



**UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL**

**INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI**

**Learning during COVID-19: Exploring students' experiences of studying Social Work
through blended learning at a university in Durban.**

By

Kwena Rayneth Tlhaku

217003232

Supervisor: Dr Maud Mthembu

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the academic requirements

For the degree of Master of Social Sciences

Social Work Discipline

School of Applied Human Science,

University of KwaZulu-Natal,

Howard College Campus.

January 2023

The financial assistance of the National Research Foundation (NRF) towards this research is hereby acknowledged. Opinions expressed and conclusions arrived at are those of the author and are not necessarily to be attributed to the NRF.

DECLARATION

I, Kwena Rayneth Tlhaku, declare that the research reported in this dissertation is my original research. This dissertation has not been submitted for any examination or degree at any other university. It does not contain other persons' data, tables or other information unless specifically acknowledged as being sourced from other persons. It also does not contain text, illustrations or tables copied and pasted from the Internet or other sources unless specifically acknowledged and referenced.

Kwena Rayneth Tlhaku (217003232)

.....

Date

.....

Place

.....

ABSTRACT

The social work program is a professional program that offers students a unique skill set to address real-world socio-cultural issues. The coronavirus disease raised much skepticism among educators and students alike about whether social work can be effectively taught through blended learning. This study aims to explore the experiences of social work students taking the program through this approach to learning. Additionally, the purpose of the study is to identify the opportunities and challenges presented by blended learning and the strategies students employed to adapt to it. It seeks to draw attention to the students' perceptions of the social work skills and knowledge acquired through a blend of synchronous and asynchronous approaches to learning. The data for this study was collected through semi-structured virtual interviews with 15 undergraduate social work students from a university in Durban, South Africa. The findings illuminate the barriers to learning created by the use of blended learning in social work programs, which include poor access to technology, structural challenges, and poor adjustment and mental health challenges. Students' resilience and adaptive behaviour were evident in students' narratives. The findings further demonstrated that the role of lecturers was as critical in supporting the students' development and acquisition of social work knowledge and skills by taking a more active role in blended teaching and learning. It is recommended that further research focus on equipping lecturers with blended learning design competencies.

Keywords: Social work education, blended learning, synchronous learning, asynchronous learning

DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to:

The slummy community of Angelo, which is located in Boksburg in the Gauteng province, it is from your dusty streets that a passionate, caring, and dedicated servant of the people was born.

The generations of the following families: The Seanego family, the Tlhaku family, the Ngoasheng family, and the Moremi family.

May the Lord, God Almighty, lift your 'horns' high in all aspects of life.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to first thank God; this is a sign of His answer to my prayers. I called unto Him, and I prayed to Him about the goals and hopes for my life and He answered me, for He seeks only to prosper me (Jeremiah 29 v 11). I thank Him for the strength, competency, motivation, and persistence that He kept providing me from the onset of this degree until its conclusion. It is through Him that this was possible.

Next, I would like to express my heartfelt, unequivocal gratitude and appreciation to the following people who have been very instrumental in the successful completion of this thesis:

- Special thanks to my supervisor, Dr Maud Mthembu, for her continuing support, guidance, and patience. I am thankful for her constructive, motivating and spirit-lifting feedback. I am also very grateful for her belief in me, for honing my academic and research skills, building my confidence in writing, and for encouraging and allowing me to grow. I am truly grateful; words fail me.
- Thanks to the reviewers of my research proposal, Dr Seepamore and Dr Sithole, for their comments and feedback, which have been of great help.
- Gratitude to my parents for their love, understanding, and support in my educational journey.
- Special thanks to Mr Zwelisha Mfishi for his guidance, motivation, and unwavering support. I am very grateful to have worked with him.
- Thanks to my mentor, Dr Jienchi Dorward from the Centre for AIDS Programme of Research in South Africa (CAPRISA), for his guidance and support. I am very grateful to be learning from him.
- Thanks to my colleague, Mr Sandile Gumbi, for the calls to the research commons to get the work going.

- A massive thank you to all my participants for their willingness to take part in the study, their incredible efforts to prepare a quiet and conducive environment for the interview, their time, and their patience through the challenges with connectivity. I appreciate them for trusting me enough to share their experiences with me despite the impacts.
- Lastly, I would like to thank all those who contributed to the completion of this thesis that I have not mentioned by name; I appreciate all the unique contributions.

May the Lord bless you all.

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.3.1: Showing Social Work simulated practice

Table 4.1: Showing the participants' socio-demographic details

Table 4.2: Showing the summary of themes and sub-themes

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Declaration	ii
Abstract	iii
Dedication	iv
Acknowledgements	v-vi
List of tables	vii
CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY	
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Background and Rationale of the Study	1-5
1.2 Problem Statement	6-7
1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study	
1.3.1 Aim	7
1.3.2 Objectives	7
1.3.3 Research Questions	8
1.4 Theoretical Framework of the Proposed Study	9-12
1.5 Summary of Research Methodology	12-13
1.6 Significance of the Study	14
1.7 Limitations of the Study	14
1.8 Definition of Key Concepts	14-15
1.9 Structure of the Thesis	15-16
1.10 Conclusion	16

