Desperate times call for desperate measures: Student well-being and academic integrity during and post the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa

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Abstract: Among the challenges caused by COVID-19, the pandemic brought issues of educational inequalities in South Africa, comparable to problems experienced in Europe due to the massification of university studies applied at higher education levels in the '70s. The affected well-being of South African university students has evoked concern which, based on empirical evidence, defines them as a 'very high-risk population' for mental disorders and psychological distress. The emergency remote learning applied during the pandemic has also caused a drastic surge in academic dishonesty across most universities, manifested mainly in plagiarism. Despite preliminary research on connections between academic dishonesty and students' well-being, the field is under-researched, with an evident gap in the South African context. This study aims to enhance the South African educational system through awareness of students' well-being and academic integrity issues related to unpredicted circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering its destructive role, the research has analysed students' experiences during and after the pandemic from two angles, psychological, in terms of their emotional state of mind, and ethical in terms of their thinking, reacting, and acting in the context of academically dishonest behaviour.

The subject matter has been diachronically approached through the qualitative method applied with the participation of 35 students in three asynchronous phases. To contextualise their mental well-being and involvement in academic dishonesty, the two first phases took place during COVID-19, in the framework of the collective pandemic health crisis. Considering the circumstances to be calmer and the students' reactions less subjective, the data collection and analysis were realised in beginning 2023. The purposively planned phase-interval, we believe, sustains this study in terms of credibility and accuracy. To raise awareness through empirical knowledge, initially a group of 20 students from the Faculty of Education at a South African urban university participated in a photovoice study. The students were tasked to search for photos during the pandemic, illustrating academic dishonesty and student well-being. From an artistic, pedagogical viewpoint, the phenomenon of plagiarism, beyond textual content, was focused on another group of 15 participant students tasked with creating counterfeit objects. Through their design skills, students were tested on their views on ethics expressed from a satirical and humorous point of view. Conclusively, unpredictable collective disasters causing socio-educational changes can negatively affect a student's mental health in terms of doubting human value system and disillusionment regarding higher education principles and the consequently increasing academic dishonesty. Positively, students' well-being was also associated with awareness of one's inner self, the value of resilience and peer interaction importance in the campus space.

Keywords: Academic dishonesty, Arts-based Methodology, Massification, Photovoice, Plagiarism, Post-COVID-19

Introduction

Among fundamental social changes in Western countries after WWII, motivated by the political wish to narrow down social class differentiation, the right to higher education, previously reserved for the elite, was given to everyone. Korn and Davidovitch (2016) stated that in the 1970s, higher education rapidly spread throughout Europe, resulting in what is known as the "massification of higher education". This meant that higher education,

previously reserved for a privileged few, became a right for everyone and even a civic duty. Such fundamental educational changes, even in a conventionally governed society, entail serious challenges and unpredictable, complicated administrative problems, mainly socio-political and economic adjustment (Kazamias, 1978). Despite their contextual differences, in terms of establishing social-class equity in Europe and racial justice in South Africa, specific common points in the adjusting process validate mutatis mutandis, the above reference to the massification of higher education in Europe.

In the South African socio-economic context, the fundamental educational reforms were planned and applied with the required goodwill and the decisive, immediate-effect approach. The reformed, inclusive educational system would have continued its status quo, possibly with gradual adjustments for an undefined period. The recent COVID-19 pandemic, however, has exacerbated inequities and caused increased learning losses to vulnerable students (Angu, 2019; Eloff, 2021). Various studies focus on the social inequalities, challenges, and opportunities that emergency remote teaching created in South African higher education during and after the Covid-19 pandemic (Alex, 2022; Mbhiza, 2022; Mtshweni, 2022). A survey conducted by Universities South Africa (USAf) has revealed that many students require mental health support, but many are not receiving the necessary assistance (Walker, 2022).

This study aims to enhance the South African educational system through awareness of severe issues regarding students' well-being and academic integrity related, directly or indirectly, to the unpredicted circumstances of the pandemic. To this end, three main areas have been focused:

1. The psychological impact of the pandemic on the students' life in terms of peer and teaching/learning interaction.
2. The impact on teaching, learning, and assessing students' tasks, in terms of academic integrity ethics.
3. The benefits of empirical knowledge to the development of better inclusive educational approaches in South Africa.

