# A Comparison of Undergraduate Students' Perception of Tutorials Before and During the COVID-19:

# A Case of the University of Kwazulu-Natal in the Discipline of Public Governance

Jabulani C. Nyawo[1]

[1] University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Correspondence: Jabulani C. Nyawo, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Westville Campus, University Road, M255, South Africa.

## Abstract

Enhancing students' learning experience through support structures such as tutorial sessions is essential. Students attending the tutorial sessions within the Discipline of Public Governance have never been given the opportunity to provide feedback on the sessions they have attended. They only get a chance to evaluate their lecturers using closed and open-ended questions to capture their learning experiences about modules' structure, content, delivery and assessments. This implied a need to explore the students' perceptions about the tutorial sessions during the normal conditions and under severe conditions like this of COVID-19. The quantitative approach was utilised and the data was collected through the distribution of questionnaires to the undergraduate students. The participants attended tutorials within the Discipline of Public Governance during the first semester of the year 2020. The study findings indicated that tutorial sessions occupy a critical role in students' development and learning. It is the platform for the students to easily interact with other students, discuss issues, and improve their performance. The study recommends that higher education institutions invest in the tutorial structure as one of the student support systems as it produces positive results in enhancing student learning. Redefining and reviewing the tutorial support structure is always crucial to improve the tutorial sessions' quality.

**Keywords:** tutorial, learning experience, higher education institutions, expectations, academic performance

## 1. Introduction

With the numerous challenges facing higher education institutions ranging from the under-preparedness of first-year students entering large classes (Machika, 2013), it has become necessary to provide students with academic support. Students who enroll at South African higher education institutions come from various racial, social, cultural and religious backgrounds. An alternate approach is to work with the students themselves by "transforming the teaching and learning environment and by addressing the diversity of strengths and challenges that students bring to higher education" (Pym, 2013: 353). The direct tutorial model is regarded as a way of supporting students, especially those underprepared for academic challenges (Hlatshwayo, 2013). Due to the outbreak of COVID-19, universities have been compelled to move to online teaching and adapt to that quickly (Dhawan, 2020; Li & Lalani, 2020; Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj, & Shethi, 2020). This implies that the traditional direct tutorial model is not relevant in this current pandemic. New digital skills for engaging students online are essential to ensure that students benefit from tutorials.

On the other hand, students from poor rural areas face challenges such as lack of or no network coverage, lack of or irregular supply of electricity supply and no academic support at home (Ogina & Mampana, 2013; Singh, 2015; Faroa, 2017; Letseka, Letseka, & Pitsoe, 2018). Simelteonously, the universities have to capacitate academics and tutors with an understanding of digital learning and provide resources and infrastructure for the use of Information and Communications Technology to deliver teaching and learning. Although most South African universities do not possess the capacity to fully deliver their programmes online, the COVID-19 pandemic has provided them with an opportunity to maximize their ICT operations.

Against the background of such challenges, it remains challenging and problematic for higher education institutions to advocate a fully online teaching and learning approach, while against the background of challenges to e-learning integration and adoption in higher education for a substantial period of time. Few South African universities have been implementing blended learning to increase access and improve learning (Singh, 2015; Letseka, Letseka, & Pitsoe, 2018; Nyawo & Mashau, 2019). Few universities had intentions for their direct tuition to be entirely replaced by online teaching and learning. During the past, numerous universities have been offering tutorials to students via the traditional direct method, with certain students not attending tutorial sessions or only attending a few sessions. Such behavior from students tends to defeat the purpose of the tutorial system's purpose, which is to prepare them for independent learning and improve their knowledge. The lack of studies undertaken that evaluate students' perception during the normal conditions and under severe conditions like this of COVID-19 necessitated the investigation of such nature. This article aims to capture undergraduate students' perceptions of the tutorial system in enhancing their learning in higher education institutions before and during COVID-19 by attempting to provide answers to the following questions: led

1) What are the students' experiences with their tutorials before and during COVID-19?

2) What are the students' expectations about tutorials before and during COVID-19?

3) What kind of support did students receive in tutorials before and during COVID-19?

The following section explains the literature review on teaching practices and methods in higher education, student tutorial systems in higher education and Information and Communication Technology skills for teaching and learning. Also explained are the theoretical framework, the methodology utilized, study results and analysis.

## 2. Literature Review

The following section explains literature on teaching practices and methods within higher education, student tutorial system/programme, ICT skills for teaching and learning, theoretical framework utilized in this study.

### 2.1 Teaching Practices and Methods in Higher Education

There are numerous teaching methods and strategies available in higher education that improve teaching and learning, and they offer lecturers and tutors several options. Higher education institutions (HEIs) attract and enroll different students from different backgrounds, requiring lecturers and tutors to apply different teaching methods, which might help students demonstrate acquired knowledge. Facilitators (lecturers or tutors) must implement teaching methods that effectively achieve teaching goals and adopt modern practices that correspond with the changing environment. Despite innovative teaching and learning approaches in higher education, certain lecturers or tutors still prefer outdated teaching methods. In contrast, others are willing to try new ways of teaching to improve student learning. Armstrong (2012) claims that "traditional approaches ignore or suppress students' responsibility; thus, students assume a receptive role in their education" (p. 4). Digital technology education has challenged traditional educational teaching practices as facilitators and students must possess specific skills to ensure that effective teaching and learning occurs. In this context, there is a need to use an appropriate variety of teaching methods and to adjust and adapt to changing times to adapt to technologically proficient students (Saville, Lambert, & Robertson, 2011; Bayat & Naicker, 2012; Tshuma, 2012; Govender, 2015). Some of the more active teaching methods that are widely used include wikis, learning blogs, group discussion, seminars, problem-solving, lecture/discussion, flipped classroom, thinking-based, case study, simulation, online streaming videos, interactive whiteboard, brainstorming and e-Learning (Killen, 2011; Stephenson & Cortinhas, 2013).

