances of using MS Teams to supervise pre-service teachers be fully realised.

This qualitative case study focused on the challenges of online supervision, using MS Teams in one open distance and e-learning university in a developing country.

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The study, therefore, involved a small sample that does not reflect online pre-service teacher supervision in different contexts. However, we believe that this study will catalyse further research on online pre-service teacher supervision using technology, especially MS Teams.

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Student Teachers' Views on Developing Practical Online Art Skills During Teaching Practice

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Student Teachers' Views on Developing Practical Online Art Skills During Teaching Practice

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Abstract

Addressing the learning needs of grades 10-12 art students, specifically those students who are vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation, requires inclusive and innovative approaches when teaching practical art skills online and face-to-face. The aim of the study was to establish student teachers' challenges when teaching practical art online during COVID-19 and to find innovative ideas for addressing such challenges. Qualitative data was collected from art student teachers (n=147) who reflected on their teaching practice experiences and responded to two online open-ended questions. Challenges that student teachers mostly experienced included a lack of in-person teaching, internet connection and data, student-teacher support from mentors and lecturers, not enough practical teaching experience hours, stress, and anxiety. If not addressed, these challenges could have an impact on not only the practical application of art skills but also the development of scarce skills such as creativity and problem-solving skills that are necessary for all citizens to make informed decisions. In addressing these challenges, various innovative online and offline activities were suggested, such as demonstrations posted on WhatsApp groups, peer tutoring, extension of submission dates for practical art activities, creating offline videos for learners to view and work on activities at their own pace, repeat lessons, keeping activities simple, virtual museums, and using natural resources from learners' surroundings to develop practical art skills.

Keywords: Art education, practical skills, online teaching practice, creativity, problem-solving, natural resources

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Introduction

Globally, COVID-19 has affected students, lecturers, and educational institutions in transferring from a face-to-face to an online teaching mode (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, and Bruce 2020; Toquero 2020). The rapid spread of the virus contributed to institutions being unprepared to manage the teaching of practical skills effectively. Crawford *et al.* (2020) state that this transformation imposed many challenges on all stakeholders in education, especially in subjects requiring the development of practical skills such as art education. Although various online techniques have been recommended to supplement practical skill development, McPherson and Bacow (2015) point out that from a macro level perspective, the efficacy of online education and the effect on practical skill development has not been investigated. Liguori and Winkler (2020) add that the capacity of effective online teaching for practical subjects varies from educator to educator. Moreover, the socio-economic circumstances of some art students living in rural informal settlements affect their learning because not all of them can afford technology devices and reliable internet connections to attend online classes and apply practical activities online (Zhong 2020). Asmara (2020) notes that students and lecturers prefer to engage and communicate on a WhatsApp platform to find a solution to the challenge experienced with a lack of internet connectivity.

To adapt to the new online learning environment, globally, art teachers have merely transferred content to online platforms with very little training in diverse interactive online teaching methods and strategies and the impact on practical subjects and the skills that these students need to develop (Ahmad et al. 2021). This has resulted in art students developing a lack of creativity and lose interest in attending online classes as shown in some studies. The reasons could be that students' diverse learning styles are not always accommodated (Zhong 2020). For example, art students cannot always interact and socialise with their peers in creating a performance as communication is limited regarding the availability of fellow students online. This is problematic as Aliyu, Arasanmi and Ekundayo (2019), allude us that students need social interactions with other student teachers in solving challenges and finding innovative ideas for how to teach practical art online. Students are not always able to interact socially with fellow students, which could contribute to depression and psychological distress in artists (McCarthy, 2020). Additionally, Zhong (2020) raises the concern that art students mostly discuss the content online with the educator and that practical skills are not developed, which contributes to fear and anxiety among students, as they cannot

apply practical skills in activities.

Since institutions must modify their curricula and programmes to reach the same programme objectives and develop prescribed practical skills, teaching art subjects online during a pandemic could be considered as crisis learning (Pace, Pettit and Barker 2020). Recent research studies have investigated the challenges associated with online learning and teaching during pandemics (Mailizar et al. 2020). Mailizar et al. (2020) emphasise the importance of investigating students' perspectives and the possible challenges they experience when learning and teaching practical subjects, while Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) emphasise exploring effective online learning. In addition, Aglazor (2017) underlines the importance of teaching practice, where student teachers are provided with opportunities to develop effective pedagogical and practical skills while interacting in real-life classroom lessons. In order to engage student teachers in hands-on experiences during this period, guidance and interaction between student teachers and knowledgeable lecturers and school mentors are essential (Izadinia 2016).

Similar challenges in the teaching of practical subjects such as art are experienced in the South African context as they are in other developed and developing countries. Due to limited research studies in how practical subjects such as art can be taught online, the author investigated the development of student teachers' ability to teach practical art skills during the COVID-19 pandemic in their teaching practice schools. Detecting challenges in effective teaching and innovative ideas in how practical art skills could be developed in a multimodal approach is essential. Therefore, the study investigated the challenges student teachers experienced in applying and developing practical online art skills during the COVID-19 pandemic by answering the following open-ended research questions:

- *What are the challenges experienced in teaching practical online art skills during teaching practice?*
- *What innovative online practices can be applied to address the challenges and develop practical art skills?*

Background

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted art education and training at all levels, given the distinctive art skills that students need to develop. The significance of art education

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cannot be ignored. The art curriculum is an activity-based programme where students learn different art skills, the foundational knowledge of art, and appreciation of artworks of diverse cultures (Ahmad et al. 2021). Furthermore, regular evaluation of students' development of practical skills could enhance their independent thinking (Yu and Li 2022) and encourage creative and imaginative thinking (Perignat and Katz-Buonincontro 2019). In both Curtis, Reid, and Ballard (2012) as well as Daigle and Vasseur (2019) it is emphasised that engaging and using natural material from learners' environments in arts activities does not only make it accessible for all learners to develop art skills but also assist them to understand the complexity of nature. In exploring their natural environment and creating innovative art forms, learners could become critical thinkers and problem solvers who are needed to respect and maintain the natural environment.

The South African Creative Arts curriculum in the senior phase (grades 7 to 9) aims to develop creative, expressive, and innovative individuals and to expose students to experiences in drama, music, dance, and visual arts (including crafts and design) (Department of Basic Education 2011). The aim of exposing students to all four art forms is to develop basic art skills in different art forms from which students can select one in Grade 10 in the Further Education and Training Phase (FET) and develop one art form extensively. For example, in studying the dance art form in the senior phase, students are provided with opportunities to learn how to dance and enjoy it, warm up and use their bodies safely, develop fitness for dancing, and develop basic dance skills. All four art forms are integrated in the creative arts curricula and include different skill development and aims that students need to achieve before selecting one of the following art forms as a subject in FET: dance studies, design studies, dramatic arts, music, or visual arts.

Jansen van Vuuren (2018) points out that student teachers and teachers often have limited art skills because of their education by insufficiently trained art educators. To exacerbate the inadequate in-service and pre-service training of art educators, pandemics such as COVID-19 have posed additional challenges that hamper effective art education (Carrillo and Flores 2020). Such challenges include a lack of infrastructure and internet connectivity, the development of practical skills online, digital skills, technology devices, infrastructure, student support, and online training (De Jager and Dondolo 2023). These challenges contribute to pressure, anxiety, and stress so that art students are not actively engaged in their course and are not able to develop and apply

their practical art skills in class or online. Moreover, De Jager and Maserumule (2021) point out that addressing the learning needs of art students, specifically those student teachers who are vulnerable to exclusion and marginalisation, requires inclusive and innovative approaches when teaching practical skills online to provide them with opportunities to develop effective pedagogical skills. If not addressed, these challenges will affect not only the practical application of art skills but could also affect the development of scarce skills such as creativity and problem-solving needed by all citizens for informed decision-making (Yu and Li 2022).

Teaching practice is essential in the teacher training programmes of all institutions where theory is implemented in practice but varies in different countries according to their national education policy. For example, in Nigeria teaching practice is a compulsory course for all final-year student teachers. It runs for one semester from the beginning to the end of the first semester. During this semester, the programme focuses on lesson planning, technology application, and micro-teaching with the assistance of a mentor. Similar to Nigeria, China insists on compulsory teaching practice for final-year student teachers only, consisting of a three-month period. According to Zhao and Zhang (2017), the internship at schools in China is too late in a student-teachers' development of teaching pedagogies and leaves qualified teachers with little experience in what all the different components of teaching practice entail. In the participating South African institution of this study, student teachers are exposed to classroom experiences from the first to the final year of their teacher training programme, which includes six weeks of teaching practice at a functional school annually for four years.

The COVID-19 pandemic showed that adaptations to a remote/multimodal teaching strategy exhibited unexpected challenges and concerns among art student teachers of various countries, as student teachers were not able to visit schools in person and they were not all trained in how to teach and illustrate practical skills effectively online (Abbasi, Ghamoushi, and Zenouzagh 2023; Alenezi et al. 2022). Additionally, Teng and Wu (2021) have stressed the importance of an increased demand for training in developing students' digital literacy and adapting their teaching practice methods to a digital environment. Online video recordings and induction programmes on how to teach effectively could guide arts student teachers in how to confidently apply various strategies in their online lessons and assist them in developing their own innovative ideas when creating arts activities online (Zenouzagh, 2022). Furthermore, Chen, Lai

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and Yu (2021) highlight the value of virtual museums that can be utilised as sources for online class activities in art. In addition, Lee (2017) suggests that the repetition of the same online classes could also provide learners with the opportunity to find answers to their questions as not all students can attend the online classes at given times of the day due to a lack of internet connectivity. Apart from teaching online practical art skills and the rapid technological changes that arts teachers have to adapt to, art education is essential for developing a more improved society.

Theoretical framework

Eisner's Curriculum Theory (2004) emphasises that art education teachers should focus on developing skills that will enable students to make judgements, think critically, and make informed decisions in collaboration with other citizens. Thus, teaching practice enables art student teachers to adapt, practice, and apply various strategies that could enable their learners to engage in inquiring processes where they can arrange, categorise, find patterns, compare, critically review, interpret information, and formulate a solution to a problem. In agreement with Eisner's vision, John Dewey emphasises the ability to make informed decisions, effective education, acquiring significant knowledge and developing skills as 'a way to live one's life' that contribute to a better society (Boydston 1971). Dewey's moral life focus characterises democracy in art education where the artist makes art available to everyone and models transformative processes from personal and community experiences that will add value and dignity to citizens' moral conscience. It is crucial for student teachers to be able to create diverse online activities where learners can develop an appreciation and respect for various cultures and use natural resources from their social environment that could contribute to more democratic reflections and expressions in art. Dewey explicitly emphasises the responsibility of people to adapt to change and engage and take responsibility for all actions (Boydston 1971). Thus, art education should inspire students to adapt to changes and demonstrate in a creative way how society can be improved democratically and responsibly. In line with Dewey's theory, student teachers should use art education responsibly to apply innovative strategies according to the challenges that their arts learners might encounter in the social context they are living in. This is essential to remove the fear of online teaching from their learners, and to reflect on their own practices and empower their learners to make decisions

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and create innovative practical activities. Related to Dewey's theory, the COVID-19 pandemic demands adaptations in art education and digital literacy, and the provision of equal opportunities for all. Additionally, Eisner (2004) emphasises the importance of art education and the development of practical art skills.