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2. Introduction	17
2.1. Background	
2.1.1. COVID-19 and Higher Education in South Africa	17-20
2.2. The conceptualization of Blended Learning	20-22
2.3. Learning Social Work during COVID-19	22-24
2.3.1. SACSSP Social Work guidelines for practicum during COVID-19	25-28
2.4. The challenges and opportunities forwarded by blended learning	
2.4.1. Challenges	29-37
2.4.2. Opportunities	37-39
2.5. The strategies employed in blended learning	39-42
2.6 Conclusion	43

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3. Introduction	44
3.1 Research Paradigm	44-45
3.2 Research Design	45
3.3 Sampling Strategies	45-46
3.4 Data Collection Method	46-47
3.5 Methods of Data Analysis	47
3.5.1 Data management	47
3.5.2 Date Analysis	47-48
3.6 Ethical Considerations	49-51
3.7 Trustworthiness and Authenticity	51-53

4.4.1 Sub-theme one: Help-seeking and Support	90-93
4.4.2 Sub-theme two: The use of social media in learning	93-96
4.4.3 Sub-theme three: Behavioural change and self-motivation	96-99
4.5 Theme three: Students' perceptions of social work skills and knowledge learned in blended learning	99
4.5.1 Sub-theme one: Poor development and retention of knowledge and skills	99-106
4.5.2 Sub-theme three: The perceived role of lecturers in skills and knowledge acquisition	106-108
4.5.3 Sub-theme four: Impacts of academic dishonesty on the acquisition of knowledge and skills	108-110
4.6 Theme four: Self-doubt	110
4.6.1 Sub-theme one: Self-doubt due to limited knowledge	111-112
4.6.2 Sub-theme two: Self-doubt due to the lack of practical experience	112-114
4.7 Conclusion	114
 CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS	
5. Introduction	115
5.1 Overview of the achievement of the study's main aim and objectives	115
5.1.1 Objective one: To identify opportunities and challenges forwarded by blended learning as experienced by social work students	116
5.1.1.1 Opportunities forwarded by blended learning	116-118
5.1.1.2 Challenges forwarded by blended learning	118-121
5.1.2 Objective two: To understand the strategies that social work	

students employed in preparing and adjusting to blended learning	121-123
5.1.3 Objective three: To explore the social work students' perceptions of	
the skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning	123-125
5.1.4 Objective four: To establish the social work students' self-confidence	
in practicing social work skills acquired through blended learning	126
5.2 Recommendations	127
5.2.1 Recommendations for social work education	127-128
5.2.2 Recommendations for further research	128-129
5.3 Conclusion	129-130
References	131-144
Appendices	145
Appendix 1: Gatekeeper's Letter	145
Appendix 2: HSSREC Ethics Approval	146
Appendix 3: Information Sheet	147-149
Appendix 4: Informed Consent Form	150-151
Appendix 5: Interview Guide	152-153

CHAPTER ONE: GENERAL INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION OF THE STUDY

1. Introduction

This chapter consists of six sections, it presents a contextual understanding of the background of the studied phenomenon, the rationale, and the statement of the research problem.

Furthermore, it states the research aim, objectives, and research questions. The theoretical framework and a brief discussion of the study methodology is included. Lastly, this chapter gives operational definitions of the key terms used in the study and an outline of the thesis.

1.1 Background and Rationale of the Study

The Corona Virus Disease 19 pandemic, COVID-19, as referred to by the World Health Organization [WHO] (2020), has abruptly introduced a new era to the world, one which not only changed the livelihoods of all people, but which also compelled all systems, including the education system, to change. Many institutions of higher learning looked to off-campus online course delivery to meet the needs of the new pandemic, and the social work discipline was no exception.

For many years social work education was seen as only possible taught in presence using traditional face-to-face lecture format (Maidment, 2006). This is supported by Goldingay and Boddy (2017) as a critique for online learning, saying that social work academics and practitioners believed that interacting through technological means is inconsistent with the discipline of social work, which has human connection at its heart. Numerous researchers concurred with the above criticism; Coe Regan (2005); Allen and Seaman (2013) all stated that "many faculty members remain skeptical of the online environment as a platform to transmit social work practice knowledge, skills, and values" (as cited in Bentley, Secret & Cummings, 2015, p494). They added that:

much of this skepticism generates from faculty members' struggle to reconcile how teaching "use of self" and relationship development, commonly recognized as the core of social work education, can be accomplished successfully when student and instructor are miles apart, connected only through inanimate objects such as a computer and the Internet (p. 495)

Also, in consensus, Petracchi, Mallinger, Engel, Rishel, and Washburn (2005) observed that the development of communication skills and critical thinking ability is believed to be the essential aspects of the social work students' socialization, and the belief among social work educators is that these aspects are accomplished solely through the conventional classroom formats, with face-to-face (f2f) interactions. A recurrent challenge identified in the literature to date is the skepticism amongst social work educators about whether technology-enhanced learning is as effective as the traditional face-to-face mode of instruction in preparing students for the realities of practice.