### 2.2 Student Tutorial Systems in Higher Education

Apart from the COVID-19 pandemic, South African universities have been facing challenges such as low pass rates, low throughput rates, high first-year failure rates, low participation rates from previously excluded groups as well as low degree completion rates (Badat, 2010; Strydom & Mentz, 2010; Wilson-Strydom, 2010; Machika 2013). Jansen (2012); Metcalfe, Orkin, & Jenny (2012); Guthrie, Evans, & Burritt (2014); Persson & Napier (2014); Wilmot & Merino (2015); Singh (2015)). Maddock & Maroun (2018) have indicated that South African universities are experiencing challenges such as poor students' academic performance, lack of resources to fully support students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, under-preparedness of the students for universities, the inability of students to cope with the complexity of coursework. Such challenges faced by universities are influenced by factors such as students' approach to studying, teaching strategies, motivation, the social system of the university, psychosocial factors, cultural expectations, mismatch between home language and the language of learning and teaching, poor orientation strategies, poor time management, poor study habits, financial pressures, health or stress issues, learning difficulties which are likely to influence students' success at university (Cross & Carpentier, 2009; Mgqwashu, 2009;

Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Dube, Kane, & Lear, 2012; Mouton, Louw, & Strydom, 2013; Davids, 2014; Potter & Bye, 2014; Holland, 2016).

With the above challenges experienced by the South African higher education institutions, it has become increasingly essential to provide students with academic support. Students enrolled at South African HEIs come from various racial, social, cultural, and religious backgrounds. The tutorial model is seen as a way of supporting students, especially those underprepared for academic challenges (Hlatshwayo, 2013).  According to Van Lehn (2011), tutoring can be classified as a peer, one-on-one, cross-age, group, online utilizing email, or discussion forums. The type of tutorial system being investigated in this study is described as a small group (25 students) in which experienced (postgraduate) students work with less experienced (undergraduate) students to assist them, in a structured venue, to understand the module and adjust to the university environment. Singh (2015) stipulates that the tutorial sessions are learner support systems in which the learner engages with the learning materials and teacher/facilitator. The tutoring model's application as a strategy to maximize engagement for student development and success is not a new topic (De Smet et al., 2010). Tutoring at universities has historically been a model for enhancing students' engagement based on a close student-teacher relationship (Lee, Hong & Choi, 2016). Thomen & Barnes (2006); Jelfs, Richardson, & Price (2009); and Truuvert (2014) have conducted studies on determining tutorials in enhancing learning. Stevenson, MacKeogh, & Sander (2006); Carey & Mair (2008); Coughlan & Stephen (2011) have conducted studies that evaluate tutorials for improving learning. Other researchers have investigated the role of tutors towards enhancing learning and improving the academic performance of the students (Fung & Carr, 2000; Maynard & Almarzouqi, 2006; Ashwin, 2006; Comfort, 2011; Carter & Yam, 2013; McKay, 2016; Hassan, 2017), and the tutor's abilities to transfer discipline-specific skills to students who attend tutorials (Smitha & Bath, 2003; Underhill & McDonald, 2010; Ogina & Mampane, 2013). Some of the critical factors for successful tutorial sessions are the tutor's ability to be confident, creative, interactive, caring, and experienced.

From honours to doctoral levels, postgraduate students are given a key role in facilitating tutorial sessions and student engagement and learning in higher education (Clarence, 2016). A number of the postgraduate student tutor's duties include:   (i) acting as an intermediary between the lecturer and student, (ii) assisting in assessment activities, (iii) facilitate a learning environment that meets each student's learning needs, (iv) encourages the development of critical thinking, communication and leadership skills, (v) provide positive and constructive feedback on student's progress and performance, and (vi) consulting with students outside tutorials (Retna, Chong & Cavana, 2009). The role of the tutor includes different aspects of teaching and learning. As a result, students and tutors may likely have different expectations regarding the tutor's role in a specific module (Ogina & Mampane, 2013). Given the tutors' valuable role, there is a gap in educational support, training, and development offered to them by their higher education institutions (Clarence, 2016).

The tutoring system comprises a key component of the academic institution's teaching and learning process and it can be characterized as a necessary strategy for improving students' academic performance (Morillas & Garrido, 2014). The significance of tutoring in higher education institutions can be seen in its value: to enhance retention of study material and facilitates advancement for students who are at risk of failing and for the integration of minorities and previously disadvantaged groups (Girves, Zepeda, & Gwathmey, 2005; Betts & Burrell, 2014). Tutoring is one of the methods to deal with complex social problems. According to Betts & Burrell (2014), complex social issues such as social inclusion should be dealt with by processes and strategies that already exist in higher education, allowing students' engagement.  Faroa (2017) noted that the role of tutoring is "multifaceted and implicit in teaching and learning, thereby fulfilling an invaluable role in student, graduate and professional development as well as in promoting student engagement" (p. 3).

*2.3 Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Skills for Teaching and Learning*

With a fast-paced contemporary environment and perpetual advances in technology, several South African higher education institutions have fully or partially implemented blended learning to improve teaching and learning. According to van de Heyde & Siebrits (2019), the "emerging learning technologies within the learning and teaching environments are generally underutilized in South Africa, and the need for and use of e-tools is essential as national higher education institutions are working towards a common goal within the context of a global education transformation" (p. 2). There are specific obstacles that South African higher education institutions experience, which prevents the institutions from being equipped for digital teaching and learning.