Marshall, Shannon and Love (2020) caution that, during a pandemic, online learning challenges could contribute to the development of social and emotional difficulties and impede effective art education due to a lack of digital skills and technology devices and resources. Therefore, when creating online practical activities, art student teachers should keep in mind Dewey's vision of the importance of developing and illustrating art skills in accordance with the social context of different cultures to support art learners who are encountering social and emotional difficulties.

Method

The study employed a descriptive research design where data was collected employing a literature review and an online questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions to establish student teachers' perceptions of the teaching and learning of practical art skills during pandemics. The literature study was conducted to gather previous research findings on challenges experienced with practical art education online. The online, open-ended questions were used to collect qualitative data about student teachers' perceptions and in-depth experiences within diverse social contexts where they conducted their practical teaching.

Qualitative data was collected, using the perspectives of art student teachers in Further Education and Training (FET), grades 10-12, regarding the development and application of online art practical skills during a pandemic. Art student teachers (n=147) from a university in Pretoria completing their postgraduate certificate in FET education were sampled to complete the online questionnaire. The university is situated in a township of South Africa and most participants were from poor and disadvantaged socioeconomic contexts.

The participating student teachers specialised in different art forms, including dance, music, and visual arts, and conducted six weeks of practical teaching during their first and second years of the two-year course. Both first- and second-year art student teachers were sampled to find an empirical view of what they valued as important in FET art education for adapting to online art practices as future art

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teachers. This was because student teachers are a new generation and will be teaching their future students practical art skills during pandemics and in a democratic manner.

Inspired by the theories of Eisner (2004) and Talebi (2015), two open-ended questions were constructed to establish the challenges student teachers experience in teaching practical art skills online during teaching practice, and how they could adapt and create alternative strategies to address these challenges. With these theories as the foundation, the researcher found the questionnaire to be valid and reliable for analysing the qualitative data of this study. The aim of the open-ended questions was to establish student teachers' challenges in online teaching in the development of practical skills in art education by reflecting on their teaching practice experiences and finding innovative ideas to engage their learners in practical online art activities.

Before the research commenced, ethical clearance and permission to conduct the study in the relevant university were acquired from the research committees. The researcher subscribed to ethical principles—namely autonomy, justice, fidelity, openness, and respect for participants' rights and dignity—and adopted important ethical guidelines as set by the institution. The objectives of the study were communicated to all participants and consent forms were e-mailed. The research purpose and potential effects on the participants were explained to them. The participants were informed about what the research was all about and how it would affect them, and it was stipulated that participation was voluntary. In the process of data collection and analysis, I ensured that participants' data remained confidential and anonymous in all respects.

The questionnaire, consisting of open-ended questions, was created on the "Survey Monkey" online application and the link was posted on an online teaching and learning platform where participants could complete the questionnaire anonymously in their own time.

Results

Responses to the research questions were analysed and grouped according to frequently recurring themes. The main issues emanating from the identified themes were compared with previous research studies to identify challenges when teaching online and find innovative practices for how art practical skills could be developed in a multimodal way during a pandemic in South African secondary schools.

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Analysis of participants' responses to open-ended questions

Most participants contributed similar responses that were grouped together, using common themes. Edited transcriptions are provided below for the sake of clarity. Themes were extracted from responses to both questions.

All participants (n=147) responded to question one and shared their challenges with online teaching of practical arts skills. Disappointingly, only sixty participants answered the second question and shared innovative ideas for addressing the challenges. The possible reason that not all of them completed question two could be that they did not have innovative ideas that they could share.

Question 1: What are the challenges experienced in teaching practical online art skills during teaching practice?

Lack of in-person teaching

Participants shared how they missed in-person teaching, as indicated in the following direct quotes of some participants:

"Teaching practice is about practical work, it [is] all about gaining experience on what need to be done in class with Art learners during and after class; interaction between teacher and learner should take place, communication is important, hence effective teaching practice cannot be done in an absence of learners because we need learners during TPs and they also need us in order to interact and be able to be determined to achieve our best."

"I was requested to video record myself while teaching an Art lesson, this was impossible as lecturers could not evaluate my real teaching skills and class management."

"It is impossible to conduct effective teaching practice while there are no Art learners and it's impossible to evaluate me as a student teacher as we did not conduct lessons in presence of the learners during the COVID-19 pandemic."

Most of the participants (n=95) felt that they could not develop their own strategies to develop learners' practical art skills in the absence of an interactive class and without the evaluation of their lecturers. Supporting the above, Ahmad et al. (2021) emphasise

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that the art curriculum is an interactive programme where learners engage in practical activities to develop diverse art skills and simultaneously develop an appreciation for different artworks and cultures. Student teachers also experienced this when using video recordings of their teaching skills, a lack of in-person teaching, and evaluation by lecturers did not contribute to effective teaching. In this regard, Yu and Li (2022) as well as Perignat and Katz-Buonincontro (2019) emphasise the importance of the evaluation of students in establishing the development of their practical skills that could improve their independent, creative and imaginative thinking skills.

Lack of internet connection and data

The challenge of a lack of data and internet connection was indicated by most of the students (n=129), for instance:

> *"Online learning and lessons can be used as one method to continue with the learning and teaching of Art, but most learners will be left out from teaching and learning activities as they may not have access to the internet."*
> *"Many of the learners are from disadvantaged communities and cannot afford data."*

Alarmingly, only eighteen (18) students did not indicate sufficient data and online access as a challenge, which indicates that not all student teachers were always able to teach online.

Participants agreed that most of their learners were from disadvantaged communities and were unable to participate in online teaching and learning due to a lack of internet connections. Zhong (2020) points out that those learners living in informal settlements and rural areas are not able to purchase expensive technology devices and internet data and cannot attend online classes and engage in practical online activities.

Lack of student-teacher support from mentors and lecturers

Most participants (n=78) emphasised their need for extra online support from mentors or lecturers during and after online classes, for example:

> *"I experienced when completing the lesson plan assignment, the lecturer who was supposed to guide and mentor us, referred us back to a teaching lesson video which costs a lot of data to download. For effective Art teaching and learning to take place, we need a team of lecturers/mentors available to answer our questions during working hours. I really believe that if we have more active mentors/lecturers available online to assist us, even on a chat basis, then we will be able to teach practical art activities effectively."*

Izadinia (2016) emphasises the importance of school mentors that are able to guide student teachers effectively during their teaching practice. In accordance with Dewey's theory, sufficient support during online teaching is essential to include all students from diverse social contexts and support those who are possibly experiencing emotional challenges (Boydston, 1971).

Less practical teaching experience hours

Student teachers mostly responded that they needed more practical teaching experience to develop not only art skills, but also how to apply these skills in real classroom situations, for example:

> *"Practical teaching was reduced, which hampered my skill development and experience of real-life classes."*

This is evident in a study by Jansen van Vuuren (2018), who indicates that arts teachers are not always effectively trained and develop limited art skills. In addition, De Jager and Maserumule (2021) highlight the importance of opportunities to develop effective pedagogical skills to teach effectively. Thus, the reduction of teaching practice time could contribute to art student teachers graduating without developing effective teaching skills.

Stress and anxiety

As expected, most participants' answers reflected concerns such as a lack of data or no access to the internet which contributed to stress and anxiety.

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> *"During the COVID-19 pandemic I found teaching practice extremely stressful, and this caused that I developed anxiety attacks as I did not have sufficient data, access to the internet and did not always know if I was on the right track in compiling my lessons. It was also very difficult to talk with my friends about the fear I am experiencing."*

Moreover, Zhong (2020) is concerned that because they are merely discussing the skills online and not always putting art skills into practice in activities, art students can develop fear and anxiety as they are unable to apply online practical art skills in their lessons. McCarthy (2020) adds that students are social beings and if they are unable to interact with their peers online, this could contribute to other psychological effects such as depression, which could hamper student teachers' progress in their Arts courses.

The results showed that the most common challenges experienced by student teachers were that they required more teaching practice time in class, and extra support from competent mentors and lecturers during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that many of them had insufficient data and internet access which contributed to the development of anxiety and stress.

Some felt that teaching practice was too short, and lecturers' assessments were not sufficient to guide them in conducting effective classroom practices. These reflections align with Aglazor (2017) who emphasises the importance of teaching practice where student teachers can develop pedagogical and practical skills in a classroom. During this period, guidance and interaction between student teachers and knowledgeable lecturers and school mentors are essential in engaging student teachers in hands-on experiences. However, Jansen van Vuuren (2018) cautions that mentors are often not effectively trained in how to teach the different art forms and will therefore not be able to support and guide student teachers effectively during teaching practice.

To find innovative solutions to conduct online practical art lessons during teaching practice, the following question was posed to all participants:

> *Question 2: What innovative online practices can be applied to address the challenges and develop practical art skills?*

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Online and offline learning

From the responses it seems as if innovative practices assisted to overcome challenges. Participants also suggested some others:

> *"… Assign activities and communicate with learners during teaching practice in using WhatsApp groups."*
> *"We can also make short, structured videos, demonstrating practical Art skills such as dance moves, drawing, painting and designing and then post on WhatsApp groups, because some of the learners do have data and it is a cheaper option."*
> *"Create offline demonstration videos which learners can view in their spare time."*
> *"Teach learners about new technologies that they could use to complete their art activities. Use, for example, Google Classroom to encourage student participation."*
> *"Decide on one online platform for lessons, either Zoom or Teams (avoid confusion) to teach learners practical skills and repeat these lessons as often as possible to ensure all are able to attend, even if they attend in groups on one device."*

Most of the participants requested communication using WhatsApp groups. Asmara (2020) points out that WhatsApp communication is valuable in the sense that students can contact their lecturers or peers at any time of the day to clarify unclear concepts. It also makes it easier for lecturers to communicate with their students.

Participants felt that only one platform for lesson activities should be selected to avoid confusing the learners and repeat the lessons as often as required by learners. In agreement with Lee (2017), online learning provides learners with the opportunity to find answers to their questions by engaging in lectures that are consistently repeated to ensure all students stay on track. Not all students are able to attend the online classes at given times due to a lack of data.