Although the above concerns are logical, unprecedented situations such as the occurrence of a pandemic compel most disciplines in institutions – those teaching theory and practice modules – to move teaching online if learning is to continue. According to de Boer, Cambell, and Hovey (2011), "online learning refers to course content and instruction being delivered off-campus via the internet" (p. 2). Online learning is not a new phenomenon; there are many studies on it dating more than two decades back. According to Maidment (2006), in numerous countries, "online learning has simply consisted of uploading electronic versions of study guides, readings and exercises and this indiscriminate transfer of material from hardcopy to electronic versions in no way constitute a process for learning online" (p. 53).

With consideration of the distinctive requirements of social work and other disciplines, blended learning was seen as the preferred alternative approach to both teaching and learning during this pandemic. The most common conceptual definition of blended

learning found in the reviewed literature is as defined by Garrison and Kanuka (2004); the "thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (p. 96). For the purpose of this study, blended learning will refer to the use of synchronous (live, real-time online meetings when the whole class or smaller groups get together) and asynchronous learning (instruction and learning that is available for the student to manage on their own time) (MANCOSA, 2020). Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) – those that could – had to swiftly adapt the programs ordinarily offered face-to-face and make changes that allowed them to be offered through blended learning. These changes required the innovative use of available resources and time to review programs and adapt them for blended learning through live online classes, video recordings, and online notes and readings.

There is an insurmountable amount of research on the 'face-to-face integration with online learning' blended learning; Nel (2005) informed that "the interest in blended learning has surged since the dawn of the new millennium" (p1). Those that studied it tout it as 'the best of both worlds.' The concern with online learning was its effectiveness in delivering practice and field courses, which contact learning excelled in delivering. Blended learning is claimed to be more effective in all curriculum areas, especially in developed countries; developing countries such as South Africa see its effectiveness in a selectively few disciplines, medicine, nursing and aviation (Naudé, 2016), not so much for social work. de Boer et al. (2011) stated that social work educators continue to wonder "if practice skills, such as interviewing, assessment, critical thinking, and theory application could be effectively taught using blended learning" (p.5). Can beginning practice skills in planning, intervening with, and evaluating social work groups be effectively taught using blended learning? Goldingay, Hodgson, Boddy, Nipperess, and Watts (2020) stated that the shift of focus of the social work professional accreditation body and other disciplines from curriculum content to learning outcomes, and knowledge and skills that students should be

able to demonstrate, is the reason social work has been slow to engage with the trend of digital technology that other disciplines capitalised on.

Muhuro and Kang'ethe (2021) rightfully stated that the COVID-19 pandemic "requires learning modalities that promote social distancing to reduce the spread of the disease while ensuring that students have access to quality teaching and learning materials and to frequently stay engaged" (p.427), this has forced institutions in South Africa to join into digital technology in very little time and limited resources, terming this type of delivery of higher education "emergency remote teaching and learning (ERT)" (Council on Higher Education [CHE], 2020). Multiple 'known' constraints surfaced, threatening to exclude disadvantaged students.

The spaces in South African HEIs are occupied by a diverse student population from different socio-economic backgrounds, many of whom come from poor backgrounds and lack technological skills. Although there have been initiatives by the government to provide the resources needed for a smooth transition into blended learning, most students (especially black students) have not had experience with computers before entering higher education (Zimba, Khosa & Pillay, 2021). The digital divide is a constraining feature of blended learning in the country, with issues of access and equity (principles of social justice), as embedded in the still-standing inequalities in the country, being central (Zimba et al., 2021). In light of the aforementioned, this study sought to explore the experiences of students who took the social work program using blended learning at a university in Durban, South Africa.

Rationale for the study

An important argument made in favour of face-to-face instruction and against technology-enhanced learning is the enabled ability for social work service user protection. Goldingay and Boddy (2017) stated that "some literature has argued that face-to-face instruction is vital

for alerting educators to potential problems and therefore protects future service users" (p. 210). This statement prompts the question of whether is blended learning produces skilled and competent social workers who will protect future service users?

In the defence of technology-enhanced education, Siebert, Siebert, and Spaulding-Givens (2006) mentioned that, as a new frontier for schools of social work, technology-mediated education "requires technological expertise, flexibility, and creativity from both the students and instructors, and it will likely be a source of both great satisfaction and dismay for all who participate" (p. 335). The protection of social work service users is a concern for most developing countries, South Africa being one of them. Having been ordered "to switch, almost overnight, from F2F to online teaching and virtual education for the learners" (Bordoloi, Das, and Das, 2021, p.3) because of the pandemic, they are still finding their way around this virtually delivered educational system and feedback is crucial. For this reason, this study saw the exploration of the perceptions of social work students about blended learning as noteworthy.

This study explored the opportunities and challenges presented by blended learning for social work skills development and practice. This will inspire researchers to conduct in-depth studies that will be influential, and in turn, help curriculum developers design a system that will mitigate or alleviate the challenges and reinforce the opportunities as they see fit since, in view of the current information age (the Fourth Industrial Revolution), blended learning may be here to stay. In exploring students' perceptions, the researcher kept an ear out for student self-efficacy in using skills learnt through blended learning; this helped voice students' opinions (constructive and criticizing) about this approach to learning. Self-efficacy, according to Lawrence and Abel (2013), "refers to an individual's assessment of his or her confidence in one's ability to perform certain specific skills in a set of circumstances in the hopes of achieving a successful outcome" (p.770).