To reach our aim, we explored students' well-being experiences from a psychological viewpoint. We assessed academic dishonesty from an ethical standpoint at the education Faculty in a South African higher education institution during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contextualisation

When the COVID-19 outbreak hit South Africa, conventional face-to-face instruction had to be largely replaced by an online learning system in a relatively short time. Boateng, Mensah, Boateng, Verzie and Pillay (2022) state that the traditional learning system and its procedures had to be drastically reduced. In addition, the unequal access to online learning opportunities and the lack of specialised support and training for online education vis-à-vis the concerned lecturers have caused institutions' genuine worries about students who lack internet connectivity, a computer system, and a suitable workspace for online learning. Emergency remote learning has also caused a drastic increase in academic dishonesty, mainly plagiarism, across most higher education institutions in South Africa (Boateng et al., 2022).

On the other hand, despite various diversions at home, achieving student engagement and positive learning outcomes during online lectures remained vital for a quality learning experience. However, to achieve a said quality learning, the barriers of the modality need to be overcome while also promoting crucial social co-existence aspects such as collaboration, discussion, and engagement, which according to Namboodiri (2022), encapsulate "the essence of a great learning ecosystem". These opposite standpoints illustrate the complexity of the circumstances during the pandemic in terms of human interaction with their physical and social environment and the perpetual contradiction between ideal and reality, theory and practice (Figure E).

In the framework of academic principles, knowledge through awareness, this article explores students' experiences of well-being concerning academic dishonesty associated with the pandemic. To this end, the research selected 35 students from the University of Pretoria, South Africa, education Faculty.

Students' well-being versus academic honesty

From an optimistic viewpoint, Seligman (2018) identified five dimensions of well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA), which due to their intrinsic contribute positively to a person's state of mind and worldview. From an opposing viewpoint, the existence of the link between academic performance and mental health is well substantiated (Evans, Borriello & Field, 2018; Hughes & Spanner, 2019; Bruffaerts, Mortier, Kiekens, Auerbach, Cuijpers, Demyttenaere, Green, Nock & Kessler, 2018). On the other

hand, students' well-being was also positively associated with feelings of connection with themselves, their peers, the campus space, and inner resilience cultivation.

Students associated their experiences of academic dishonesty with feelings of loneliness, disconnection, depression, and anxiety (Figures A, B, C). Depression predicts poor academic performance and a higher dropout rate among university students. The link between depression and academic outcomes is especially pronounced in students who screen positively for an anxiety disorder (Auerbach et al., 2018; Eisenberg, Golberstein & Hunt, 2009).

Mature critical thinking versus adolescence

University students' mental health is influenced by their developmental phase, particularly during adolescence. Known as vulnerable periods, typically between 18 and 25 years of age, for the onset of mental health disorders like depression and anxiety, they are prevalent among this population (Wiens, Williams, Lavorato, Duffy, Pringsheim, Sajobi & Patten, 2017). Emerging adulthood is a challenging phase characterised by numerous transitions and changes in education, living arrangements, and relationships. During this stage, which is associated with biological and developmental changes, such as the ongoing development of the pre-frontal cortex, regulation and cognitive flexibility play a crucial role (Patterson, Gabrys, Prowse, Abizaid, Hellemans & McQuaid, 2021). Addressing these issues requires systemic interventions and a shift from the prevailing biomedical perspective towards a more contextualising worldview (Farrell, 2021).

Why disillusionment?

Students experienced disillusionment with higher education, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic, due to the consequent disruption and the pressure students felt to obtain their academic qualifications regarding the inability of the higher institutions to cope adequately with the crisis measures (Figures A & B). Korn and Davidovitch (2016) suggest a shifting perception that passing the course and graduating matter more than the grade received. As a result, universities are seen as "degree brokers" rather than institutions focused on imparting education.

Furthermore, current university policies are influenced by the expectations and drawbacks of neoliberalism and capitalism. University curricula and pedagogical practices are increasingly influenced by a market-based view of the world, which emphasises the pursuit of wealth and materialism within a competitive market system (Mayaba, Ralarala & Angu, 2018). According to Jordan (2021), universities are growing disillusioned. The literature on universities often takes on a dystopian tone (Watson, 2014), and some researchers (Bengsten & Barnett, 2017) argue that mass universities struggle to embrace diversity and engage with the complexities of students' experiences.

The modern university's business-oriented approach threatens humanistic scholarship (Kidd, 2021). Mahon (2021) warns that higher education cultures foster damaging structures and imperatives that hinder the development of positive character traits. The fast-paced nature of the modern world, including emergency online teaching, promotes negative behaviours while neglecting virtues such as patience, sensitivity, and discernment (Mahon, 2021).