Mlitwa & Van Belle (2011); Venter et al. (2012); Isabirye & Dlodlo (2014); and OERAfrica (2014) have highlighted issues such as technology instability, infrastructure shortage, lecturer efforts, weak ICT skills, technological cost, no e-learning culture and learners' frustration with e-learning and students not being adequately prepared for higher

learning institutions which are main obstacles in digital-age teaching and learning. The development of technological education teaching and learning instruments and systems has a significant developmental influence on how students improve their learning, how the information is transferred to the students, and the design of the curriculum's assessments and format (Ruxwana & Msibi, 2018). According to Alruwais, Wills, & Wald (2018), the use of "information and communication technology has been an assisting instrument in education for a long time" (p. 34).

The University of KwaZulu-Natal has a learning management system such as Moodle, which was not fully used by academics and students before the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, more emphasis was placed on the training of staff (academics and students), gathering data on students who have access to laptops, smartphones, network and WiFi, data affordability by the students and staff to develop effective strategies to change from traditional direct to online teaching and learning. In addition, the tutorials before the COVID-19 were presented in a structured venue where both tutors and tutees are present, but with the COVID-19, tutorials had to be conducted online. The change from traditional teaching and learning to an online system necessitated the need for facilitators to possess relevant ICT skills to ensure the successful implementation of online education technologies.

According to Tilghman (2011), the facilitators must "construct successful assessment strategies and frameworks specifically designed for online learning environments" (p. 34) to facilitate online assessment effectively. Gikandi, Morrow, & Davis (2011) explained that educational technologies require "facilitators to rethink online pedagogy to achieve effective formative assessment strategies that can support meaningful deep learning and its assessment" (p. 2334).

Although tutors occupy a significant role in improving students' performance and learning, Retna (2005) showed that training and development's professional requirements had not been prioritized in higher education institutions. Haggers & Donald (2013); Lee, Hong, & Choi (2016) explained that tutors are obliged to accept a more technical support role in addition to their more traditional roles due to the change towards online learning. Wade, Hodgkinson, Smith, & Arfield (2013); Lee, Hong, & Choi (2016) found that universities have demanded technology-based learning environments, which require immediate technical support essential for teaching and maintaining student interest and the flow of learning. The ICT skills of lecturers, tutors and students are significant to ensure commitment and improvement in online teaching and learning. Faroa (2017) argued that the universities should take "decisive steps to ensure both human resources as well as infrastructure are available and sufficiently suited to accommodate staff, students, and tutors" (p. 8).

*2.4 Theoretical Framework*

By possessing the high-order ability, a person can adapt cognitive processing strategies to deal with new, unexpected and changing conditions. This study has utilized the cognitive flexibility theory based on the theoretical work of Spiro et al. (1987), which describes "instructional design guidelines for advanced learning in ill-structured domains" (Cheng & Koszalka, 2016: 2). The critical component of the cognitive flexibility theory is adjusting to managing new situations. Students within the higher learning institutions must use their flexible thinking in complex domains for their learning.

In this context, the application of cognitive flexibility theory requires instructors to employ different teaching and learning methods so that students can construct their interpretations. The multiple representations of content should be provided through classrooms and online-based teaching and learning platforms.

## 3. Methodology

A quantitative census sampling method was used for this study as the online questionnaires were sent to all undergraduate students. Participants were undergraduate students currently (in 2020) enrolled in and studying the first year, the second year, and third-year modules, which resort to the Discipline of Public Governance at the Universit of KwaZulu-Natal. The students must register nine major modules when studying towards the Bachelor of Administration Degree, one module from the first level, four from the second level and four from the third level. The study's total population was 420: 114 students registered for the first-level module, 180 registered for second-level modules, and 126 registered for third-level modules. Sekaran (2016) indicated that a population size of 420 should have a sample size of 217. This study's main limitation was that only 170 participants completed the questionnaires, while other participants never started to fill the questionnaires. Poor internet connectivity and inadequate network coverage in the areas where the participants lived were the main factors contributing to such a lack of participation among certain students. Hence, the lack of full participation by undergraduate students in this study was the main limitation. Such low participation shows that the university enrolled most students from disadvantaged backgrounds that lack the essential services in their areas such as water, sanitation and electricity. According to Statistics South Africa (2016),

the electricity in South Africa has became almost ubiquitous, with KwaZulu-Natal Province lagging behind with 85.6% of households have access to electricity compared to other provinces.

This made it difficult for the researcher to generalize the study's findings to university undergraduate students. Still, on the other hand, the data collected represented the diversity of students registered for the Bachelor of Administration programme.

The data collection took place near the end of the first semester of 2020. This was done to ensure that participants had at least one semester's experience of university online tutorials. The consent forms and questionnaires were administered online at the end of the tutors' timetabled tutorial sessions. Online distribution of questionnaires by the researcher to all undergraduate students was done to ensure that the study captures and compares their perception about tutorials before and during COVID-19. Participants were duly informed about the aim of the study. Before completing the questionnaires, the participants had to sign the consent form firstly. It was indicated in the consent form that the confidentiality, anonymity and privacy of their response will be assured.   Consequently, the study complied with the prescribed ethical considerations in research.

The study adopted the descriptive statistics approach to analyze the responses of the participants based on a five-point Likert scale. The Likert-scale questions were divided into three categories: (1) to evaluate the students experience of the tutorial sessions as a teaching and learning strategy, (2) to assess the students' expectations of the tutorial sessions and (3) to evaluate the support provided to students via the tutorials. These themes were relevant to collect data that answered the research questions of the study.

## 4. Results/Findings

This section presents the results of the study generated using the descriptive statistics approach.