Peer group learning

Students as social human beings are influenced by their interactions with other student teachers who can assist them in finding the best ideas for how to teach practical art online (Aliyu et al., 2019). Some suggestions were made by participants:

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"… create groups for student teachers where they can share ideas on how to conduct practical art lessons".
"… provide channels on television where learners could view and observe extra practical classes in Art activities".

Practical lessons demonstrated by various arts teachers on television programmes, could assist students in adapting their teaching strategies to the social context in which they are teaching.

Extend submission dates of practical art activities, repeat lessons and keep activities simple

Participants required short and simple activities on which they could work at their own pace with the resources at hand.

"Learners should be able to complete assignments at their own pace and according to availability of resources. They need extra time to submit their Art practical work."
"Lesson activities should be short and simple for all to understand as they do not have a teacher in class to support them always during a pandemic. Learners should be given enough time to complete the task."
"I'll keep on repeating the same topic before starting another one as many do not attend classes during the pandemic."

They also indicated that they needed extra time to submit their class activities and needed lessons to be repeated online consistently as they were not always able to log into the digital platform when lessons were presented.

Practical art activities

Some suggestions were made with regard to practical art activities:

"… Virtual Art museums could be used to teach the history and practical lessons to learners. Send the website URL to all learners."
"Allow learners to select their own activities from diverse but simple activities

created on a choice board."

Students could visit online virtual museums to gain a better understanding of diverse cultures' art histories and lesson strategies that they employ in artworks, dances, and drama classes. Virtual museums can also be utilised as art sources in assignments (Chen et al. 2021).

Choice boards are valuable for assisting students to select their own online teaching and learning strategies for diverse lesson activities.

Connect nature to practical art activities

The importance of connecting nature to practical art activities was mentioned by some participants

"… learners can select items from their natural surroundings to create a colour wheel. They can search their homes to find the different colours and paste it on the wheel."

"… learners can search for natural materials and compose a picture using different shapes."

"They can make their own paint with coffee, tea, spices, fruits, mud and others and paint a theme."

"… they can use different cardboards, magazines and papers they find in their homes to create a collage."

"… let them make wire sculptures, from old wire hangers."

"… let them create their own traditional dances and songs and video record their moves step by step for the educator to assess."

"… I will take pictures of the Art form I am teaching, by sending pictures step by step so that they can easily download it from the WhatsApp group."

Integrating art activities in nature not only contributes to an awareness of the complexity of nature but also contributes to the development of creative and problem-solving skills that a sustainable society requires (Curtis et al. 2012; Daigle and Vasseur 2019). Thus, learners not only develop art skills but also problem-solving and critical thinking skills.

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Disappointingly, not all participants completed question two. Nevertheless, interesting ideas were accumulated from the 60 responses. The innovative ideas suggested by participants to enable learners to complete practical art activities included the creation of WhatsApp groups to post videos and demonstrations and to communicate, creating diverse art activities, short offline video recordings, television programmes where practical art demonstrations or lessons could be viewed, visiting virtual museums and completing art activities using natural resources from students' surroundings. According to Zenouzagh (2022), online video recordings during teaching practice and online induction video programmes that demonstrate effective teaching strategies could provide students with more clarity and confidence when applying their own innovative strategies in art classes.

Most of the innovative ideas adhered to Dewey's philosophy that learners should be empowered from their own experiences in the social context they grow up in to adapt and create from their natural environment (Boydston 1971). Thus, using natural elements from their surroundings and environment could assist them in developing the required art skills in a disadvantaged community.

Discussion

COVID-19 was experienced as a stressful learning and adjustment curve for arts student teachers, lecturers, and educational institutions in teaching practical arts skills (Marshall *et al.*, 2020). What contributed to the ill-prepared teaching and learning of practical art skills during teaching practice was the poor socioeconomic status of most of the arts student teachers and their learners who lived in rural areas with little or no access to internet or data (Zhong 2020) and lack of sufficient training in the application of digital skills (Teng & Wu 2021). Moreover, student teachers who were able to create online classes felt their learners could not always attend their lessons where practical art skills were taught. This runs counter to the theory of Eisner (2004), who emphasises the importance of the development of practical arts skills.

Student teachers need to develop effective pedagogical skills when teaching art and require more teaching experience in face-to-face classes to gain experience in the management of art classes. Zhao and Zhang (2017) concur that sufficient teaching practice experience is important for student teachers to gain sufficient practical experiences where theory can be implemented in practice.

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Moreover, participants felt that they were not properly assessed, guided, and supported by knowledgeable lecturers and mentors. Their experiences are in alignment with Aglazor (2017), who accentuates the creation of opportunities for active participation of student teachers in face-to-face classes where they are assisted by mentors and lecturers to develop effective pedagogical practices. However, Jansen van Vuuren (2018) warns that it is often found that art educators themselves have limited art skills and are not always able to teach their student teachers the art skills they require.

Participants indicated that most of their learners were from disadvantaged communities and were unable to attend their online classes during teaching practice due to a lack of sufficient data and internet connection. Zhong (2020) warns that the socioeconomic status of art students affects their ability to attend online classes due to a lack of access to technology and data. This contributed to student teachers' experiences of stress and anxiety as they could not always connect to the internet and did not always know whether they were on the right track when conducting their practical lessons. McCarthy (2020) mentions that a lack of social interaction with their peers could cause psychological agony in students.

The value of the development of practical art skills cannot be ignored as art skills not only enable students to think independently (Yu and Li 2022), but encourage creative thinking and problem-solving (Perignat and Katz-Buonincontro 2019). In finding solutions to address the challenges and to create innovative online practical lessons where the art learners can engage actively with student teachers and develop practical art skills the following ideas were suggested by participants: (1) create WhatsApp groups where student teachers could communicate with their learners and post short video clips or demonstrate specific art skills; (2) create offline videos so that learners can view the art lessons on their own time and at their own pace without having to use data; (3) teach learners how to use technology to complete art activities (Google Classroom); (4) to avoid confusion, decide on using either Zoom or Teams as a teaching and learning platform when teaching arts; (5) encourage peer-group learning where student teachers can assist each other; (6) refer to a channel on television where practical art skills are demonstrated; (7) keep practical activities short and simple and extend the submission dates of these activities; (8) repeat the same topic as often as required by learners as not all learners attend all the online classes; (9) send a website URL for learners to use virtual art museums that could

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support art culture and history; (10) use choice boards where learners can select from diverse activities; (11) connect practical art activities to nature and the surroundings of learners—learners could select coloured leaves, flowers, magazines, cloths to build a colour wheel and natural materials to compose different shapes; when developing painting skills they can use teabags, coffee, spices, fruits, and mud as colours to paint a picture; a variety of cardboard holders, magazines, and items can be used to create a collage; create a wire sculpture from old wire hangers found in their homes; (12) compose traditional songs and dances and video record these activities for lecturers to assess. The innovative ideas concur with Dewey's theory (Boydston, 1971) that student teachers should be able to adapt and create diverse online activities using their own cultural activities and resources from their natural environment, so that art learners can respect and engage in the art skills of diverse cultures.

Recommendations

Deriving from the research findings in supporting the development of art student teachers' pedagogical skills during teaching practice, the following is suggested:

- Mentors and lecturers should be well-trained, knowledgeable, and available to assist student teachers in the development of their art pedagogical skills and to guide them during teaching practice.
- Student-teachers require learning more about how to create diverse online practical art activities to accommodate the diverse learning styles and social contexts of their learners.
- Student teachers should be able to design activities where learners can use their natural surroundings as resources to complete a practical art activity.

The limitation of the study was that the focus is on a single previously disadvantaged institution and does not include the entire country's post-graduate student teachers' experiences in conducting online classes in practical art during the pandemic. In addition, the fact that not all participants were able to complete the second question where they had to share innovative ideas on how to develop practical art skills online, showed a possible lack of future art teachers' creative thinking skills.

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Conclusion

The importance of art education in a democratic society and the challenges teachers experience in teaching practical art skills online require more teaching practice time in class, extra support from mentors and lecturers during a pandemic, sufficient training in digital skills, and the provision of technology resources. Most student teachers had insufficient data and internet access, which contributed to the development of anxiety and stress. Practical teaching experience is limited to twelve weeks over a two-year period and could be insufficient to effectively develop postgraduate FET student teachers specialising in a specific art skill. Often lecturers themselves are not effectively trained in the various forms of art to guide and assist students in developing specific art skills effectively. During a pandemic, online practical classes can be effectively conducted if short, diverse activities are created where learners can use their surroundings to collect shapes, colours, and objects to complete a visual art activity and their culture to compose traditional songs and dances which they can video record in short clips and submit for assessment. The time limit to submit practical activities should be extended to allow sufficient time to complete practical art activities.

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Academics in International Branch Campuses' Perceptions of Professional Development and Distance Education in Enhancing their Capacity

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Abstract

The number of international branch campuses (IBCs), denoting universities offering academic programmes and granting credentials from foreign educational institutions, has been on the rise. Consequently, there is an increasing demand to undertake comprehensive investigations into these entities, as the contextual factors surrounding IBCs wield considerable influence over programme efficacy and overall institutional well-being. This paper adopts an analytical approach to scrutinise the perspectives of forty academic professionals engaged in IBCs concerning the concept of continuous professional development (CPD) and the role of technology in facilitating it for educators working within the host country. This analysis is grounded in the foundational assumptions that educators in transnational educational settings must cultivate proficiency across a broader spectrum of professional domains compared to their peers teaching within domestic universities (Tran et al. 2021). The findings of this study reveal a consensus on the paramount significance of professional development among the surveyed individuals. However, despite the acknowledged importance of technological proficiency, nearly half of the participants still manifest a preference for traditional face-to-face learning modalities for their CPD, with the selection contingent upon the subject matter under consideration.

Keywords: teacher education, distance learning, transnational education, technology, professional development, university lecturers, international branch campuses

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Introduction

In contemporary higher education, a growing number of students have access to higher education both in local and international contexts (Altbach et al. 2009). There is also a growing demand for transnational education (TNE), which involves the provision of education to students across distinct geographic regions via international branch campuses (Garrett et al. 2016; Cross-Border Education Research Team 2017; Osmani 2021) in many parts of the world. At the same time, with the pace at which the world is evolving, providing authentic and effective programme that can fulfil the demands of the students is essential.

In tandem with these developments, the need for academics who can effectively fulfil their roles has become paramount and underscores the importance of academics continually updating their knowledge and honing their skills (Becker et al. 2017; Lopukhova and Makeeva 2019). Consequently, numerous universities are proactively facilitating opportunities for educators and encouraging them to engage in diverse training sessions while acknowledging their participation through academic credits. Concurrently, the advent of technology has substantially expanded learning possibilities for educators, thus amplifying the imperative for perpetual improvement and self-improvement. This sustained commitment to professional development significantly enhances the efficacy of academics and their influence on student learning outcomes (Shaha Glassett and Copas 2015 cited in Osmani 2021). These educators must remain committed to enhancing their expertise to remain at the forefront of their profession.

