



Virtual platforms

ensure continuity in teaching, learning, assessment, supervision and mentoring

Not so long ago, the country's universities were severely disrupted by the Fees Must Fall protests orchestrated by students themselves. Countrywide, the Fees Must Fall campaigns halted teaching in universities, promoting university administrators and some commentators to ponder the use of e-learning programmes. Thankfully, the South African government intervened decisively and reached an agreement with the leaders of various students' organisations. The Fees Must Fall protests eventually ended after months of disruption and chaos at universities.

The COVID-19 pandemic broke out at a time when various organisations in the private, government and non-governmental sectors were already gearing themselves for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Across the world, countries and organisations were not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led to the shutdown of schools and universities, among other institutions. In South Africa, where the government has taken measures that are necessary to safeguard our lives from the deadly pandemic, academic programmes across the country's universities have again ground to a halt and many university students are sitting idle at home. It is during these challenging times of the COVID-19 pandemic that we imagine what e-learning and virtual learning could have been like if online electronic platforms were widely utilised at South African institutions of higher learning.

Of course, there are institutions of higher learning that have incorporated e-learning in their academic programmes. However, such electronic platforms of teaching have not been widely introduced and implemented in South African universities and technical and vocational educational and training (TVET) colleges. The utilisation of e-learning in the South African education sector is still challenged with inequalities relating to access to data. Many households from which many black students come cannot afford to purchase data. This is one of the barriers to e-learning/virtual learning in South Africa. It seems to be the privilege of those who can afford it. A number of academic institutions have also not adequately invested in information technology (IT) infrastructure necessary to implement e-learning programmes on a large scale.

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The good news is that there are various electronic platforms and devices that could be used to mitigate against the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on South African universities. A number of organisations have swiftly switched to these virtual platforms as part of their responses to the lockdown measures taken to contain the spread of the virus. Based on my experience, I would like to propose the use of the following virtual platforms and devices as part of the humanities and social sciences (HSS) response during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. These virtual platforms and devices could be used for teaching, learning, assessment, supervision and mentoring, from the comfort and safety of our homes.

Suggested Responses

Aspire

This is an online learning management system (LMS) I got to know and make use of at the University of Pretoria's Gordon Institute of Business Science (GIBS). This online platform virtually connects students with lecturers, supervisors, programme managers and fellow students, allowing the academic learning process to proceed. Aspire is based on an online software application called Blackboard which is used across multiple learning institutions globally to deliver learning, content and results to users while facilitating engagement and collaboration with other students within courses and institutions.

From my experience, Aspire works very well as a virtual teaching, learning, assessment and supervision platform. It enables lecturers to post the course/teaching material online, including course outline, assignment questions, test/exam questions, lecture slides and readings. Students are provided with usernames and passwords to access the lecture, teaching and supervision material. Students are also able to submit their assignments and research projects through Aspire, while programme managers and administrators of academic programmes can post important communication relating to teaching, learning, assessment, supervision and mentoring. Students' marks are also posted to Aspire, which protects the privacy of the students' marks.

Aspire also works well for students doing research



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projects at master's and doctoral levels as it provides virtual interaction between the student, supervisor and programme administrators. This LMS will work well for the HSS especially when it comes to the submission of progress reports from students and their supervisors. It will also facilitate online communication between programme administrators, teaching staff, students, researchers, supervisors, mentors and funders.

Google Classroom and Meet

Developed by Google for schools, Google Classroom and Meet is a free web service that simplifies the creation, distribution and grading of assignments in a paperless way. The service can be accessed anywhere, including from phones, when the Google Classroom app is downloaded. To use the service, students and teachers/lecturers need to register for an account with a username and password.

Through Google Classroom and Meet, the teacher/lecturer can post class schedules, assignments, announcements and his or her office hours. There are dialling options where students can dial in for classroom teaching discussions with the teacher. The service also provides for real-time chatting while online during teaching discussions and enables participants to make online presentations.

Google Classroom and Meet is therefore one of the virtual platforms that could be considered as part of the HSS responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. It can work for virtual meetings between students and fellow students, between students and their supervisors, and between mentors and mentees. It can also be used for virtual interactions between programme administrators, managers, students, researchers and supervisors, and is ideal for the submission of students' work, teaching material and supervisors' feedback or assessment remarks to students.

In fact, Google Classroom and Meet, has been a fantastic virtual learning platform for my daughter's school's teaching programme during the COVID-19 lockdown period. One of my virtual meetings during this virus lockdown took place via Google Meet where we discussed progress made on a research project. The presenter was able to present to us virtually the slides and graphs pertaining to the findings of the research project. We could also type our comments and questions as we were virtually listening to the presentation.