Socialisation versus isolation

Recent research by Sapiro and Ward (2020) emphasises the importance of social connection, especially among young people, to cope with stress and fulfil basic psychological needs. Belongingness is considered a fundamental human motivation (Baumeister & Leary, 2017), and our well-being is dependent on our connection to others (Soldevila-Domenech, Forero, Alayo, Capella, Colom, Malmusi, Mompart, Mortier, Puértolas, Sánchez & Schiaffino, 2021). Conversely, disconnection is associated with poorer health and well-being outcomes (Soldevila-Domenech et al., 2021; Levula, Wilson & Harré, 2016). Research indicates higher psychological distress and mental health concerns among university students during the COVID-19 pandemic, likely due to increased social isolation (Hamza, Ewing, Heath & Goldstein, 2021). These studies underline the importance of our research findings on the students' well-being state, which is closely linked to their sense of connection with family, friends and campus spaces, was abruptly interrupted (Figure D).

Arts-based methodology

Guided by qualitative, arts-based methodology, the photovoice data collection approach was applied as a flexible, adaptable, and valuable for engaging diverse communities' research tools in addressing their needs (Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi & Pula, 2009; Moletsane, de Lange, Mitchell, Stuart, Buthelezi & Taylor, 2007). It has indirectly promoted peer collaboration in the research process through conversations and knowledge sharing (Butler-Kisber & Poldma, 2010). Photovoice, 2D and 3D models were produced to uniquely and creatively illustrate personal experiences and theme interpretations as individuals and students (Capous-Desyllas & Bromfield, 2018). The use of

images allowed participants to associate beyond words with the concepts of academic dishonesty, in our case, plagiarism, and student well-being (Brown & Collins, 2021).

With the participation of 35 students, data was collected in three phases, two during COVID-19 to contextualise their mental well-being and involvement in academic dishonesty in the framework of the collective crisis, and the third in post-pandemic period considering the circumstances calmer and the reactions less subjective. The first phase overviewed various aspects of academic dishonesty, including group work, deceptive conduct, falsification, plagiarism, and dishonest behaviour during tests and exams. In the second phase, we requested a group of 20 students who had previously engaged in academic dishonesty to submit three photos that reflected their experiences of well-being and academic dishonesty during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the third phase (post-COVID), was guided by the 'element of surprise' in the context of innovative teaching approach (Steyn, 2020). To this end, we asked another group of 15 students to create a counterfeit item as a fun activity, imitating plagiarism. This task was met with surprise because students were repeatedly warned against plagiarism for obvious ethical reasons. In addition, scholarly, the phenomenon is associated with the authorship of textual content or commercialised counterfeit products beyond the academic environment.

By using images, language, and context, participants could express their priorities and showcase their lived experiences. Presented, thus, by a semi-narrative format and the participants' artworks, the qualitative data set substantiates students' interpretations of well-being and academic dishonesty. The visual data collection methods resulted in a generous, emotional, and enjoyable journey for the researchers and the participants. The students' stories showcased how photos, images, and 3D products helped them better express their experiences. Lenette and Boddy (2013) supported this idea, noting that visual methods can bring a new depth and meaning to qualitative inquiry.

The arts-based research methods were applied to students' works produced through photovoice, 2D and 3D designs, which allow the creator-student to explore complex ideas, emotions, and experiences. The Systematic Visuo-textual analysis (Brown & Collins, 2021), and Visuo-interpretative (Savin-Baden & Wimpenny, 2014), were applied to analyse the images and text and identify emerging themes.

The Visuo-textual approach operates on two levels. The first level focuses on noticing and describing the details and literal meaning conveyed by the images. The second level involves conceptualising the images and text and examining the social and value-laden implications (connotation) beyond the literal interpretation (denotation). Semiotic analysis was utilised to derive conceptual meaning from the images and understand how meaning is produced. The denotation and connotation approach was adopted to interpret the phenomenon under study, recognising that a comprehensive understanding could not be achieved through textual interpretation alone. An inductive category procedure was applied, avoiding preconceived categories and allowing codes to form categories. The names of the categories emerged directly from the data (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018).

Mental health challenges

A significant finding from the study was the strong connection students established between their mental health difficulties and their involvement in academic dishonesty. One participant's photo (Figure A), titled "screaming at the screen," portrays a young individual gripping his head with his hands, expressing evident frustration or anger. The image vividly illustrates heightened emotional dysregulation and a sense of lacking control. Furthermore, it potentially signifies feelings of anxiety, hopelessness, and sadness (De Jager, 2023).

Figure A: Screaming at the screen

Figure B: The silent sickness (Tierney, 2018)

One of the submissions by a participant, referred to as Figure B, bears the title "The silent sickness" and showcases a visually striking image. The illustration depicts a face devoid of distinct features, upon which emerges an unsettling protrusion of another face. This secondary face is portrayed as shedding tears of black ink, conveying a profound sense of anguish and suffering. Surrounding the central image are menacing hands that extend claw-like appendages towards the two heads, while the overall composition is enclosed within a black oval shape.