Academics working in transnational contexts are no exception. In addition to the roles of academics in local universities, they must remain attuned to the global educational landscape and must not lose sight of the cultures and expectations of both their home and host institutions (Compton and Alsford 2022). While navigating and enhancing their understanding of transnational settings, they must concurrently maintain up-to-date skills and knowledge to meet the evolving demands of students and their universities. However, this multifaceted endeavour can be notably challenging, underscoring the indispensable role of ongoing and contextually relevant professional development, which supports and guides academics as they contemplate their mission as educators of local students within the international setting of international branch campuses.

Various avenues, such as face-to-face training sessions, online training sessions conducted by both local and international experts, webinars, professional communities,

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and technological innovations present limitless opportunities for these academics. However, a salient query arises: do academics embrace online courses as a sufficient means of professional development, and are they willing to utilise them?

In the current study, we aim to elucidate the perspectives of our colleagues in Uzbekistan regarding their professional development and their perceptions of technology and online learning as channels for advancement. Acquiring insights into their views is imperative, particularly in light of the paradigm-shifting impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which accentuated the necessity for educators to continuously update their skills and knowledge and highlighted the new-found significance of technology in teaching.

Following an explanation of the transnational higher education concept, we delve into the roles of lecturers within these institutions and outline the kinds of training and professional development that educators in transnational universities may necessitate. Analysing this specific context affords valuable insights that can inform strategic actions within Uzbekistan and offer potential guidance for other higher education institutions with similar contexts and experiences. Madsen and Adriansen (2021), based on their experience supervising PhD students in Africa, suggest that assuming that teaching and research approaches are the same in all universities is questionable and each context deserves to be studied individually. However, still valuable information can be elicited from the experience of others.

Transnational education

Transnational education, also referred to as cross-border education, predominantly transpires through international branch campuses (IBCs). An IBC is 'an entity that is owned, at least in part, by a foreign higher education provider; operated in the name of the foreign education provider; engages in at least some face-to-face teaching; and provides an entire academic programme, that leads to a credential awarded by the foreign education provider' (Lane 2011: p. 5). According to Francois (2016), transnational education aims at providing globally oriented programmes that are adapted to local needs.

The establishment and proliferation of transnational universities can be attributed to several factors. These include the reputation of the home-country institution, the perceived quality of education offered, the amenities provided, and the unique

experiential facets that differentiate these institutions from local universities in students' home countries (Wilkins, Balakrishnan and Huisman 2012; Turdiyeva 2018; Celeti, Nurmanova and Gavalyan, 2020; Bezborodova and Radjabzade 2022). Furthermore, many students anticipate enhanced employment prospects on the global stage upon graduation from such institutions (Yao and Tuliao 2019). Transnational education also represents a more cost-effective alternative to studying abroad, potentially stemming the 'brain drain' by retaining graduates within their home countries. As Yang and Welsch (2010: p. 3) aptly assert, 'the global mobility of highly skilled individuals has long been a matter of national concern', and transnational education can play a pivotal role in mitigating this concern.

Both local and international academics may find themselves teaching in a language that is not their native tongue, necessitating an effective command of that language in many cases for instructors and students alike. Since the two primary countries facilitating transnational education are the United States of America and the United Kingdom, with English being the predominant medium of instruction in the majority of IBCs (Garret et al. 2016), in many cases, English serves as the medium of instruction.

According to the Cross-Border Education Research Team (C-BERT) (2023), which aggregates data on global universities, there are currently 333 international branch campuses spanning 83 host countries. However, it is pertinent to note that 58 such campuses have closed since their inception. An in-depth examination of these closures is essential to unearth the reasons behind these failures and to derive valuable insights for the enhancement of the quality of transnational education. Competent academics arguably constitute one of the central factors contributing to this endeavour (Kahu 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the vital nature of transnational education, particularly in the face of travel restrictions that impede the mobility of students seeking education abroad. It has further underscored the value of online learning. Before the pandemic, several countries did not accord online higher education the recognition it deserved in terms of degree accreditation. However, the pandemic has precipitated a paradigm shift, prompting institutions to acknowledge and embrace online learning modalities. In a post, Lane et al. (2021) elucidate this transition, stating '[T]the combination of acceptance and easing of restrictions on online learning positions IBCs to introduce new modalities, creating more flexibility in the teaching and learning environment'. Consequently, educators must continually

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update their knowledge concerning the effective integration of technology into their teaching methodologies, all while adhering to the standards and criteria prescribed by transnational education providers. Long-distance training and collaborative exchanges with peers can significantly expedite this process.

The value of professional development in higher education and IBCs

Quality education hinges on a harmonious convergence of effective curricula, cutting-edge facilities, highly proficient educators, and diligent students. In line with contemporary educational trends such as learner-centeredness, technology integration, and the cultivation of teacher and learner autonomy, these facets constitute pivotal drivers of pedagogical efficacy (Rashid and Yadav 2020). Moreover, within IBCs, an acute awareness of the values and demands of both the home and host countries is imperative. Expatriate academics may find their teaching style and cultural norms divergent from those of their students (Healey 2015). It can be assumed that similar concerns may apply to locally-hired staff. Certain institutional values may diverge from those of the home universities, potentially posing challenges for both educators and students. Notably, concepts such as critical thinking, learner autonomy, inclusivity, gender roles, and social justice emerge as critical issues (De Wit 2019). Educators stand as key stakeholders responsible for guiding students through these challenges without inadvertently perpetuating 'educational imperialism' (Pyvis 2011: p. 733). Consequently, the provision of high-quality pre-service and in-service training emerges as a critical prerequisite to equip educators with the requisite skills and perspectives to navigate these complexities. It may be noteworthy to pinpoint that most of the literature available focuses on the needs and demands of expat lecturers and educators moving to the host country as they have so far outnumbered the local lecturers in many countries (Wilkins and Neri 2019), while in many contexts, including Uzbekistan, the number of local educators employed at these universities is high and on the rise and the need to study their needs is pivotal.

Technology and Professional Development

Foremost among technology's contributions to professional development are the

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abundant and versatile array of opportunities it offers, primarily through online education. Online learning opportunities consist of both synchronous and asynchronous modalities, can be short to extensive, and are accessible at virtually any time, thereby facilitating asynchronous self-paced learning. They further foster global interactions, fostering cross-border exchanges of ideas and experiences (Dhawan 2020). When effectively harnessed, online platforms afford avenues for knowledge augmentation, practical skill refinement, and reflective practice. However, as Rienties et al. (2013: p. 2) elucidate, 'providing effective training for academics... is not straightforward'. This complexity highlights the need for comprehensive investigations into the impact of professional development on educator performance, particularly within the context of online professional development, a facet that remains insufficiently explored in various educational settings. Massive open online courses (MOOCs), online professional learning communities (PLCs), and communities of practice (CoPs) are among the avenues for formal and informal professional development. In addition, a study conducted by Annabi et al. (2009) suggests that developing materials for MOOCs is also considered an effective means to career progression. As such, it can be surmised that self-driven educators tend to reap greater benefits from MOOCs and technology-assisted online professional development initiatives (Luhanga et al. 2021; Vangrieken et al. 2017).

The study

As mentioned earlier, our study endeavours to augment the perceptions of academics working in transnational universities of the significance and impact of professional development on their performance. We seek to collect their views on the specific domains they deem essential for enhancing their pedagogical efficacy, technology, and online learning as vehicles for professional growth. Our motivation for this research stems from our roles as lecturers at a transnational university in Uzbekistan. Given the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent requirements for educators to continuously update their competencies, along with the newfound centrality of technology in education, gathering insights from these perspectives is paramount.

Our research adopts an exploratory stance, with its focal point resting on academics operating within transnational universities in Uzbekistan. We draw extensively from

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relevant literature and incorporate data collected from a survey administered across seven transnational universities situated in Tashkent. Following an explanation of the transnational higher education framework, we proceed to elucidate the roles of lecturers within these institutions and delineate the varieties of training and professional development modalities that educators in transnational universities may necessitate. Our emphasis is directed toward unpacking the perceptions of academics operating within these institutions concerning the knowledge and skills they believe they need to develop particularly in TNEs and then the extent to which technology and online learning have contributed to their training and development. Accordingly, the research questions addressed in our study are:

1. What are the perceptions of educators in a TNE of the kind of knowledge, skills, and values they need to improve to be effective academics?
2. What are the perceptions of the educators in a TNE of the value of technology and online learning for their own professional development?

Context of the study

Uzbekistan, a Central Asian country with a population exceeding 35 million and a steadily growing economy, falls within the lower-middle-income category. Uzbek, the official language, coexists with a multiplicity of languages spoken by the general public, including Russian, Tajik, and Karakalpak. Of the 113 higher education institutions in Uzbekistan, 21 were listed as international branch campuses in 2021 (Bezborodova and Radjabzade 2022: p. 76), and this number continues to rise. The majority of these transnational universities deliver their courses in English, with Russian, Korean, and Turkish also serving as languages of instruction across Uzbekistan.

Theoretical framework

Transactional distance theory (TDT), introduced by Moore (1991), underpins the current study. Initially, Moore emphasises the significance of pedagogical and psychological proximity between educators and learners, addressing the challenges posed by geographical separation. Timely dialogue emerged as a cornerstone of TDT. Moreover, the flexibility of educational programmes, according to TDT, determines

course functionality. Greater flexibility enhances individualised attention and context relevance. Learner autonomy constitutes the final pillar, affording learners the freedom to set objectives and choose methods. In the context of transnational universities, marked by geographical separation, efficient communication between host and home campuses is essential and undeniable. The theory carries implications for both the students and the training and professional development of academics and staff in host countries as well. Pre-COVID-19, academics and sometimes students from both home and host countries physically traversed campuses, engaging in first-hand observation and face-to-face dialogue. However, the pandemic prompted increased reliance on technology for inter-campus communication, a shift that could yield both positive and negative outcomes (Carstens et al. 2021). This study examines host country academics' perceptions of the need and quality of online sessions with their home country counterparts, grounded in TDT.

Simultaneously, given the 'borderlessness' (Jean-Francois 2016: p viii) and cultural diversity inherent in transnational education markets, a culturally responsive pedagogy, advocated by Ladson-Billings (1994), assumes importance in the current study. This pedagogical approach highlights the recognition of cultural diversity in education. Given the collaborative nature of transnational education between two universities situated in distinct cultural contexts, host country educators must navigate cultural nuances. This study explores educators' awareness of cultural impact, their approaches to facilitating and guiding student learning, and the knowledge and skills they deem necessary for effectiveness (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2000).