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Zoom

Zoom has become the most used virtual platform since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It caters for virtual meeting and presentations for any number of participants, regardless of geographical location. In my workplace, as part of our measures against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, we stopped all in-person meetings between colleagues, consultants, senior management, committee and Board members.

Zoom enables the host or chair of the meeting to direct the discussion points in an orderly fashion and the participants are also able to raise their hands virtually to obtain the attention of the host. Zoom further provides a video option where participants can see each other on the screen and has the option muting the audio while other participants are talking.

GIBS has decided to host Zoom-enabled online graduation ceremonies as one of its responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. On Tuesday, 7 April 2020, a PhD student I co-supervised graduated through a Zoom-enabled and facilitated graduating ceremony.

This virtual platform can facilitate academic, research and research administration meetings of all kinds, and can also be used for virtual research interviews with certain research participants so that students and researchers do not lose time while unable to do face-to-face interviews/fieldwork. Meetings can be recorded and transcripts provided. Moreover, Zoom would be good for online hosting of seminars and workshops for institutions and participants at different locations.

Microsoft Teams

Microsoft Teams is one of the new electronic platforms that have seen rapid development and usage in recent years, and is a good choice for organisations and individuals using Microsoft Office365 products. Like Zoom, it provides options for video conferencing, online meetings, real-time chatting, calls and filing. Microsoft Teams allows for online presentation of documents and reports for participants' review and comment. It also tracks who has made changes and comments on the document.

As such, Microsoft Teams is another virtual learning platform that could be used as part of the HSS response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This virtual platform can facilitate meetings, be used to conduct virtual research interviews with certain research participants and enable online hosting of seminars and workshops. It also allows for the recording of the meetings and provision of transcripts.



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Skype and Skype for Business

Skype or Skype for Business is another platform for online meetings. Its instant messaging software works well with Microsoft Office 365 and it offers video and chatting options. As part of the HSS response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Skype would be an ideal online platform for meetings about academic and research matters, including supervision and mentorship, and could be used to conduct virtual research interviews. Skype has been one of the most-used online platforms in various organisations, especially those promoting working from anywhere locations.

Webinars

Webinars are widely used around the world as a virtual platform for hosting live online discussions on specific topics of interest, usually of an educational or instructive nature. Webinars support audio and visual communication and enable the sharing of slides and interactive participation through chat boxes and question-and-answer features. They would work well for the hosting of real-time virtual teaching, presentations, research projects, seminars and workshops for academics, students and the general HSS research community. Webinars are therefore one of the virtual platforms that should be considered in the HSS response during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic.

Teleconferencing

Teleconferencing is yet another intervention measure that can offset the adverse impact of the pandemic on teaching, learning, assessment and supervision. It entails the use of voice communication devices to hold discussion between participants in different locations. It requires an allocated code between the host of the meeting and invited guests. Teleconferencing would work in areas where supervisors and students need to discuss research projects, as well as for discussions between programme administrators, managers, teaching staff, mentors and mentees.

WhatsApp and email

WhatsApp groups can also be a useful platform for interaction involving teaching staff, administrative staff, students, supervisors, mentors and mentees. Important announcements can reach WhatsApp group members quickly and short documents can be sent.

Emailing between teaching and administrative

staff and students also comes in handy during these challenging times. This should go beyond just submission of assignments. Important teaching material and announcements can be communicated through emails. In my experience, emailing between teaching staff and students has not been happening as much at undergraduate level than at postgraduate level.

Beyond covid-19 research agenda

The accelerated uptake of electronic platforms of teaching and learning may have unintended consequences. These platforms may impact on certain types of jobs by displacing certain groups of people out of employment. While these virtual technologies may create demand for new kinds of jobs, it is important that the humanities and social sciences community should craft a post-COVID-2019 research agenda.

The COVID-19 pandemic has already intensified the use of electronic platforms in various organisations, many of which are not likely to abandon the use of these virtual devices and platforms beyond the current pandemic lockdowns. Organisations will think differently about the old traditional ways of office clocking times that demanded the physical presence of employees in physical buildings. Life after the COVID-19 pandemic will not be the same and the HSS community would need to research the opportunities and challenges that the pandemic has created for different segments of society, while also providing solutions to the challenges.

Conclusion

There is a range of electronic and virtual platforms that can be used for teaching, learning, assessment, supervision and mentoring in the HSS during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The recommended platforms assume that the users have access to means of connectivity such as internet and wi-fi. In South Africa, there is still inequality in terms of access to data – and indeed the COVID-19 pandemic has sharply reminded us of that. This inequality is a challenge that the HSS will have to overcome not only during but also after the COVID-19 pandemic. We can all be sure that post-pandemic, the world will not be the same in terms of ways of working, teaching and learning. May the HSS not waste the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic but use this time to conduct solution-oriented research on the technological challenges resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic. ☀

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