Table 1. Year of study

|  |  | Frequency | Percent | Valid Percent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | First-year | 58 | 34.1 | 34.1 |
| Valid | Second-year | 71 | 41.8 | 41.8 |
|  | Third-year | 41 | 24.1 | 24.1 |
|  | Total | 170 | 100.0 | 100.0 |

Due to limited financial resources, there was one forty-five minute contact session before and during the COVID-19 and a week for a particular group of students per module during the first semester. There were four contact session slots per week whereby the students could choose from that did not overlap with other modules. Eight tutors were temporarily employed to assist the students with tutorials. Two tutors were registered for their Honours Degree, two registered for Maters Degree and four registered for Ph.D. The appointed postgraduate tutors had a background understanding of the field of Public Administration and Management. Each tutor conducted two tutorial sessions per week for a module to which they were linked to assist the students. The students were organised in groups and allocated to specific tutors for the semester and they were not allowed to change their tutor. The table above shows that the majority of participants (42%) were on the second level. More students registered for the second level modules compared to the other classes.

Table 2. Students' tutorials experience

|  | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| My critical and analytical thinking skills were improved through the tutorials - Before COVID-19 | 5.3% | 3.5% | 25.3% | 41.8% | 24.1% |
| My critical and analytical thinking skills were improved through the tutorials - During COVID-19 | 14.7% | 20.6% | 26.5% | 28.8% | 9.4% |
| Learning materials and activities used in tutorials helped me to learn effectively- Before COVID-19 | 5.9% | 5.3% | 18.2% | 38.2% | 32.4% |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Learning materials and activities used in tutorials helped me to learn effectively- During COVID-19 | 16.5% | 18.8% | 27.6% | 29.4% | 7.6% |
| Tutor was well prepared during the tutorial sessions- Before COVID-19 | 5.9% | 4.1% | 12.4% | 38.2% | 39.4% |
| The tutor was well prepared during the tutorial sessions- During COVID-19 | 9.4% | 11.8% | 22.9% | 32.9% | 22.9% |
| Tutor's feedback enhanced my learning- Before COVID-19 | 5.9% | 4.7% | 21.8% | 41.8% | 25.9% |
| Tutor's feedback enhanced my learning- During COVID-19 | 10.6% | 18.2% | 31.2% | 27.6% | 12.4% |
| Overall, I was satisfied with my learning experience in the tutorials- Before COVID-19 | 7.1% | 4.7% | 18.2% | 35.3% | 34.7% |
| Overall, I was satisfied with my learning experience in the tutorials- During COVID-19 | 22.4% | 20.6% | 22.9% | 25.9% | 8.2% |

One of the aims of the tutorials is to improve the students' performance and learning. The above table showed that the direct tutorials before COVID-19 helped the students enhance their critical thinking and analytical skills, as 41% have strongly agreed with 71% agreed. The students preferred direct tutorials, as shown in Table 2.

In the table above, the students expressed uncertainty whether the tutorials during COVID-19 assisted them in improving their critical thinking and analytical thinking skills – with 16% strongly agree and 49% agree. The tutor's preparedness and feedback were influential in students learning both before and during Covid-19, as 71.1% of students agreed that their tutors were prepared for tutorials and their feedback enhanced learning. Table 2 above shows that the traditional direct tutorials positively impacted students' learning compared to online tutorials. Based on the information presented in Table 2 above, it is clear that students perceive traditional direct tutorial as a better method for learning than online tutorials. Variables such as inadequate ICT skills, poor internet connectivity and problematic network coverage contributed to online tutorials' inability to produce excellent results.

Table 3. Students' tutorials expectations

| | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly agree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I expected the tutor to teach during the tutorial sessions | 4.1% | 12.4% | 28.8% | 36.5% | 18.2% |
| I expected the tutor to encourage interactions and monitor discussions during tutorials, not necessarily to teach | 2.4% | 10.6% | 30.6% | 38.2% | 18.2% |
| I expected the tutor to play a dual role of facilitation and teaching | 2.4% | 11.2% | 28.2% | 41.2% | 17.1% |
| I was expecting to be assisted with my assessments | 2.4% | 5.3% | 23.5% | 42.4% | 26.5% |

Enhancing students' engagement in tutorials is paramount. Tutorial sessions should provide a platform whereby students interact, engage and critically discuss the learning materials. Based on Table 3, students preferred the tutors to monitor (38.2%) and facilitate (41.2%) the discussions. The majority of students (42.4%) expected the tutors to assist them with the assessments.

Table 4. Usefulness of tutorials' support

| | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neutral | Agree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Support offered by the tutors during the tutorial sessions was important | 7.1% | 7.1% | 22.9% | 41.8% | 21.2% |
| Tutorials had a positive effect on my academic performance | 8.2% | 8.8% | 25.9% | 38.8% | 18.2% |
| Tutor was available and helpful | 8.2% | 7.6% | 25.3% | 38.8% | 20.0% |

The support that the tutors provide to the students is essential to ensure the successful transfer of specific skills and enhance learning. Table 4 above shows that the majority (41.8%) of the students agreed that the tutors' support during tutorial sessions was essential. A number of the students (38.8%) indicated that the tutorials positively affected their academic performance. Additionally, 38.8% of the students indicated that their tutors were available to assist them, and their assistance was helpful.

## 5. Discussion

There are different aspects to the role of a tutor concerning teaching and learning. In most cases, the students and tutors might have distinct anticipations concerning the tutor's role. Although the expectations may be different, the tutor must create a diverse learning environment from the main lectures. They should always try to work together with the students in completing the shared knowledge. The tutor should always try to employ an approach that fosters student independence and critical thinking rather than students depending on them. Based on this study's results, the majority of the students prefer that the tutor engage, monitor, discuss and facilitate learning rather than disseminating the information so that their analytical and critical thinking will be improved and learning enhanced. This study's results are similar to Ogina & Mampane (2013) findings, where they investigated tutorial sessions' experiences as learning support. Their results showed that all students perceived tutorial sessions as a beneficial support structure that helped them better understand the course content through communication with other students.