Research design and instrument

This study employs a self-administered, web-based survey to gather data. The survey took between 15 to 20 minutes to complete, and the respondents were promised anonymity. The questionnaire, facilitated through Google Forms, addresses several aspects: opinions on continuous professional development for higher education academics in general, CPD in transnational contexts in particular, and CPD through online learning support. Both open-ended and closed questions were used to elicit the information. In some of the closed questions seeking the opinion of the respondents, a Likert scale was used. The questions were based on the literature, detailed discussions among the writers of this article who have the experience of lecturing at a transnational

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university in Uzbekistan, and finally the agenda and organisational framework of two of the transnational universities in Uzbekistan. Before the main survey, a pilot survey was conducted among colleagues, followed by discussions for questionnaire refinement. Survey invitations were disseminated through social media channels and e-mail. Descriptive statistics assisted in analysing the responses.

Demographic information

The study employs stratified random sampling to recruit 40 lecturers teaching across seven transnational universities in Tashkent. Of these respondents, 32 identified as females and eight as males. English primarily served as the language of instruction in five of the seven universities. All except two respondents had received some form of training for professional development in the past three years. Teaching experience among respondents ranged from one year to more than 11 years.

Research findings

The first question sought the reasons that the academics had for CPD. As Table 1 demonstrates, the respondents offered a variety of reasons. Seventy-seven point five per cent of respondents cited the desire to stay updated, while 52.5 per cent sought to improve the quality of their work. Examining what they meant by the 'quality of their work', 67.5 per cent pointed to fulfilling professional needs, such as publishing and research, while 50 per cent focused on personal development, and 37.5 per cent highlighted student needs (see Table 2). While 95 per cent of respondents had received some online training, 55 per cent preferred face-to-face training over online sessions, with preferences influenced by the subject matter and need for interaction. Out of 40 respondents, 45 per cent had sought training beyond their university, even if not obligatory.

Regarding their perception of CPD, 23 respondents strongly agreed on its necessity for university academics, and 97.5 per cent believed CPD could help academics become better educators.

However, only six strongly agreed that membership in online social platforms like LinkedIn was effective.

There was a shift in the level of digital literacy among respondents during the

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COVID-19 pandemic, with more becoming advanced users, particularly in technology platforms related to teaching.

Notably, 50 per cent of respondents considered themselves fully autonomous in their work, while 47.5 per cent deemed themselves somewhat independent.

Table 1: General reasons for attending CPD courses

The main reasons for attending the professional training classes	Percentage of the responses
To keep updated	77.5%
To improve the quality of my work	52.5%
To plan my future career	32.5%
To fulfil the demand of the university I work at	22.%

Total number of respondents=40

Table 2: Specific reasons for attending CPD sessions

Reasons	Percentage
Fulfilling professional needs (e.g. need to publish)	67.5%
Fulfilling personal needs (e.g. time management)	50%
Fulfilling the needs of my students	37.5%

Total number of respondents=40

Ninety-five per cent of the respondents have received at least a part of their training online; however, 55 per cent believe that in general, they would prefer face-to-face training to online (see Chart 1).

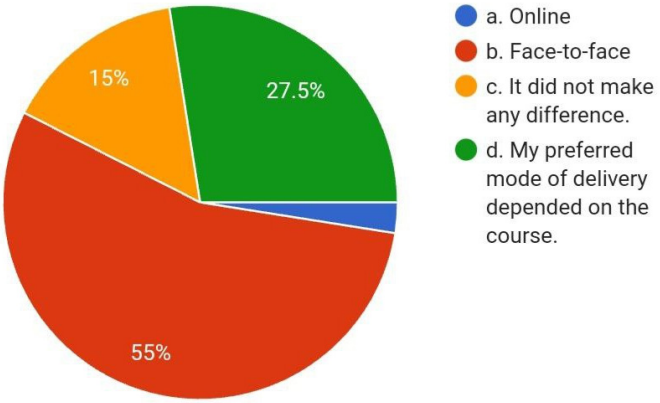

Chart 1: Mode of delivery of CPD sessions

The open-ended questions invited the respondents to elaborate on their answers. For the preferred mode of training, the most frequent main argument was that their preference depended on the subject of learning. For example, one respondent mentioned that:

> *'If the topic was on using apps to improve my teaching then online mode is perfect. But if the topic was more about other topics excluding technology integration then face-to-face is needed.'*

Another response concerning the same argument was:

> *'If the topic is related to my research and I need my questions to be answered or contribute to the discussion then I would opt for face-to-face but if the topic is not very crucial and I need to get some chunks of ideas or information then I would choose online mode.'*

The next criterion for preferring online to face-to-face learning and vice versa that the respondents provided was the type of activity that they needed to do. For example, one of the respondents believed:

> *'But if the PD course (asynchronous or MOOC/without a significantly important qualification) required a lot of reading, comprehension assessments and no synchronous training, I would prefer online mode. It is great to do the course from the comfort of home?'*

One of the supporters of face-to-face learning stated that:

> *'Face-to-face sessions can encourage learning, stimulate interest, and lively communication which can save time. There are No technical pauses, lack of personalization or limited interaction we usually have during online learning/ teaching.'*

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Another participant reported that:

> *'Face-to-face trainings trigger[s] you to study and feel more accountable - psychological push.'*

Finally, there were a few who were comfortable with both. One mentioned: *'In my opinion, the quality of the lesson depends on the knowledge of the trainer not the mode of delivery.'*

Phrases such as *'more interactive'*, *'talking to colleagues and the trainer'*, *'more fun to meet people'*, *'being part of the community'*, and *'personal touch'* were used in favour of face-to-face learning. However, those in favour of online learning mentioned *'self-paced'*, *'flexible schedule'*, *'learning to use the technology'*, and *'more comfortable'*.

Out of 40 respondents, 45 per cent have looked beyond the university for training and the same number of people would choose from the courses offered by the university even if they are not obliged to take part.

The majority believe that CPD is necessary for university academics. Twenty-three strongly agreed and also agreed that having follow-up discussions with colleagues regarding the CPD sessions is helpful. Ninety-seven point five per cent of the respondents firmly or partly believe that CPD can assist academics in becoming better educators. Despite the value they assign to professional development, only six strongly agree that membership in online social platforms such as LinkedIn is effective.

When asked to rate their digital literacy pre-, during, and post-COVID, the difference was noticeable (see Chart 2).

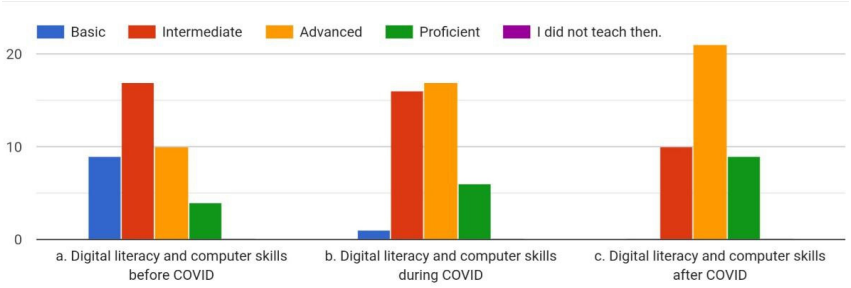

Chart 2: Level of digital literacy

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One participant on their answer and stated:

> *'Zoom or BBB were challenging tools before the pandemic but during the pandemic I got training and used them a lot. So now I feel I have become an advanced user of both.'*

Another respondent mentioned:

> *'I think my skills improved significantly because I learned how to use several platforms for various purposes - for synchronous lessons, assessment and monitoring students' progress (like LMS), recording video lessons and storing them in some platforms for asynchronous courses. I mainly started to look for them during Covid and still do.'*

However, other respondents believed that after COVID-19 they did not see the need to develop their computer skills.

> *'… before COVID I didn't have to learn technology since it was not necessary. During COVID we had to learn a lot, but it was overwhelming, therefore, many teachers [trainers] had to choose the most primitive ways of online teaching (Zoom). In my case, the university gave me carte blanche to develop a more or less sustainable system. That time I and other teachers have learned a lot.'*
>
> *'After COVID, the necessity of online teaching disappeared, therefore, I stopped growing in this area.'*

We sought their opinion about the similarities and differences between transnational universities and local universities to find out what areas of training they thought they needed. Thirty-two respondents believe that their university uses a more learner-centred approach, 29 think that their curricula are different, 19 believe that the relationship between students and lecturers is less formal, 26 think that the pressure to conduct research is more, 31 believe that technology is used more frequently, the majority think that the approaches to assessment are different, and 26 argue that the content of what they teach is different. Twenty-five believe that they are more autonomous compared to local university colleagues and 10 are not sure about it.

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Twenty-three are not sure whether more attention is paid to social justice issues and only nine think that this area is paid attention to. For culture and inclusivity too, the number of undecided people is significantly more than those who think that their universities pay attention to them (see Table 3).

Table 3: The rate of the respondents' agreement with the degree of similarity between typical local universities in Uzbekistan and the transnational university they work at

Items	Yes	No	Unsure
a. At my university, we have a more learner-centred approach to learning and teaching.	32	2	6
b. The curriculum at my university is very different.	29	2	9
c. In my university, more attention is paid to social justice issues.	9	8	23
d. In my university, inclusivity is paid more attention to.	17	5	18
e. Culture is among the issues paid more attention to at my university.	11	2	27
f. In my university, the relationship between students and academics is less formal.	19	12	9
g. The demand to publish articles is more at my university.	22	9	9
h. The demand for research is greater at my university.	26	8	6
i. Technology is more frequently used in my university.	31	4	5
j. The content of what we teach is usually different.	27	8	5
k. The approaches to testing and assessment are different.	31	4	5
l. In my university, we are more autonomous.	25	5	10

Total number of respondents=40

Only one person has received training for all of the above areas, and eight mention that they have not been trained for any of the above topics. Fifty-five per cent are willing to take online training for these topics.

In Table 4, each row represents the survey responses to various aspects of CPD, while the columns display the mean and standard deviation for each of the items. These metrics offer insights into how respondents perceive CPD opportunities.

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Table 4: Means and standard deviation for some of the survey responses

Items	Mean	SD
I think I can receive effective online training for topics such as cultural awareness and social justice.	1.55	0.67
I attend PD sessions because I feel appreciated.	3.02	1.14
Professional Development is an important part of my job at my university.	1.67	0.76
Being a member of professional social platforms such as LinkedIn helps in my PD.	2.8	1.32

Total number of respondents=40

Interestingly, 50 per cent of the respondents consider themselves fully autonomous and 47.5 per cent believe that they are autonomous to some extent. Almost all except for one believed that autonomy is very or partly important for university academics (see Chart 3).