Interpreting this image reveals a range of emotional themes and psychological states. The presence of sadness is evoked, suggesting a deep-seated sorrow within the individual. Furthermore, the depiction of dissociation becomes apparent, as the faceless head and the emergent face symbolise a disconnection or detachment from one's own identity. The image also alludes to the existence of a "dark" or "ugly" side within the individual, hinting at internal struggles and conflicts.

The portrayal of the crying face and its torment signifies the presence of depression, conveying a sense of overwhelming despair and emotional pain. Moreover, the lack of recognition or visibility conveyed by the faceless head suggests a profound feeling of being unseen or overlooked by others, possibly reflecting the participant's experience of marginalisation or isolation. The act of the distressed face being plucked from the faceless head by one of the demanding hands carries symbolic implications. It can be interpreted as a representation of the individual feeling torn apart or divided by the numerous demands and pressures they face. This fragmentation may result from the multitude of challenges posed by the pandemic, remote learning, personal development, and experiences of loss and grief.

Alternatively, this unsettling image may signify the emergence of the participant's worst self or serve as a desperate cry for help. It implies a profound yearning for connection and support amidst the difficulties they encounter. The individual's need for solace and understanding in navigating the complex circumstances brought about by the pandemic, remote learning, personal growth, and the experience of loss and grief is powerfully expressed (De Jager, 2023)

A powerful image is also provided by the photo titled "Fading Away" (Figure C). This photo shows three statues of a head, depicting a process of fading away. The statues' facial expression seems neutral and tranquil, yet the head appears to fade. Images from various participants confirmed this sense of not feeling heard or seen. Participants highlighted the "dehumanising" effect of emergency remote learning and the feeling of disappearing into a sea of black screens. They reported subsequently suffering from feelings of loneliness, depression, and anxiety (De Jager, 2023)

Figure C: "Fading away"

The above photos indicated a strong link between mental health challenges and academic dishonesty. Images related to well-being conveyed psychological safety and connectedness, while images associated with dishonesty depicted loneliness, disconnection, and feelings of depression and anxiety. This highlights the connection between emotional states and engagement in dishonest practices.

Connection as central to the well-being

The well-being of university students has been significantly affected by various factors. An examination of the submitted images sheds light on the crucial role of connection and social interaction in promoting student well-being. These images portray students actively participating in diverse activities, such as engaging in pool games or attending soccer matches. Through such depictions, the importance of socializing and being an integral part of a community is underscored. The shared experiences and camaraderie captured in these images contribute significantly to fostering a sense of belonging and happiness among the students.

Moreover, a subset of images within the submissions showcases students in the company of their families and pets, as represented in Figure E. These depictions serve to highlight the significance of familial support and resilience in

maintaining overall well-being. The photos symbolically represent the ability of individuals to persevere and overcome challenges, despite their vulnerabilities. The connection to family and the companionship of pets play crucial roles in bolstering the students' emotional well-being and providing them with a source of strength.

Furthermore, it is evident that the students' general well-being is influenced by their connection to peers, family, and the physical spaces of the campus. The sense of belonging and support derived from these relationships and environments contributes to their overall well-being during the ongoing pandemic. The cultivation of resilience, as depicted in the images, also plays a significant role in enhancing their overall sense of well-being. By developing resilience, students are better equipped to cope with adversity and maintain a positive outlook in the face of challenges (De Jager, 2023)

Figure D: "Prickly perseverance"

The phenomenon of plagiarism

Academic dishonesty is framed within the 'fraud triangle' theory, which posits that three conditions - opportunity, incentive/pressure, and rationalisation/attitude - contribute to academically dishonest behaviour (Holden, Norris & Kuhlmeier, 2021). Studies indicate that these factors positively predict academically dishonest behaviour (Becker, Connolly, Lentz & Morrison, 2006). Opportunity refers to the belief that students can cheat without consequences, while incentive/pressure can come from personal, parental, peer, or institutional expectations. Rationalisation happens when students justify their dishonest behaviour based on their personal value system of ethics and beliefs. The 'fraud triangle' theory is widely accepted while highlighting the importance of psychological factors in academic dishonesty (Akbulut, Uysal, Odabasi, and Kuzu, 2008. Although the fraud triangle as a theory is well supported by research, other studies have taken a more nuanced approach. For example, Akbulut et al. (2008) propose that psychological aspects are one of the most significant factors leading students to academic "e-dishonesty".