1.2 Problem Statement

With the anomalous situation that is COVID-19, literature reveals that social work educators who are newly introduced to the system used for blended learning are challenged by the need to strike a balance between harnessing the promise offered by the delivery of education using this method or approach while ensuring students are not disadvantaged through it, especially in developing countries challenged by multiple constraints. According to Muhuro and Kang'ethe (2021), blended learning is well entrenched in many developed countries; they have the resources and have had the time to find solutions towards enabling access to educational resources and managing student diversity. In developing countries, however, the total adoption of blended learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic occurred under pressure and within a short timeframe (as an emergency to salvage the academic year). The literature does indicate that the benefits of blended learning are contingent on sound design (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Graham, 2009); and that translating in-class methods into online methods requires creativity, this cannot possibly happen within a short period of time and with limited resources.

In South Africa specifically, the CHE foresaw and acknowledged the constraints of this approach to learning, saying that it "threatens to exclude or disadvantage many who are not economically or functionally able to participate in such practices, where a physical device and data are not the only sufficient requirements, albeit that they are necessary requirements" (CHE, 2020, p.10). The Council expressed the need for an urgent national dialogue with the relevant stakeholders to converse about the sustainability of this mode of delivery seeing as COVID-19 keeps developing into different and more dangerous variants, restricting the return to normalcy (CHE, 2020).

There is a paucity of evaluative studies in the literature on blended learning and little

information specific to the use of blended learning in skill-based learning, especially in developing countries. Dinh and Nguyen (2020) concurred with this; they stated that very little is known about the situation, advantages, and disadvantages, together with the students' assessment of this type of delivery online, particularly in social work. This is the identified gap in the literature on blended learning that the researcher sought to contribute to by exploring students' experiences of a social work program that was taken using blended learning. The researcher sought to answer whether blended teaching, from the students' perspective, affords students the same opportunities as the traditional learning formats to learn and practice social work.

1.3 Aim and Objectives of the Study

1.3.1 Aim

The study aims to explore the experiences of social work students taking the program through blended learning.

1.3.2 Objectives

According to Kumar (2011) research objectives transforms research questions into behavioural aims by using action-oriented words such as “to find,” “to determine,” and “to explore” (p. 50). Study objectives are the important steps the researcher takes to achieve the study aim.

- To identify opportunities and challenges forwarded by blended learning as experienced by social work students.
- To understand the strategies that social work students employed in preparing and adjusting to blended learning.

- To explore social work students' perceptions of the skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning.
- To establish the social work students' self-confidence in practising social work skills acquired through blended learning.

1.3.3 Research Questions

Research questions articulate what a researcher wants to know about the perspectives of those involved in social interactions (Agee, 2009). This study addresses the following research questions:

- What are the opportunities and challenges presented by blended learning to social work students?
- What are the strategies that students employed in preparing for and adjusting to blended learning?
- What are the students' perceptions of the social work skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning?
- How confident are the students with practising social work skills acquired through blended learning?

1.4 Theoretical Framework of the Study

The Constructivist theory of learning

The Constructivist theory is a learning theory that explains how people may acquire knowledge and learn. Maksimović (2020) stated that "it was only two centuries ago that it was formulated as a new educational theory that changed the former understanding of education, learning and teaching" (p.265). Constructivist conceptions of learning are said to have their historical roots in the work of Dewey (1929), Bruner (1961), Vygotsky (1962), and Piaget (1980), the theory's genesis is traced as far back as the eighteenth-century philosophers Vico and Kant (Maksimović, 2020).

According to Brau (2018) The constructivist theory "relies on the learners to be in control of their own acquisition of knowledge" (para. 30), it therefore supports the learner-centred pedagogy that is adopted mostly by HEIs that endorsed the use of blended learning to deliver practice-based programs such as social work. It posits that knowledge is not passively received from the world or authoritative sources but constructed by individuals or groups making sense of their experiential worlds, making knowledge personal and idiosyncratic (Yilmaz, 2008). It considers the student an active agent in learning and acquiring knowledge (Olusegun, 2015). Yilmaz (2008) expands the afore-mentioned in stating that the theory "proposes that learning is neither a stimulus-response phenomenon nor a passive process of receiving knowledge; instead, an adaptive activity requiring building conceptual structures and self-regulation through reflection and abstraction," which students are believed to be capable of (p.165).

The constructivist theory also puts forward the assumption that learning is situated, which means that it should occur in situations meaningful to students and relevant to the context in which the new information is to be used (Yilmaz, 2008). With social work being a practice-based profession, its education adopts socio-cultural perspectives that include real-

world activities (Phelan, 2015) and requires that students be engaged in real-world activities similar to what is required in the work place, that is, role-plays demonstrating the acquisition or development of counselling, group work, and community work skills. Constructivists, in saying that learning is an active process, recommend giving students ownership of what they learn (real-world activities) and have educators assume roles of facilitation and support; many authors believe the physical classroom environment is better enabling of such practices (Bentley et al., 2015; Boer et al., 2011; Goldingay & Boddy, 2017; Petracchi et al., 2005). The researcher thus used this theory to understand the experiences of social work students with regard to the role they assumed in engaging the blended learning environment to facilitate their learning.