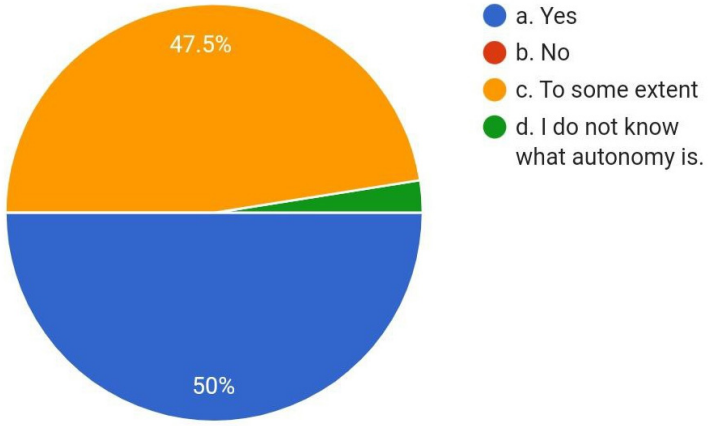

Chart 3: Academics' perception of their autonomy

Table 5 below displays the correlations (Pearson's r) between two survey items. A correlation of 0.18 between teachers perceiving autonomy and their willingness to join professional online platforms suggests a small, positive relationship.

Table 5: Correlations between feeling autonomous and CPD

	Beliefs about CPD	
	Being a member of professional social platforms such as LinkedIn helps in my CPD.	I attend CPD sessions because I feel appreciated.
Feeling autonomous	0.18	0.04

Total number of respondents=40

Some of the definitions of autonomy that they have provided are as follows:

- *Being able to create your own syllabus, teaching calendar, lesson plans for the subject you teach. You have independence over the content of the subject and how to teach it.*
- *Ability to make my own decisions about what to do.*
- *Making decisions by myself for all aspects of life.*
- *Being able to decide what you need for professional development.*
- *It is when I can set my research goal or conduct research individually with no supervision reading and analysing different sources to get the ideas for research.*
- *While I need mentoring and training (and it is valuable and indispensable), I also have some foundation I rely on - knowledge, competence and qualification. Based on my background and knowledge of what I know/don't know, can/cannot do, I autonomously (mostly) choose what I need a training with and/or apply in my teaching. But my autonomy is monitored by university curriculum.*
- *Ability to set the goals and needs and seek for possibilities to find resources to fulfill them being able to identify my professional development needs and plan PD activities, fined relevant course and attend them.*
- *I believe that an autonomous teacher is the one who decides what to teach and how to teach, in my case, I think that I am autonomous to some extent because the programme is provided by our head university, and, also, assessment is done by them only (they design tests, assessments and they check students' papers). However, I decide on subsequence of topics (I have to follow the programme, but I can decide on the order of topics), hours to spent on a particular topic, activities in the class and etc.*

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Seventy per cent believe that technology has helped them in their teaching. At the same time, 77 per cent agree that technology has helped them learn more, 65 per cent have received some training on online platforms such as Moodle, 85 per cent sometimes use YouTube videos for their professional development, and 64 per cent appreciate the fact the online trainers from different parts of the world can provide pieces of training for them.

Being independent, free to make choices, doing individual work, and deciding for oneself were the most frequent phrases used to define autonomy.

In the end, the respondents were asked to share their overall opinion about the topic and some elaborated on their thoughts. Here are some of the responses:

> *Technology plays an important role in today's life, thus professional development should take it into account and be conducted in a blended way. Follow-ups make CPD more effective, so the administration should focus on that. Certainly time is the big barrier, but if CPD is organized in a way which makes a difference in the life of the teachers, no one would skip it. Certificates, letters of Appreciation, or promotion play a big role in that. But intrinsic motivation should be there as well. Being a young mother, I could keep up with my cpd during my maternity leave with the help of technology. I could attend webinars, use apps and see its benefits for teaching and courses helped a lot.*

> *Digital literacy is essential for modern educators. To be able to use technology so that it benefits teachers, we need good trainers, those who would prepare for training sessions properly and would not rush through materials. Teachers, whose use of technology in their younger years was very limited, should not be looked down upon if they are a little slow in acquiring necessary skills.*

> *The quality of professional development is not guaranteed by the use of technology, it is facilitated by technology in some cases.*

> *PD is super important. However, trainers sometimes do not know exactly what you need. So self study could be more effective in some cases.*
>
> *Time constraints; too much pressure and the poor quality of some training sessions were mentioned more than once as deterrents to pursuing PD.*

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Discussion

The present study delved into the assessment of continuous professional development perceptions among academics engaged in transnational universities within Uzbekistan. It sought to identify the types of CPD that participants perceived as necessary in a transnational context and their willingness to engage in online CPD. Notably, a significant outcome of this investigation is the widespread acknowledgement of the value of CPD among respondents. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the preferred training focus, for the majority, continues to revolve around the utilisation of technology within their pedagogy. Notably absent from their priorities are subjects such as culture, social justice, and the development of contextually relevant curricula and materials. This suggests a potential lack of reflection or an inclination to follow the guidance of their home institutions or trust the leadership of the host institution, thus potentially neglecting critical facets of transnational education, which emphasise collaboration and the nature of the relationship between host and home academics (Merola et al. 2023).

Furthermore, the findings suggest a relative lack of volunteer participation and vocalisation among the majority of respondents, a pattern that extends to the underutilisation of online informal professional networks, such as LinkedIn. Only a minority of respondents take these platforms seriously, possibly indicating a preference for institutional directives or more formalised training sessions. This lack of interest warrants further investigation, as it could be attributed to factors such as the absence of accreditation, trust issues, or the perception that the offerings provided by their institutions or alternative sources are sufficient. Clearly, this disinterest demands deeper scrutiny.

Despite the assumption that teacher autonomy might influence participation in informal training and online learning, the data indicate that almost all respondents consider themselves autonomous or semi-autonomous, regardless of their varying interpretations of autonomy. This, too, requires more in-depth exploration, which falls beyond the scope of this study.

The correlation between the perceived autonomy and some CPD issues indicates that the academics who perceive themselves as more autonomous in their roles may be slightly more inclined to engage with professional online platforms. This could imply that teachers who feel autonomous are also proactive in seeking out additional avenues,

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such as online platforms, for professional development and networking. However, given the modest correlation, it is essential to consider other factors that could influence teachers' decisions to join these platforms, as autonomy is just one aspect of their overall motivation and engagement with online professional communities. Due to the relatively small number of respondents, the possible differences between genders and years of experience were not studied.

Most of the existing literature on educators in transnational universities focuses on the needs of expats who relocate to teach in the host country. It may be plausible to assume that the reason for not having robust studies on the local staff teaching in TNEs is that initially, many countries that adopted TNE did not have local human resources. They had to rely on the support of foreign staff and needed to support them. Modise and Avoseh (2016: p.16), for example, discuss this case in Botswana and how their 'initial involvement in TNE was mainly one way'. However, currently, the number of qualified local academics is on the rise. Uzbekistan is a good example of such a country. Therefore, the need to study their needs and demands should also be prioritised.

To sum up, considerable efforts are necessary to stimulate meaningful professional development and networking within the academic community. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly shifted the focus towards enhancing technological pedagogical skills, but other essential subjects appear to be relatively neglected. The pandemic's impact on technology adoption has been substantial, yet in our study the preference for face-to-face CPD sessions remains predominant for specific topics due to their perceived interactivity and productivity. There is no denying that each context has its own needs and studying them individually can contribute immensely to the education of their students. Jean Francois (2016: p.6) argues that 'transnational education involves glocally informed pedagogy, which accounts for learning style preferences and cultural dimensions, glocal awareness, glocal knowledge, and glocal competence'. To meet these conditions and prepare the grounds in TNEs, educating their educators is of prime importance. They, too, can be the exporters of knowledge and education.

Conclusion

The contemporary educational landscape underscores the vital importance of

continuous professional development for educators to augment their knowledge, skills, and values. This necessity stems from the rapid pace of technological evolution, globalisation, and the abundant information resources made accessible by technology, which, in turn, have reshaped our daily lives. These changes have also fostered a reimagining of societal norms and expectations, particularly in terms of the pursuit of knowledge. Notably, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has underscored the significance of educators equipping themselves with the requisite knowledge and abilities to navigate the unknown and better prepare their students. Moreover, it has become evident that online teaching and learning are indispensable, as evidenced by their pivotal role during pandemic-induced lockdowns, thereby necessitating educators to adapt and enhance their online teaching and student support competencies.

This study has centred on transnational education within Uzbekistan, examining the perceptions of academics in international branch campuses regarding their professional development needs and experiences, with a specific focus on distance and online CPD opportunities. Our findings illuminate a widespread recognition of the value of CPD among respondents. However, the prevailing emphasis leans towards honing technology utilisation within their educational practice, with other dimensions of transnational education often relegated to the background. Concurrently, a significant proportion of participants continue to express a preference for face-to-face CPD sessions, citing their interactive nature. In summation, the insights gleaned from this small-scale inquiry emphasise the pressing need for further exploration into the exigencies and aspirations of educators engaged in transnational settings, both regionally and globally.

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Comparative and International Education as a Way to Strengthen Internationalisation in Teacher Education Programmes at Universities in Africa

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Abstract

One lacuna in teacher education programmes at universities in Africa is a lack of internationalisation. This is a position paper, using the method of comparative and international education. The paper argues that imbuing teacher education programmes at universities in Africa with comparative and international education is an obvious way to counter such detrimental trends of parochialism, universities appointing their alumni, an inward orientation and to effect internationalisation in such programmes. This is particularly significant at this point, when the constraints brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have rendered many of the other conventional means of internationalising higher education difficult or impossible. The article concludes comparative ad international education courses in teacher education programmes fully serve a host of purposes. These include description of education systems, understanding of education systems, improvement of education practice (both at policy and at classroom level), applying the comparative method to investigate or illuminate education issues, and furthering of the philanthropic ideal. Furthermore, such courses appear to be ideally suited to bring about much-needed internationalisation in such programmes. Being part of an internationalisation drive, it may have several additional benefits related to the countering of Northern hegemony in education, and shaping the course of the decolonisation of education drive.

Keywords: Comparative and International Education, COVID-19 pandemic, internationalisation, internationalisation at home, teacher education.

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Introduction

Parochialism—universities appointing their own alumni and an inward orientation—are anathema to the ethos of a university, for very sound reasons. Yet these are dangers to which teacher education programmes at universities easily fall prey, especially at universities in the Global South. This is a position paper, using the comparative and international education method to argue that imbuing teacher education programmes at universities in Africa with comparative and international education is an obvious way to counter such detrimental trends and bring about internationalisation.

The paper commences with an exploration of the international dimension of higher education or the internationalisation of higher education: definition, history, and rationale. The matter of how challenging internationalisation is for universities in Africa is discussed next. The focus is then narrowed to internationalisation in teacher education programmes at universities in Africa. Comparative and international education is then suggested as a field of scholarship that may potentially promote internationalisation in teacher education at universities in Africa.