In the study conducted by Hassan (2017: 105), which investigated the tutors' role in tutorials, it was found that there was a "consensus among 61% of tutee respondents that tutors encouraged them to ask questions and discussed or explained concepts without dominating discussions". The study results are similar to Hassan (2017) as the participants/tutees indicated that the tutorials improved their analytical and critical thinking skills. They expected the tutors to encourage interactions, discussions and facilitate learning. The tutors must meet the tutees' expectations, according to which they should apply the student-centred approach/principles to ensure for the "students to productively engage in their knowledge-construction process" (du Plessis, 2020 p. 2). The ability of the tutor to facilitate learning instead of disseminating information is essential to enhance student learning. The facilitation can be achieved by asking related probing questions about the topic and work interactively with students. Consequently, the tutor's ability to facilitate learning by providing clear explanations, examples, and case studies for discussions could promote an understanding of the topic. The tutor must be aware that few students might dominate during the facilitation, so various teaching and learning methods become vital.

In Table 2, the comparison of students' tutorial experiences before and during COVID-19, it is clear that the students prefer the traditional direct tutorial system utilised by the university before COVID-19 compared to the online tutorial system. Students' favoritism towards traditional direct tutorials could be due to certain South African higher education institutions having fully or partially implemented blended learning to improve teaching and learning. Factors such as technology instability, infrastructure shortage, weak ICT skills, technological cost, no e-learning culture and learners' frustration with e-learning and weak network connectivity (Mlitwa & Van Belle, 2011; Venter et al., 2012; Isabirye & Dlodlo, 2014; and OERAfrica, 2014) could also be the contributing factors to students' perception about the online tutorials compared to traditional direct tutorials. Although the University of KwaZulu-Natal had in place the Learning Management System, i.e., Moodle before COVID-19, such a system was not fully used by academics and students. Therefore, COVID-19 necessitated the university's need to conduct training within a short time for online learning and ICT skills required to ensure the successful implementation of online learning. Considering the students' diversity and background, one could say that the training delivered was not beneficial to other students who received ICT-related training for the first time. Hence, this could also be one reason why certain students perceived traditional direct tutorials better than online tutorials conducted during COVID-19.

Certain factors influence the adoption and use of online learning among students and academics. Such factors include perception, attitude and behavioural intentions. Irrespective of these factors, requisite skills in ICT training and technical support are essential to ensure the adoption and implementation of online learning (Maphalala & Adigun, 2021). The ICT skills of lecturers, tutors and students are significant to ensure commitment and improvement in online teaching and learning. Lack of ICT skills from students could result in a resistance to change from traditional direct learning to online education technologies. Therefore, the universities must prioritize infrastructural educational technologies and ICT-related training to accommodate/prepare academics and students for the continuous educational environment changes.

The tutoring model has been widely recognized for improving students' engagement at the universities based on a close tutee-tutor relationship (Lee, Hong, & Choi, 2016). In the literature, it has been noted that the high level of student engagement in activities that are linked to the desired outcomes of the tutorials, module and the institution

produce positive outcomes for student success (Faroa, 2017). Based on Table 3, it is clear that the majority of students (58.3%) prefer tutors to play a dual role of facilitation and teaching compared to that of encouraging student engagement during tutorials (53,4%). This means that the students still perceive the traditional teacher-centered method compared to the student-centered approach. Numerous teaching interventions and methods have to be used to achieve positive outcomes from tutorials and ensure students' engagement and address students' engagement challenges. Meaning, the tutors must implement teaching methods that effectively achieve teaching goals and adopt modern practices that correspond with the changing environment. Use an appropriate variety of teaching methods could improve students' engagement during tutorials to enhance their development and learning. Students' ability to actively engage in their tutorial activities could contribute positively to their learning, development, and academic achievement (Faroa, 2017).

As shown in Table 4 above, most of the students indicated that tutorial support empowered them to prepare for their assessments and improve their academic performance. The study results are similar to those of Ogina and Mampane (2013), where they found that students showed that tutorial session support prepared them for assignments and writing exams. In addition, Hassan's (2017) findings demonstrated that the majority of students (59%) indicated that tutors were able to help them with their academic problems. As presented in the study's results, before the COVID-19, the students were more accepting of the tutorial sessions. This is due to the institution having adequate infrastructures that create a conducive environment for teaching and learning. Although the numbers have decreased for tutorial value during the COVID-19, the students continued to appreciate the role of tutorial sessions. The students' perceptions about the usefulness of tutorials' support before and during COVID-19 remained substantial, considering the shift towards online tutorials. This means that the tutors were beneficial in providing support to struggling and non-struggling students before and during COVID-19.

The university's ability to support the students with data bundles and laptops helped the students to continue attending the tutorials. The university accepted such support initiatives as most students came from financially unstable families in rural areas. Additionally, the commitment and dedication from tutors contributed positively to the success of tutorials' implementation.   In this regard, the institutional commitment towards the tutorial programme is a key factor in creating the environment that will provide needed support and allow students' active involvement and met with the students' expectations in learning. The alignment of the student needs and institutional commitment were found to add value to student academic success (du Plessis, 2020).

The study results conform to the cognitive flexibility theory. The students participated and adapted to the new mode of learning due to the COVID-19 that caused the learning and learning environment to be challenging. The participants' positive responses about the tutorial sessions during the COVID-19 is an indication that they found methods to manage and adapt to the new online learning environment of academic activities.