According to Yilmaz (2008), the constructivist theory is not a single or unified theory; it is said to be characterized by plurality and multiple perspectives; the facets are explicated as cognitive development, social aspects, and the role of context. Cognitive development is covered in cognitive constructivism, which builds on the work of Piaget, while the social aspects and the role of context are covered in social constructivism, building on the work of Vygotsky. Cognitive constructivism emphasizes individual problem-solving and the construction of ideas. Social constructivism emphasizes that "human development is socially conditioned, and that knowledge is built through interaction with other people" (Maksimović, 2020, p.269). Boethel and Dimock (2000) added that although cognitive development takes precedence in the learning process, social interaction is as important a component in the process and not merely supportive of cognitive development, the melding of the two components in learning builds on the work of Dewey (Brau, 2018).

Presently, learning is technology-mediated; students use synchronous and asynchronous learning tools to acquire knowledge through blended learning. Zimba et al. (2021) assert that "the use of technology provides most students with greater opportunities for

more self-directed learning that is flexible and can – if designed with care – provide greater opportunities for critical thinking, deeper learning and reflection," features that are especially relevant within a practice-based profession such as social work (p.265). With regards to knowledge acquisition, cognitive constructivism puts much responsibility on students, assuming that no matter the circumstances disturbing their learning process, learning is an adaptive activity (Yilmaz, 2008). It does, however, acknowledge that:

a new event, situation, or learning environment can create contradictions with one's previous understandings; their insufficiency leads to perturbation and a state of disequilibrium in the mental schemata, in which generic events and abstract concepts are stored and organized in terms of their common patterns (p.166).

Nevertheless, it states that to form a state of equilibrium in the cognitive structure and to put an end to the anxiety that developed following the disturbance, the individual (the learner) is the one to reorganize their schemata by adapting to the new event, situation, or learning environment. Social constructivism does not take away this responsibility; however, having said that learning is personal and idiosyncratic; it proposes that there be support (guide) for students from peers and educators through social interactions and collaborations (for students to get multiple perspectives on tasks).

This theory, for the most part, helped the researcher understand the experiences of students taking the social work program through blended learning; the role they played in their learning, the challenges they faced, the strategies they employed to deal with or overcome the perturbation and social distress posed by this approach to learning, and the opportunities brought forward by blended learning.

In contextualizing the theory, a considerable concern, according to Alanazi (2016), was that "the Piagetian concept of constructivism overlooks important contextual factors in

learning environments such as available educational resources, the need to integrate media into learning environments, learners' preferences, and the affordance of individual student thinking" (p.3). Critics argued that the aforesaid factors contribute to learning environments, and the focus mainly on cognitive factors ignores other contributing environmental and technological factors. Zimba et al. (2021), in their study, *'Using blended learning in South African social work education to facilitate student engagement,'* stated that, in South Africa, the extent to which students engage actively in learning varies on the basis of their access to digital platforms for learning, their social and educational backgrounds, and individual characteristics. Having stated that the constructivist theory assumes that active student engagement in the learning process is crucial for knowledge acquisition, the researcher has identified that Zimba et al. (2021) appreciated that student engagement is vital in social work as it "provides a learning platform to learn critical social work values such as communication skills, integration of knowledge, self-directed reflective learning, collaboration, goal setting and evaluation" (p.265). They noted that there are barriers to the use of blended learning in South Africa, which include but are not limited to limited access to devices or even to the internet, connectivity issues, poor computer literacy, and the pedagogy adopted in course design. Considering the aforesaid, the researcher was propelled to add ignored dimension (environmental and technological factors) in this study; this covered where the theory was lacking, and it contextualized the study – acquired context-specific information.

1.5 Summary of Research Methodology

The study employed a qualitative research approach, according to Grosseohme (2014), qualitative research is an accessible way for researchers to contribute to knowledge about people's lived experiences and it seeks to understand the meaning of experience in a study sample. The qualitative research approach was used to understand the subjective experiences

of social work students taking the professional course through blended learning. To answer the research questions, a qualitative approach informed by the interpretive paradigm was used. Interpretivism calls for the understanding of phenomena by interacting with the research participants (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). The study utilised an exploratory research design.

Non-probability sampling was utilised in this study and the purposive sampling strategy was employed in selecting fifteen (15) participants for this study. Fifteen social work students in their first, second or third year of study during the year 2021 were recruited into the study, recruitment was inclusive of all genders, age groups and races. The detailed procedures followed during the recruitment process are detailed in chapter three.

Gatekeeper permission was obtained from the University of KwaZulu-Natal to conduct the study. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) also at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The researcher obtained informed consent from participants prior to the collection of data. The qualitative data were collected using semi-structured individual interviews; the interviews were conducted online (Zoom) to adhere to the COVID-19 restrictions. The interviews were conducted in IsiZulu and English; the choice of language used was made by the participants. All participants consented to have the interviews audio recorded.

Data analysis began with the transcription and translation of the data. Thereafter, the researcher made use of thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic data analysis as a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns of themes within data. After the transcription of data, the researcher analysed the data by re-evaluating it and generating main themes (recurrent information) that aligned with and answered the research questions.