Research method

This is a position paper. A position paper describes and defends a position concerning an issue, presenting an argument based on evidence and authoritative sources for that position (Xavier University Library, 2014). It has been written from the vantage point of comparative and international education, the field of scholarship in which the author of the article is active. The conceptual and methodological apparatus of comparative and international education is utilised in building the argument proposing the internationalisation of teacher education programmes at universities in Africa by drawing on comparative and international education.

Comparative and international education can be described briefly as a study of education systems in their societal-contextual embeddedness and a comparison of education systems in their societal-contextual interrelationships (Wolhuter et al. 2018). Using international-comparative perspectives is a widely accepted and used method to explore and interrogate societal issues (Pawson 2006), including education issues (Crossley, 2014). Comparative and international education has a dual nature, denoting at the same time an object of study (education systems in the contextual embeddedness) and entailing a method of study (the comparative method) (see

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Wolhuter 2022).

The literature on higher education institutions and systems in Africa and teacher education programmes at such higher education institutions were interrogated and interpreted in the societal context of such systems, forming the basis for the argument of the paper. Literature was identified and selected by using the database ERIC and the keywords "universities", "Africa", "Comparative and International Education", "internationalisation of higher education", and "teacher education".

Internationalisation of universities

In higher education scholarship it has become conventional to take the definition of University of Toronto scholar Jane Knight as a working definition of internationalisation of higher education. Knight (2003: 2) defines the internationalisation of higher education as "integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education".

Internationalisation as a distinguishing, essential feature of a university has a long history and can be detected at the very first universities. Duggan (1916: 100) enumerates five features of the medieval university in Europe (which can be taken as the prototype of the modern university) that distinguished the medieval university from the other two types of education institutions (cathedral schools and monastic schools) of the time. One of these features is that, compared to the cathedral and monastic schools, which drew their students from the immediate geographic area where such an institution was located, the university attracted students from all over Europe.

In parts of the world beyond Europe (even in North America), the university, at least in its present form, commenced as an importation (usually closely entwined with the colonisation project), not autochthonously (see Wittrock 2019). Hence the first batch of professoriates were always ex-patriates (in practice in the new world, much more so in the Global South, this dominance of ex-patriate faculty continued long after the founding of the universities in those regions). Curricula, too, had a strong element of being imported. Hence there was, from the beginning, a strong element of internationalisation, even though an objectionable kind thereof.

One of the key features of education development in the past 35 years (commencing around 1990), even of world history, has been the global higher

education revolution (Altbach, Reisberg, and Rumbley 2010). This revolution has been driven by a collection of interrelated societal drivers. These drivers are demographic shifts, increasing affluence, the rise of knowledge economies, the neoliberal economic revolution, the information and communication technology revolution, the rise of multicultural societies, democratisation, individualisation, and the rise of the Creed of Human Rights (Wolhuter and Jacobs, 2021). The signature feature of this global higher education revolution has been massification. Globally higher education enrolments expanded from 88.6 million in 1990 to 236.1 million in 2020 (UNESCO 2023) (latest available figure at time of writing). Even after factoring in global population growth, the enrolment explosion of higher education remains spectacular. On a global aggregate level, gross higher education enrolment ratios rose from 14% in 1990, to 40% in 2020 (World Bank, 2023a) (latest available figure at the time of writing), growing during this time at a rate of roughly one per cent per year.

While massification is the most salient feature of the global higher education revolution, this revolution has a host of other features too. One of these other key features of the global higher education revolution has been accelerated internationalisation (see Welch 1997). Globally, the number of international higher education students has grown from 2.1 million in 1990 to 6.4 million in 2020 (latest available figures at the time of writing) (UNESCO 2023). This growth was facilitated by the global economic upswing of the time and a more relaxed international political situation.

Rationales for the internationalisation of universities are manifold, more so in the contemporary world. Knight's (1996) taxonomy of rationales includes political, economic, academic, and cultural rationales for the internationalisation of higher education. Welch, Yang, and Wolhuter (2004) add scientific and scholarly rationales to these categories. Lastly, considerations of education, that is, the significance of internationalisation in the education supplied to students, should also be mentioned. What is relevant here is the aims of Intercultural Education, Global Education, and Education for Global Citizenship and the ideals of education found, for example, in the United Nations and its charter (Jones 1999: 147). The internationalisation of higher education is instrumental to the cultivation of an internationalist value system, achieving the goal of an international moral and political order predicated on respect for difference, social justice, and mutual respect within and between nations as a key element, as is the rejection by the weak of domination by the powerful (e.g., of politically and economically strong nations over those economically less developed,

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or of the majority of a nation's populace by powerful politico-economic elites, or of a single ethnic or religious power block) (Welch 2002: 434; see also Bu 2020). Here it is a matter of education as *Bildung* (using Alexander von Humboldt's term) where the student's learning is integrated into his or her own life and understanding of him- or herself (Sjöström and Eilks 2020).

Internationalisation in teacher education programmes

It should be borne in mind that teacher education programmes (and faculty at faculties or schools of education) are beset by a series of concern-raising problems. Very salient and high on the list is the lack—real or perceived (by such faculty themselves and/or faculty of other fields)—of academic depth and rigour in such programmes, an allegation first raised to prominence in the scholarly literature by the article of David Larrabee (1998) a quarter of a century ago, and since then repeated regularly (see Steyn, Van der Walt, and Wolhuter 2016). Other problematic issues (which may not be unrelated to the problem of a lack of intellectual depth and rigour) include high student-staff ratios and that—real or alleged—faculties or schools of education attract less academically endowed students than other faculties or schools (Steyn *et al.* 2016). However, a challenge that is relevant to the topic of this article is a relatively inward orientation or focus and a lack of internationalisation in teacher education programmes (e.g., see Tran and Pasura 2021). As a measure of the lower level of internationalisation of education schools or faculties, Leutwyler, Wolhuter and Popov (2017: 71) mention that whereas 8.3% of the teacher education students in Switzerland hold a foreign passport, the foreigners in traditional universities amount to 27.2%. This problem may be related to the fact that teacher education programmes were mostly set up to educate a national teacher corps and historically national education systems were created as part of a national project of nation building (e.g., see Porto 2016: 3), although, admittedly, distance education units (such as at the University of South Africa or the North-West University in South Africa), may have a more cosmopolitan student body than contact education institutions. The North-West University, for example, has six centres in Namibia, the bulk of students being education students, albeit in postgraduate programmes. There is also the challenge of managing teaching practice facing faculties or schools of education. A wholesome development in many parts of the world has been recent attempts to reform teacher education to equip

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teachers with a global mindset to function as global citizens (e.g., this was one of the motivations for the major reforms in Belgian teacher education programmes recently; see Kowalczuk-Walêdziak et al. 2019: 51).

Internationalisation of universities in Africa

When considering the internationalisation of universities in Africa, a few factors of the contextual ecology (that is the societal context as well as the higher education system context) of these universities should be kept in mind. Whereas the University of Karaouine, founded in 759 at Fez, Morocco, lays claim to being the oldest university in the world, on the other hand, the continent, especially sub-Saharan Africa, was very sparsely supplied with universities until very recently. Most of the states got their first university around independence in 1960, wich remained the situation until 1990, after which the number of universities mushroomed. Still, most universities in Africa are young and do not have a long historical legacy of contact with universities abroad.

Demographically, Africa is a young continent with a growing population. With universities sparsely supplied on the one hand, and, on the other hand a growing segment of young people wanting a place at university, internationalisation has been shunted to the back of the priority queue.

Economically, the countries in Africa are not strong. In terms of the World Bank classification, not a single country in Africa is a high-income country and only five are upper-middle-income countries. The economic predicament of the continent is clear from the fact that 21 countries are lower-middle-income countries and 24 are low-income countries (World Bank, 2023b). This means there is little funding for the higher education sector and whatever little funding is available should be allocated to staff salaries, infrastructure, and priorities such as opening more space to increase access to higher education, rather than channelling funds into the expensive and relatively luxury activity of internationalisation.

The economic predicament of the nations of Africa results in some challenges within the higher education system, which are also detrimental to pursuing a forceful internationalisation project. The infrastructure on campuses (including libraries, laboratories, and information technology) often leaves much to be desired (see Kigotho 2021), rendering these institutions not very attractive for international students and faculty.

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Then there is widespread discomfort (among faculty, students, and the public at large) about the universities in Africa still being tied in the grip of the colonial past, and the feeling is that the decolonisation of these universities should take priority (see Jansen and Walters 2022). This imperative for decolonisation distracts attention away from internationalisation. Not only does the call for decolonisation, *prima facie*, constitute a call to turn away from a part of the foreign world and turn to domestic turf, but, furthermore, scholars critically analysing the internationalisation of universities in the developing world often argue that internationalisation is a force promoting the persistent colonialisation or the re-colonisation of higher education (e.g., see Guo, Guo, and Liu 2022; Xu 2022). In fact, there is a whole school of scholars critical of internationalisation, led by Sharon Stein (e.g., see Stein, 2019), on this issue.

Because of all the above enumerated societal-contextual and higher education sector factors, internationalisation has thus far not enjoyed priority under national or institutional governance. Jooste and Hagenemeier (2022) draw attention to the fact that the South African government (it should be remembered that South Africa has the oldest and most expanded higher education system in sub-Saharan Africa) only in 2020, 26 years after the dawn of the new socio-political dispensation and restructuring of higher education, published the first policy framework for the internationalisation of higher education. Crăciun (2018) found that in 2018, only 22 countries in the world (11%) had a relevant official internationalisation strategy; none of these was located on the African continent.

All of the above-enumerated contextual impediments, and being relegated to low on the priority list, make it difficult for universities in Africa to internationalise. To the extent that there is evidence of internationalisation, such internationalisation has a very preposterous structure and has had unintended and undesired consequences. This statement can be illustrated by taking the ratio of inbound and outbound international students as an example. A glaring lopsidedness is evident from the incidence of international students and the ratio between inbound and outbound international students. These figures for Africa compared to global patterns are presented in Table 1.

The first observation from Table 1 is the lack of balance between the inbound and outbound student mobility rates. Rather than a global mix and global interaction and network formation, it seems that the international student mobility flows to and from Africa are a unidirectional movement. Students from Africa head to universities of the Global North. There is not a reverse flow of students from outside Africa to Africa, nor

Table 1: Internationational Student Mobility Rates for Africa Compared to Global Patterns		
Region	**Inbound International Student Mobility Rate (%)**	**Outbound International Student Mobility Rate (%)**
Sub-Saharan Africa	1.49	2.56
Saharan Africa	1.26	4.71
World Aggregate	2.69	2.69
Europe and North-America	7.54	*2.39*
Oceania	24.58	*1.5*

Source: UNESCO, 2023, data for 2020

is there a strong vector of intra-African international student mobility.