Numerous factors contribute to student academic learning, performance and success. Higher education institutions offer a wide range of student support structures to different students at different times. Based on the study results, it was demonstrated that students who participated in tutorials valued the tutorial sessions' contribution to their academic performance and success before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study concludes that tutorials continue to impact the performance of students despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The tutorial system that was designed for the undergraduate students was shown to be successful as the students' remarks were found to be positive. As a result, the tutorial systems at higher education institutions are accepted as structures that can facilitate students' academic success. From the findings, it has been shown that students still prefer traditional direct teaching and learning, which was used before COVID-19. The interventions to deal with behavioral intentions and students' attitudes toward online learning should be created by universities to ensure student performance and success. Hence, the universities must invest in tutorial programmes, ICT infrastructure and training to enable a smooth transition from traditional direct teaching to online educational technology utilizing a mixture of student-centered methods.

## 6. Conclusion

The literature showed that a tutorial system could deal with numerous challenges faced in higher education institutions. Based on the study results, universities should strengthen their tutorial programmes to ensure maximum positive outcomes. Although the study's sample size does not represent the population, the findings show that students perceive the tutoring model as useful in ensuring their academic success in higher education institutions. For universities that could consider utilizing the study findings, it would be advisable to conduct a comprehensive evaluation of students' perception concerning the tutorials to capture the views that could improve tutorial programmes and students performance even during a difficult time like this of COVID-19. Promoting and enhancing student learning through tutorials is essential as lecture classes' size is regarded as more significant.   Tutorial sessions afford the students a

better opportunity to gain knowledge and understanding of the relevant study subjects. While universities were dependent on the traditional method of delivering transfer of knowledge, the COVID-19 pandemic presented opportunities for universities to find effective ways of providing lectures and tutorials through the application of ICTs. It is recommended that this study's extension be conducted to other scientific areas where tutorials maybe even more relevant when universities face new challenges in what concerns the teaching and learning processes under severe conditions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Although several studies have been undertaken on tutorial systems within higher education institutions, future studies should investigate the necessity of appropriate training for tutors to ensure adequate support for students in the interest of advancing their academic excellence.

## References

Alruwais, N., Wills, G., & Wald, M. (2018). Advantages and Challenges of Using e-Assessment. *International Journal of Information and Education Technology, 8*(1), 34-37. http://doi: 10.18178/ijiet.2018.8.1.1008

Armstrong, J. S. (2012). *Natural learning in higher education*. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-4419-1428-6_994

Ashwin, P. (2006). Variation in academics' accounts of tutorials. *Studies in Higher Education, 31*(6), 651-665. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075070601004234

Badat, S. (2010). *The challenges of transformation in higher education and training institutions in South Africa*. Paper Commissioned by the Development Bank of Southern Africa, 56 pp. Retrieved from http://www.ru.ac.za/media/Rhodesuniversity/content/vc/documents/The%20Challenges%20of%20Transformati on%20in%20Higher%20Eduaction%20and%20Training%20Institutions%20in%20South%20Africa.pdf

Braxton, J., Hirschy, A., & McClendon, M. (2004). Toward understanding and reducing college student departure. *ASHE-ERIC Education Report, 30*(3). Retrieved from https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED501184

Betts, S., & Burrell, K. (2014). Findings of, and reflections on, the gender, lifelong learning and social class (GLAS) project. A UK partnership based perspective. *Internationa Journal of Organisations*, 12, 11-26. https://doi.org/10.17345/rio12.11-26

Carter, A., & Yam, S. (2013). How can tutors engage property students in controlled teaching environments? Experiences of a new academic. *Property Management, 31*(1), 55-75. https://doi.org/10.1108/02637471311295414

Cheng, J., & Koszalka, T. (2016). Cognitive flexibility theory and its application to learning resources. Retrieved from http://ridlr.syr.edu/publications/

Clarence, S. (2016). Peer tutors as learning and teaching partners: A cumulative approach to building peer tutoring capacity in higher education. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning, 44*(1), 39-54. https://doi:10.14426/cristal.v4i1.69

Comfort, P. (2011). The effect of peer tutoring on academic achievement during practical assessments in applied sports science students. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International, 48*(2), 207-211. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2011.564015

Coughlan, J., & Stephen, S. (2011). Student and tutor perceptions of learning and teaching on a first-year skills module in a university computing department. *Educational Studies, 37*(5), 529-539. https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2010.539698

Cross, M., & Carpentier, C. (2009). "New students" in South African higher education: Institutional culture, student performance and the challenge of democratisation. *Perspectives in Education, 27*(1), 6-18. Retrieved from https://journals.co.za/content/persed/27/1/EJC87513

Davids, M. N. (2014). Traditional tutorial system –fit for purpose or past its sell-by date? University students' pedagogical experiences. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 28*(2), 338-354. https://doi.org/10.20853/28-2-352

De Smet, M., Van Keer, H., De Wever, B., & Valcke, M. (2010). Cross-age peer tutors in asynchronous discussions groups: Exploring the impact of three types of tutor training on patterns in tutor support and on tutor characteristics. *Computers and Education*, 54, 1167-1181. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2009.11.002

Dhawan, S. (2020). Online learning: A panacea in the time of Covid-19 crisis. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems, 49*(1), 5-22. https://doi.org/10.1177/0047239520934018

Dube, C., Kane, S., & Lear, M. (2012). The effectiveness of students redrafting continuous assessment tasks: The pivotal role of tutors and feedback. *Perspectives in Education, 30*(3), 50-59. Retrieved from http://scholar.ufs.ac.za:8080/bitstream/handle/11660/3595/persed_v30_n3_a7.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