1.6 Significance of the Study

First and foremost, as an exploratory study, this study identified issues (pedagogical, technological, socio-economic.) that may inform or be the focus of future research. At the discipline level, the challenges and opportunities shared by the participants (some curriculum-related) will help curriculum developers design a system that will mitigate the challenges and reinforce the opportunities as they see fit.

The finding of this study may also inform the advancement of student support services in ways that will better support students in their newly established challenges impacted by blended learning and exacerbated by COVID-19. Lastly, this study hoped, from its findings, to recommend ways to improve the current teaching and learning methods, contribute to policy review, and the development of competent social work students.

1.7 Limitations of the Study

According to Rajkoomar (2015), "no research project is without its limitations, and there is no perfectly designed research" (p.11). The limitations of this study included: issues of generalizability of data obtained for other fields of study taken through blended learning in HEIs, the use of virtual interviews without videos, and social desirability. Perinelli and Gremigni (2016) define social desirability as the tendency of some respondents to report an answer in a way they deem more socially acceptable than their true answer. These three mentioned limitations are detailed in chapter three.

1.8 Definition of Key Concepts

Social work education – Cabiati (2017) stated this it is “generally understood as an all-encompassing enterprise that includes multiple and interrelated professional functions aiming to develop competent social work practitioners” (p. 61). It involves teaching and learning

activities that are divided into two components – theory and practice; social work educators have the responsibility to ensure that students are equipped with critical thinking abilities and develop the competency to take on the challenges of practice (Cabiati, 2017). A comprehensive (operational) definition of social work education in the South African context is detailed in the CHE’s (2015) Qualification Standard for Bachelor of Social Work.

Blended learning – this study adopts Power’s (2008) definition of the term and refers to it as “the simultaneous and complementary integration and implementation of an asynchronous-mode learning environment (i.e., a learning management system, or LMS) and a synchronous desktop conferencing environment (i.e., a virtual classroom)” (p. 503).

Blended learning, virtual learning, and technology-mediated learning may be used interchangeably.

Synchronous learning – refers to learning that takes place in an online environment where the teacher and the students meet simultaneously (in real-time) on a specific online platform for teaching and communicate about a lesson (Amiti, 2020).

Asynchronous learning – the opposite of synchronous learning, asynchronous learning is an unsynchronized method of learning; it provides students with readily available material in the form of audio/video lectures, handouts, articles and power point presentations, and is accessible anytime anywhere (Amiti, 2020).

1.9 Structure of the Thesis

This thesis consists of six chapters:

Chapter one introduces the problem under study and presents the problem statement, aim, objectives and research questions. It also presents the theoretical framework that helped the researcher understand the experiences of the population under study. **Chapter two** reviews and critically analyses the available literature on the use of blended learning amid the

COVID-19 pandemic and how it has impacted social work education. **Chapter three** describes the qualitative research methodology that guided data collection and analysis to facilitate the interpretations and support the findings. **Chapter four** focuses on the findings which emerged from the participants' experiences through the use of thematic analysis. **Chapter five** presents the discussion of the study in the context of existing literature to elaborate on the findings. And lastly, chapter six presents the conclusion of the study and offers recommendations for further research and the implications for social work practice.

1.10 Conclusion

This chapter sought to present a contextual understanding of the study and the key processes and steps that were undertaken to conduct the study. In the following chapter, a critical discussion of the literature is presented.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2. Introduction

Terre Blanche et al. (2006) stated that a literature review places a research study in context by showing how it fits into a particular field. This chapter seeks to present the available literature on the use of blended learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic; it will firstly give a brief background on COVID-19, the effect it has had on higher education and how this resulted in the use of blended learning, thereafter, it will give a detailed conceptualization of blended learning. This chapter will further critically analyse the available literature that is specific to the use of blended learning in Social Work education. The relevant legislation and policies informing and guiding the adoption of this new approach to learning will also be reviewed.

2.1. Background

2.1.1. COVID-19 and Higher Education in South Africa

According to Sansa (2020), COVID-19 is a disease associated with the novel coronavirus, which was initially named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus-2 (SARS-CoV-2) and has since developed into different and severely dangerous variants. COVID-19 was first identified in the city of Wuhan in China late in the year 2019; it rapidly spread all around the globe and was declared a world pandemic early in the year 2020 (WHO, 2020). The South African government declared this pandemic a national state of disaster in terms of the Disaster Management Act [No. 57 of 2002] (South African Government, 2020). South Africa, together with the rest of the world, came to a standstill due to the lockdown necessitated by governments to curb the COVID-19 infection rate (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020); this caused several disruptions to normal life. Sansa (2020) stated that COVID-19 is "transmitted through respiratory droplets that human beings sneeze, cough, or exhale" (p.34); therefore, avoiding any form of social contact or rather practising physical distancing was one of the ways to prevent the spread of the virus. In South Africa, the government was compelled to enact a

national lockdown, and this resulted in the total closure of all schools, including universities, causing a halt to the learning process (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020).

The extensions of the lockdown in South Africa forced universities and other institutions of higher learning to switch exclusively to remote education for learning to resume (Mhlanga & Moloji, 2020); this meant learning from home because most of the HEIs in South Africa are contact and residential institutions - "their campuses are concentrations of large communities of students and staff, making it difficult for individuals to practice social distancing" (CHE, 2020). Established contact universities that previously made use of the traditional learning system had to promptly make plans that ensured the maintenance of real-time lectures for their students while respecting the ethos of social distancing, thus the switch to blended learning.