While Ng (2020) showed no significant difference in academic integrity in the case of assessments that had strict time limits, Gamage, Silva, and Gunawardhana (2020) paint a bleak picture of the overwhelming threat of contract cheating services that had been on the rise during the pandemic and continue to occur. A study conducted in South Africa in 2022 attributed student academic dishonesty during the pandemic to a lack of awareness of academic integrity policies, unfettered access to online resources and a desire to pass tests and assignments under increasingly stressful circumstances exacerbated by the pandemic (Boateng et al., 2022).

On the likelihood of higher education students cheating during the pandemic, Lancaster and Cotarlan's (2021) state that STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths) students recorded an increase of 196.25% in academically dishonest practices in 2020 compared to the same period in 2019. However, plagiarism is not limited to STEM subjects alone. Upholding ethical standards and respecting intellectual property rights is essential across all disciplines, including the intersection of art and design known as STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Maths). In the context of creative subjects, such as art and design, plagiarism can occur when designers copy or reproduce someone else's work without proper acknowledgement or authorisation.

Disillusionment through satirical lenses

Based on 3D design means, some students chose to approach satirically their sense of disillusionment with the education system, whereby the anticipation of graduation and its ideological value is demystified and mockingly tainted. To contextualise, the participant played with the label FLY@UP tagging the stationary (e.g., ruler, keyrings, pens) complimentary handed to new students at the University of Pretoria (UP) beginning of each academic year. To motivate students to stay on track with their studies and graduate within the designated time frame, the acronym "FLY" (Finish Line is Yours) reflects the motto "the Finishing Line of your efforts is within Your reach, but cleverly insinuating reach with Flying colours (up.ac.za). The participant produced an accurate replica of a ruler (Figure E), mockingly replacing the original label "FLY@UP" with "CRY@UP". The creation eloquently reflects the student's disappointment at what is happening in the academic milieu - by visually illustrating the contradiction between the university's ideals and reality.

Figure E: CRY@UP

This disillusionment fuels academic dishonesty, framing it as an act of defiance rather than mere desperation. Participants also expressed how the pressure to obtain their qualifications overwhelmingly tempts them to engage in academic dishonesty. These images convey a feeling of being trapped and having everything to lose, leading to acts of desperation, similar to survival thinking (Figures A & B). Moreover, the images suggest that students are distancing themselves from the prestige and integrity of higher education, considering the hardships they faced during the pandemic (Figures C & E).

Still, in the context of satirical plagiarism, a participant created a Family Meal Bucket under the name AFC (African Fried Chicken). To this end, he combined two well-known acronyms, one political, ANC (African National Congress), and the other commercial, KFC (Kentucky Fried Chicken): from the satirical viewpoint, the creator cleverly replaced the established face of Colonel Sanders with the former South African President Zuma's on the Meal Bucket. This theme-choice aimed at the collective disillusionment about the party's ideologies betrayal caused by President Zuma's numerous charges in 2021. Indirectly, the choice of the theme and the satirical view links skilfully the disgraceful act of plagiarism with the former President's contemptible ethical violations in the country.

Figure F: African Fried Chicken (AFC)

Conclusion

The adversity caused by the unpredicted circumstances of the pandemic and emergency remote learning has significantly impacted university students' well-being vis-à-vis academic integrity. The study's findings suggest that academic dishonesty can stem from students' disillusionment with the education system and their struggles to maintain their mental well-being, aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students' well-being is strongly linked to their connections with themselves, their families, peers, and the campus. These findings highlight the need for higher education institutions to prioritise students' mental health and well-being, considering their unique developmental phase and high rates of mental health challenges. By recognising student adversities as complex and social and promoting a culture of acceptance rather than efficiency, institutions can mitigate the impact of student disillusionment and mental health crisis.

Visual representations highlight the importance of social connections and community engagement as students strive to regain a sense of normalcy in their lives. By recognising student adversities as complex and social and promoting a culture of acceptance rather than efficiency, institutions can mitigate the impact of student disillusionment and mental health crisis. Despite the difficulties faced, the images also revealed a determination to persevere and find moments of high spirits and socio-cultural connection, as reflected in the post-COVID task. The pandemic has shaped the experiences and priorities of students, underscoring the need for support and resources to promote their overall well-being in the post-COVID landscape.

To address academic dishonesty, it is crucial for academic authorities to adopt a more humanistic and contextual approaches than rely on outdated punitive measures conventionally applied by educational institutions. It is hoped that the knowledge gained from this study to contribute to a better understanding of desperate circumstances and to the development of human empathy, which should lead to better planning in terms of readiness and promptness in solving educational crisis issues.

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