Fung, Y., & Carr, R. (2000). Face-to-face tutorials in distance learning system: Meeting student needs. *Open Learning, 15*(1), 35-46. https://doi.org/10.1080/026805100115452

Faroa, B. D. (2017). Considering the Role of Tutoring in Student Engagement: Reflections from a South African University. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, 5*(2), 1-15. https://doi.org/10.24085/jsaa.v5i2.2699

Girves, J. E., Zepeda, Y., & Gwathmey, Y. K. (2005). Mentoring in a post affirmative action word. *Journal of Social Issues, 67*(3), 449-479. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2005.00416.x

Gikandi, J. W., Morrow, D., & Davis, N. E. (2011). Online formative assessment in higher education: A review of the literature. *Computers & Education*, 57, 2333-2351. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2011.06.004

Govender, S. (2015). Students' perceptions of teaching methods used at South African higher education institutions. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 29*(3), 23-41. https://doi.org/10.20853/29-3-486

Guthrie, J., Evans, E., & Burritt, R. (2014). Australian accounting academics: Challenges and possibilities. *Meditari Accountancy Research, 22*(1), 20-37. https://doi.org/10.1108/MEDAR-09-2013-0038

Haggers, H., & Donald, M. (2013). *The management of student teachers' learning: A guide for professional tutors in secondary schools.* New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203761137

Hassan, S. L. (2017). Tutors' role in tutorials: 'Unpacking' and 'repacking' during the semantic journey. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 31*(3), 99-115. http://dx.doi.org/10.208535/31-3-626

Hlatshwayo, A. (2013). Tutorials as a way of enhancing active participation in university classes. *Journal for Language Teaching, 47*(1), 11-27. https://doi.org/10.4314/jlt.v47i1.1

Holland, C. (2016). Critical review: Medical students' motivation after failure. *Advances in Health Sciences Education, 21*(3), 695-711. http://doi: 10.1007/s10459-015-9643-8

Isabirye, A. K., & Dlodlo, N. (2014). Perceived Inhibitors of Innovative E-learning Teaching Practice at a South African University of Technology. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences, 5*, 390-398. http://doi: 10.5901/mjss.2014.v5n4p390

Jelfs, A., Richardson, J. T. E., & Price, L. (2009). Student and tutor perceptions of effective tutoring in distance education. *Distance Education, 30*(3), 419-441. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587910903236551

Jansen, J. (2012). Poliitcal theater means country praises medicrity. *Saturday Star,* 7 January 2012. Retrieved from https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/saturday-star-south-africa/20120107/282054798894852

Killen, R. (2011). *Teaching strategies for quality teaching and learning*. Cape Town: Juta.

Lee, H., Hong, Y., & Choi, H. (2016). Perceptions of tutoring roles and psychological distance among instructors, tutors and students at a Korean university. *Higher Education Research & Development, 36*(1), 143-157. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2016.1177811

Letseka, M., Letseka, M. M., & Pitsoe, V. (2018). *The Challenges of E-learning in South Africa, Trends in E-learning*. Mahmut Sinecen, IntechOpen. Retrieved from https://doi.org/10.5772/intechopen.74843

Li, C., & Lalani, F. (2020). *The Covid-19 pandemic has changed education forever: This is how*. Retrieved from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/

Maddock, L., & Maroun, W. (2018). Exploring the present state of South African education: Challenges and recommendations. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 32*(2), 192-214. http://doi.org/10.20853/32-2-1641

Mail&Guirdance. (2020). *How Covid-19 will affect students*. Retrieved from https://mg.co.za/education/2020-04-23-how-covid-19-will-affect-students/

Machika, P. (2013). The alignment of institutional and student commitment to student needs. *Progressio, 35*(1), 91−103. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC144303

Maphalala, M. C., & Adigun, O. T. 2021. Academics' Experience of Implementing E-Learning in a South African Higher Education Institution. *International Journal of Higher Education, 10*(1), 1-13. https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v10n1p1

Maynard, J., & Almarzouqi, I. (2006). Investigating peer tutoring. *ELT Journal, 60*(1), 13-22. https://doi.org/10.1093/elt/cci077

Metcalfe, M., Orkin, M., & Jenny, G. (2012). Our pass rate focus is too narrow. *Sunday Times*: 15 January 2012. Retrived from https://www.pressreader.com/south-africa/sunday-times-1107/20120115/281947424721269

McKay, T. M. (2016). Do tutors matter? Assessing the impact of tutors on first-year academic performance at a South African university. *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa, 4*(1), 53-64. https://doi**:** 10.14426/jsaa.v4i1.144

Mgqwashu, E. M. (2009). Rethinking academic literacy for educators: Towards a relevant pedagogy. *Perspectives in Education, 27*(3), 215-227. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/10520/EJC87537

Mlitwa, W., & Van Belle, J. W. G. D. (2011). *Mediators for lecturer perspectives on learning management systems at universities in the Western Cape, South Africa*. In Proceedings of the Pacific Asia Conference on Information Systems (PACIS 2011), 2011, Brisbane, Australia. Brisbane: A.I.S. Electronic Library.