Most universities (including distance learning institutions) had embraced technology-enhanced education, advancing from basic online learning, defined by Maidment (2006) as simply transferring material from hardcopy to electronic, to the use of asynchronous learning through LMS for nearly a decade now (Mohapi, Agboola, & Kang'ethe, 2021). However, COVID-19 compelled some established contact universities to incorporate synchronous learning by using video conferencing technology, to supplement LMS for virtual learning. LMSs are defined as "computer systems that distribute course materials, manage online courses and allow collaboration between students and pedagogues" (Agaçi, 2017, p.80). They are said to promote student collaboration and encourage interaction for the sharing of knowledge. They also support different formats of content, such as text, video, and multimedia so, students are able to learn the content through these formats at their own pace and time (p.81). Mhlanga and Moloji (2020) stated that synchronous learning may be conducted using Microsoft teams, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, YouTube, or DStv. The researcher sought to find out if this has been accommodative of programs such as Social

Work that require the learning and practice of specific skills (casework and group work) in preparation for service to real-life clients.

Through its ministries, the South African government was forced to cater to any insufficiencies COVID-19 may cause the educational system with a sense of urgency. The South African Constitution (Act no. 108 of 1996) in the Bill of Rights section 28, subsection 1(b) states that everyone has the right "to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible" (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, p.12). Through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), the Council on Higher Education is responsible for providing guidelines to the higher-education sector on quality assurance during this unprecedented time of the COVID-19 pandemic (CHE, 2020). It performs its functions in terms of the Higher Education Act, 101 of 1997, as amended, "and in its capacity as the quality council (QC) for higher education, in terms of section 25 of the National Qualifications Framework Act, 67 of 2008, as amended (NQF Act)" (CHE, p.4).

The Council adopted the 'emergency remote teaching' (ERT) as a delivery mode for teaching and learning and defined it "as a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode as a response to crisis situations" (ibid), with emphasis on the term 'temporary'. The alternative delivery mode was blended learning; with this type of delivery, academics were mandated to ensure that they create as much presence as possible for their students, be it digitally synchronous or asynchronous, ensuring that no student is left behind. Landa, Zhou and Marongwe (2021) found that academics were not adequately trained to carry out the mentioned mandate, this is a worrying influence on the learning process, thus the significance of enquiring about whether the learning of a practice-based programme that seeks to equip students with skills to work with individuals, families and communities faced with a myriad of social issues has been accommodated. The CHE (2020), in its guidelines for

quality assurance, mentioned that the planning of ERT "was characterised by administrators in institutions and the DHET working to ensure devices and access to data for students and staff, as well as by academic staff beginning the onerous task of creating digital material to be delivered to students" (p.4). DHET refers to the Department of Higher Education and Training, which oversees universities and other post-secondary education in South Africa (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). This paper sought to discern, from students, if this approach to learning has been effective in facilitating the learning of social work skills.

2.2. The conceptualization of Blended Learning

Mohapi et al. (2021) noted that advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the digital age have caused remarkable changes in education. They added that "this is demonstrated by a move from printed learning materials to virtual learning platforms" (p.1), which simply connotes a shift from traditional face-to-face methods of instructions to online learning environments. The most recent of these advances is the blended method of online teaching and learning, which this study focused solely on the learning component.

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) referred to blended learning as the "thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences" (p. 96). Nel (2005) informed that the interest in this teaching and learning approach had been seen in research since the dawn of the new millennium. The first and most widely used definition of blended learning referred to it as a learning mode that combines the traditional face-to-face and online delivery modes (Nel, 2005). This definition has been adopted in much of the reviewed literature; Rajkoomar (2015) also concurred with the same definition and added that the aim of blended learning is to combine the best of face-to-face learning with the best of online learning.

However, Zimba et al. (2021) have criticised the said definition and labelled it as

basic because definitions of blended learning abound. These authors supported the suggestion made by Oliver and Trigwell (2005) to have the term ‘blended learning’ discarded altogether as it has been poorly defined. According to Oliver and Trigwell (2005), the term blended learning could mean:

a blend of any of the following three types of teaching: (i) a combination of didactic teaching with online approaches, (ii) the use of different types of media and tools in an online learning environment; and (iii) the use of various pedagogic approaches, irrespective of learning technology use. (p.264)

Benson, Anderson, and Ooms (2011) also argued that blended education goes beyond combining face-to-face and online teaching and learning; Lakhal, Mukamurera, Bédard, Heilporn, and Chaure (2020) stated that blended education “involves a total redesign of traditional courses to include the use of technology for online communication, activities and delivery.”

Three recurrent formats of blended courses in the literature were reviewed, the first being the most commonly used by HEIs (even before Covid-19) – one in which “students attend face-to-face sessions supplemented with online asynchronous teaching and learning activities (Lakhal et al., 2020, p. 2); in the second format, all teaching and learning activities occur online, some synchronously and others asynchronously. This was explained long-windedly by Power (2008) as “the simultaneous and complementary integration and implementation of an asynchronous-mode learning environment (i.e. a learning management system, or LMS) and a synchronous desktop conferencing environment (i.e. a virtual classroom)” (p.503), he termed it ‘blended online learning’; and in the third format, “online students participate in class sessions synchronously with face-to-face students by means of ICT such as videoconferencing, web conferencing and virtual world. Asynchronous online activities are also planned for all students” (Lakhal et al., 2020, p.2).