This one-way flow should be seen in part of its bigger context, namely to feed the brain drain plaguing the continent—a massive problem in Africa (see Macaulay 2022). It is estimated that Africa loses US$4 billion annually by outsourcing jobs in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics—the so-called STEM fields—to foreign professionals (Guilbert 2016). At least a significant part of this could have been obviated by retaining its best-qualified human resources in these fields. Africa accounts for only one per cent of global scientific research (Guilbert 2016). This is detrimental to the continent in many aspects (including feeding the vicious circle of rendering the universities on the continent not very attractive for international researchers, faculty, and students).

Another aspect of distorted internationalisation patterns in Africa occurs in countries that can be regarded as second-order nodes or regional nodes in a very unbalanced global higher education system (first-order nodes then being the higher education systems of the Global North). Certainly, in Africa, the most salient second-order node is that of South Africa. Statistics from the South African Ministry of Higher Education and Training, indicate there were 69 381 foreign students studying at all South African universities in 2016 (including distance education units and universities) (Republic of South Africa 2019:31). This constitutes seven per cent of the student corps at South African universities, but 66.1% of these students are from

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other Southern African countries. Turning to outbound international students, these total only 9 130 (2018 figure, UNESCO 2023). This is far out of balance with the number of inbound international students, and while hard statistics are not readily available, it can safely be hypothesised that these are largely students at universities in the Global North, and such outbound mobility is a stepping stone in such students joining the brain drain from South Africa to the Global North. Thus, the inbound and outbound student mobility rates in South Africa do not testify to the acquisition of a global mix in promoting academic excellence and competitiveness—the stated and expected goals of internationalisation—and it is a pattern repeated in all regionally strong higher education systems in Africa.

Internationalisation marred by the COVID-19 pandemic

Finally, it should be mentioned that the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic was for obvious reasons a setback in the internationalisation drives of universities, with the severe limitations that the pandemic placed on international travel. Jacobs and Mitchell (2021) did a content analysis of 116 articles published on the topic of internationalisaton in the 2020 editions of *University World News Global*. The largest single set of articles, 45.7%, discussed internationalisation in view of the COVID-19 pandemic, the most salient narrative being the adverse, drastic effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education internationalisation, specifically regarding student mobility, enrolment, the loss of tuition revenue, and the declining financial stability of higher education institutions. Studying abroad has become less attractive, more difficult, and even impossible due to the pandemic. This adverse effect of the pandemic on the internationalisation of universities has also been pointed out by other extensive research, some of these even concluding that the setback the pandemic has caused for the internationalisation of higher education will be permanent (e.g., see Liu and Gao 2022).

However, the pandemic was met as not only a challenge but also a catalyst for opportunity. Opportunities to bring about internationalisation employing technology were seized and the concept of "internationalisation at home" became a common call (see Kor et al. 2022). Internationalisation at home has been defined as "the purposeful integration of international and intercultural dimensions into the formal and informal curriculum for all students within domestic learning environments" (Beelen and Jones,

as cited by Jones and Reiffenrath 2018). Jacobs and Mitchell (2021: 24) comment that the internationalisation measures of the higher education sector, precipitated by the pandemic, are of interest to scholars of comparative and international education. However, deliberating on the prospects of employing the field of comparative and international education as a means to strengthen internationalisation has not yet taken place. Doing so, especially concerning teacher education programmes at universities in Africa, is the purpose of this article.

Comparative and international education

Conceptual clarification

Among scholars in the field, much less so among the larger field of scholars of education, there is no unanimity as to how to define comparative and international education or to answer the question: "What is comparative and international education?" (see Wolhuter 2008: 323). In a survey of the range of definitions for comparative and international education in circulation, Maria Manzon (2011: 199-205) classifies these definitions into three categories. First, some definitions are based on holding forth a unique object of study as a distinguishing and defining feature of comparative and international education. Second, there are definitions pivoting on the (comparative) methodology being the defining feature. Third, there are definitions taking the role(s), purpose(s), or use(s) of the field as their distinguishing feature(s). The author of this paper has been working with, and published, the following as a working definition of comparative and international education (e.g., see Wolhuter 2023): comparative and international education is defined by studying education from a three-in-one perspective. These three perspectives are as follows:

- An education system perspective: The single case or instance of one educator to one educand is not of interest to comparative and international education, but rather the study of entire education systems (such as the French or the Nigerian education system).
- A contextual perspective: Education systems are shaped by their societal contexts and also serve their societies. Comparative and international education studies education systems within their contextual interrelationships, entailing both societal contexts as shaping factors of education systems, and the societal outcomes of education.

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- The comparative perspective: Comparative education scholars compare education systems and education system-societal context interrelationships in different nations or locations. In this way, both general statements and more nuanced or refined statements regarding education system-societal context interrelationships can be distilled.

In recent times, there has been a call among scholars in the field that the name 'comparative education', should be superseded by 'comparative and international education" (see Wolhuter 2016). The term 'international education', as used here, is defined by David Phillips and Michelle Schweisfurth (2014: 60) as a scholarship studying education from a global or an international perspective. With the scholarly field of comparative education evolving into comparative and international education, the belief is that single- or limited-area studies and comparisons should eventually feed into the all-embracing, global study of the international education project (Wolhuter, 2016).

Purposes or significance of comparative and international education

One of the reasons for the lack of a short and simple, unanimously accepted definition of the field of comparative and international education is the nature of the field as a continuously expanding field—a feature of the field expressed in the collected volume on the state of the field *Comparative and International Education: Survey of an Infinite Field* (Wolhuter and Wiseman eds. 2019). In its historical evolution, the field has been ever-testing new frontiers and has found new themes, aims, methods, and paradigms. The same applies to the purposes or roles of significance of the field. While the use or aims of the field are generally enumerated in textbooks as the description of education systems, understanding of education systems, improvement of education practice (both at policy and at classroom level), applying the comparative method to investigate or illuminate education issues, and furthering of the philanthropic ideal, research has shown that in every new context the field finds a new role or purpose (Wolhuter 2012). One role or potential significance thus far overlooked and not noted in the literature, including in the most recently published collected volume on the intersection between comparative and international education and teacher education (Salajan, Jules, and Wolhuter eds. 2023), is that of comparative and

international education enhancing the internationalisation effort of universities. The last section of this article will now argue the potential of the field to fulfil this role, especially at the current time in teacher education programmes at universities in Africa. Similarly, in the last volume on comparative perspectives on teacher education and global citizenship education, the edited volume of Schugurensky and Wolhuter (2020), the role of comparative and international education in contributing to the global citizenship education of teachers was not covered.

Comparative and international education to provide momentum to internationalisation at universities in Africa: exploration, assessment, recommendations

Returning to Jane Knight's definition of internationalisation proffered earlier, it seems that 'to imbue teacher education programmes at universities with integrating an international, intercultural, or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of postsecondary education' so sorely needed but so difficult at this point in time, the best available means, in view of the scope and purposes of the field as explained above, would be to imbue such programmes with comparative and international education modules. Such modules can counter the parochial nature of teacher education programmes, a detrimental feature that plagues teacher education programmes worldwide, including at universities in Africa.

Furthermore, comparative and international education modules can also contribute to the Global Citizenship Education of student teachers. Given the rise of the call for Global Citizenship Education, also in teacher education programmes (see Schugurensky & Wolhuter 2020), that is also an issue designers of teacher education programmes at universities in Africa should urgently attend to.

The call for the decolonisation of education has, in the recent past, generated much enthusiasm and heated discussion among students and progressive scholars (along the entire line of scholarly fields, especially the social sciences), as well as among the progressive sector of the public discourse on education (e.g., see Jansen and Walters 2022). Scholars have pointed out that the decolonisation of education is an imperative facing not only the nations of the Global South but is as much a challenge facing education in the Global North (although in the Global North the challenge may not be identical to that of the Global South) (e.g., see Sappleton and Adams 2022).

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Yet the concept of the decolonisation of education is difficult, with a wide range of meanings attached to it. In a thorough survey of these different meanings, Jansen (2017: 156-173) distinguishes between eight different meanings attached to the term. If the conceptual clarification of 'decolonisation' is difficult, much more so is the practical realisation thereof. In this regard, nations can learn much from one another's experience, as explained by Sappleton and Adams (2022). The field of scholarship then best suited to equip student teachers for their task to tease out the meaning and the realisation of decolonisation, a task they seem to have to face in their studies as well as in their forthcoming career, is the field of comparative and international education.

When the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on education have subsided and when the force of globalisation resumes, the internationalisation of education (at all levels) will also be a phenomenon that student teachers will encounter in their studies and in their ensuing careers. Given the kind of internationalisation resulting from asymmetrical power relations, and its less-than-just-beneficial or even adverse effect on the Global South, the field of comparative and international education and, in particular, the thoughts and literature of critical scholars of internationalisation, such as Sharon Stein (e.g., see Stein 2019) are best suited to alert students to the adversarial effects of these kinds of internationalisations (a topic high on the research agenda and being thoroughly studied by scholars of comparative and international education (e.g., see Asare, Mitchell, and Rose 2022) and how to counter them.

Conclusion

Internationalisation is a quintessential feature of a university, and for sound reasons, although the kind of internationalisation taking place at many universities in the world, notably in the Global South, can be criticised as not serving the best interest of the university and its clientele. Teacher education programmes have tended to be parochial, not echoing the strong internationalisation detectable in other sectors of the higher education sector. This neglect of internationalisation in teacher education programmes has been more pronounced in Africa and, in recent times, as one of the results of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has induced the higher education sector globally to devise 'internationalisation at home' as one way to improvise, that is, to internationalise despite the constraints brought about by the pandemic. Thus far, the possibility of using comparative and international education to bring

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about internationalisation at home in initial teacher education programmes as well as in continuous professional development programmes for teachers, has escaped the attention of scholars, teacher educators, and those drawing up teacher education programmes. This article investigated that possibility and found it to be promising. Besides the host of purposes of courses in comparative and international education, usually enumerated as a description of education systems, understanding of education systems, improvement of education practice (both at policy and at classroom level), applying the comparative method to investigate or illuminate education issues, and furthering of the philanthropic ideal—all relevant, if not sorely needed in initial teacher education programmes—and continuous development programmes for teachers at universities in Africa, such courses appear to be ideally suited to bring about much-needed internationalisation in such programmes. Being part of an internationalisation drive, it may have a number of additional benefits related to the countering of Northern hegemony in education and to shaping the course of the decolonisation of education exercise. This is, as has been explained at the beginning, a position paper. There is a need, as follow-up research, for empirical research in cases where comparative education modules do form part of teacher education programmes at universities in Africa, both as object lessons for other universities to learn how to employ comparative education in internationalisation exercises and also to improve such modules as vehicles of the internationalisation of universities.

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