Morillas, N. R., & Garrido, M. F. (2014). The role of tutoring in higher education: Improving the student's academic success and professional goals. *Revista Internacional de Organisaciones*, 12, 89-100. https://doi: 10.17345/rio12.89-100

Mouton, N., Louw, G. P., & Strydom, G. L. (2013). Restructuring and mergers of the South African post-apartheid tertiary system (1994–2011): A critical analysis. *International Business and Economic Research Journal, 12*(2): 151-166. https://doi.org/10.19030/iber.v12i2.7628

Mukhtar, K., Javed, K., Arooj, M., & Shethi, A. (2020). Advantages, limitations and recommendations for online during Covid-19 pandemic era. *Parkistan Journal of Medical Sciences, 36*(S4), 27-31. https://doi: 10.12669/pjms.36.COVID19-S4.2785

Nyawo, J. C., & Mashau, P. 2019. Significance of South African learning institutions in comparison to the global economy. *Ubuntu: Journal of Conflict and Social Transformation, 8*(1), 33-54. https://doi**:** 10.31920/2050-4950/2019/sin1a3

Ogina, T. A., & Mampane, S. T. (2013). Experiences of tutorial sessions as learning support for distance education students. *Progressio, 35*(1), 104-118. Retrieved from https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstream/handle/2263/32563/Ogina_Experiences_2013.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

OERAfrica. (2014). *Case studies: delivering eLearning in South Africa*. Retrieved from http://www.oerafrica.org/supporting-distance-learners/case-studies-delivering-elearning-south-africa

Persson, M., & Napier, C. (2014). The Australian accounting academic in the 1950s: R. J. Chambers and networks of accounting research. *Meditari Accountancy Research, 22*(1), 54-76. https://doi.org/10.1108/MEDAR-06-2013-0020

Potter, A., & Bye, L. A. (2014). "It might have worked for you but …" Evaluating the efficacy of a first year support strategy in multiple units and disciplines. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education, 5*(2), 57-68. https://doi.org/10.5204/intjfyhe.v5i2.232

Pym, J. (2013). From fixing to possibility: Changing a learning model for undergraduate students. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 27*(2), 353-267. Retrieved from https://journals.co.za/docserver/fulltext/high/27/2/high_v27_n2_a6.pdf?expires=1605178005&id=id&accname=guest&checksum=4A02A6BEFC52389934ADBF314866A744

Retna, K. S. (2005). *Universities as learning organisations: Putting tutors in the picture*. Proceedings of the 28th HERDSA Annual Conference, Sydney, 3-6 July 2005, 422-429. Retrieved from https://www.herdsa.org.au/publications/conference-proceedings/research-and-development-higher-education-higher-education-97

Retna, K. S., Chong, E., & Cavana, R. Y. (2009). Tutors and tutorials: Students' perceptions in a New Zealand university. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 31*(3), 251-260. https://doi.org/10.1080/13600800902974336

Ruxwana, N., & Msibi, M. (2018). A South African university's readiness assessment for bringing your own device for teaching and learning. *South African Journal of Information Management, 20*(1), 1-16. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajim.v20i1.926

Saville, B.K., Lambert, T., & Robertson, S. (2011). Interteaching: Bringing behavioral education into the 21st century. *Psychological Record*, 61, 153-166. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03395752

Smith, C., & Bath, D. (2003). Evaluation of a networked staff development strategy for departmental tutor trainers: Benefits, limitations and future directions. *International Journal for Academic Development, 8*(1–2), 145-158. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144042000278017

Spiro, R. J., Vispoel, W. P., Schmitz, J. G., Samarapungavan, A., & Boerger, A. E. (1987). *Knowledgeacquisition for application: Cognitive flexibility and transfer of training in ill-structured domains*. Technical Report No. 409. Retrieved from https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/17527/ctrstreadtechrepv01987i00409_opt.pdf?sequence=1

Statistics South Africa. 2016. *The state of basic service delivery in South Africa: In-depth analysis of the Community Survey 2016 data*. Retrieved from http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report%2003-01-22/Report%2003-01-222016.pdf

Stevenson, K., MacKeogh, K., & Sander, P. (2006). Working with student expectations of tutor support in distance education: Testing an expectation-led quality assurance model. *Open Learning, 21*(2), 139-152. https://doi.org/10.1080/02680510600713169

Stephenson, J., & Cortinhas, C. (2013). *Creative uses of in-class technology*. Retrieved from http://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/book/export/html/

Singh, R. J. (2015). Current trends and challenges in South African higher education. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 29* (3), 1-7. https://doi.org/10.20853/29-3-494

Strydom, J. F., & Mentz, M. (2010). *Focusing the Student Experience on Success through Student Engagement*. Pretoria, South Africa: Council on Higher Education.

Thomen, C., & Barnes, J., (2005). Assessing students' performance in first-year university management tutorials. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 19*(5), 956-968. https://doi: 10.4314/sajhe.v19i5.25538

Truuvert, T. (2014). Enhancing tutorial learning experiences: A programme to develop sessional-tutor teaching skills by raising awareness about learning. *Studies in Higher Education, 39*(1), 20-33. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2012.690731

Underhill, J., & McDonald, J. (2010). Collaborative tutor development: Enabling a transformative paradigm in a South African University. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnerships in Learning, 18*(2), 91-106. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611261003678853

Van Lehn, K. (2011). The relative effectiveness of human tutoring, intelligent tutoring systems, and other tutoring systems. *Educational Psychologist, 46*(4), 197-221. https://doi: 10.1080/00461520.2011.611369

Wade, W., Hodgkinson, K., Smith, A., & Arfield, J. (2013). *Flexible learning in higher education*. New York: Routledge.

Wilson-Strydom, M. (2010). Traversing the chasm from school to university in South Africa: A student perspective. *Tertiary Education and Management, 16*(4), 313-325. https://doi.org/10.1080/13583883.2010.532565

Wilmot, L., & Merino, A. (2015). A personal reflection of the impact of adopting a student-centred teaching approach to influence accounting students' approaches to learning. *South African Journal of Higher Education, 29*(6), 257-274. https://doi.org/10.20853/29-6-533