The researcher concurs with Oliver and Trigwell's (2005) definition on the grounds that technology's rapid advances, pedagogical and curriculum reconstructions, and other external factors such as, in this case, the occurrence of a pandemic may influence the definition of blended learning. Thus, this study adopted the second type of blend they mentioned (the use of different types of media and tools in an online learning environment) together with the second format mentioned by Power (2008) (blended online learning). It defines blended learning as the use of synchronous (live, real-time online meetings with the whole class or in smaller groups) and asynchronous learning (instruction and learning that is available for students to manage on their own time) because the COVID-19 outbreak compelled universities to demand lecturers – ready or not – to move their services fully online and use video conferencing technology (synchronous) to supplement LMSs (asynchronous) for learning to continue.

2.3. Learning Social Work during COVID-19: Developed countries Versus South Africa

Blended learning is not a new concept for HEIs in developed countries; Muhuru and Kang'ethe (2021) stated that blended learning is well entrenched in many developed countries. The opportunity to employ 'web-based learning' was accepted comfortably in countries such as Australia, the United States of America (USA), Sweden, Finland, Norway, and the United Kingdom (UK), as they have seen a significant increase in the prevalence of web-based learning in higher education in the last decade (Lawrence & Abel, 2013; Goldingay et al., 2020; McFadden et al., 2020). Being resource-efficient, although not the sole determining factor for the successful implementation of web-based learning (Küsel, Martin and Markic, 2020), helped them develop this learning approach optimally, consequently teaching and learning of social work were adjusted with ease to accommodate

the COVID-19 restrictions in some of them.

Australia, for example, prides itself on the technology-mediated tools they have long been using to prepare social work students for practice – simulations and digital storytelling (Vandsburger, Duncan-Daston, Akerson, & Dillon, 2010 as cited in Goldingay et al.,2020). Simulations refer to professional acting roles that are loosely scripted by a member of the faculty; these are done through live streaming with professional actors or sent to students as recorded videos (Wood and Phillips, 2019). They are used to socialize students into the social work profession and develop students' cultural competency and understanding, confidence, and competence (ibid). Simulations are reported to be a very effective learning tool that provides students with an opportunity to navigate high-risk situations with no risk of harming real clients.

Meredith, Heslop and Dodds (2022) in the UK shared that classroom-based role-play is another form of simulation that is common in social work education and has been used by both students and educators for a very long time, they also reported on their use of simulations (both classroom-based and digital) in social work education pre-Covid-19. Hitchcock's (2022) magazine article informed that simulations are also used in the USA and have been used even before the pandemic. In South Africa, the use of simulations is well documented in medical, health care, aviation, and science practice (Naudé, 2016; Dunn & Ramnarain, 2020); the following definition of simulated learning by the CHE (2011) reflects this assertion: the concept is referred to as “learning simulated through an activity that involves the imitation of the real world in academy. The act of simulating something entails representing certain key characteristics of the selected workplace and includes such things as laboratories, mock meetings, flight simulations etc.” (p.76). Local literature on simulations, as defined by Wood and Phillips (2019), in social work education is elusive. Pillay (2016) confirmed that classroom-based role-play is used in social work education in South Africa to

teach practice skills, however, it is unknown whether the adopted online environment as a result of the pandemic allowed for this type of simulation in this context, and the researcher sought to find this out from the student participants.

Digital storytelling is another form of simulation that creates a contextual digital case study, replicating the experience of social work practice in context. It is said to "invite students to sustain interest and experience empathy, engagement, and emotional responses not possible with text-based case studies" (Goldingay, Epstein, and Taylor 2018, p.3), introducing them to the client's context; some students in Meredith et al.'s (2022) study expressed that watching a case study is a better learning experience than reading it from a handout. The use of the abovementioned tools demonstrates the 'real-world' activities that are required to foster self-directed learning, which is a pedagogical need in these unprecedented times of the pandemic. Also, Australian social service providers have long been delivering counselling online; this further justifies their adoption of digital technologies in social work as early as they did (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017).

Countries such as Norway and Ireland (as developed as they are) had not fully adopted digital technology in programs such as social work for somewhat the same reason many other institutions in other countries (developing) had not – the belief that it would not be effective for such a program, more especially for social work skills development. In fact, the five universities and one Further Education College delivering social work education in Ireland predominantly use face-to-face methods (McFadden et al., 2020). Technology-mediated education was adopted following the COVID-19-related lockdowns put in to prevent the spread of the virus and in their case, as it is in most established contact universities in South Africa, "technology was used to provide a mixture of synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning platforms" (McFadden et al., 2020, p.1157).

2.3.1. South African Council for Social Service Professions (SACSSP) Social Work guidelines for practicum during COVID-19

Before going into the details of what the social work programme is comprised of, it is important that its detailed definition is provided. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (2014) approved the following as the global definition of social work:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being. (para.2)

As a practice-based profession, social work is mandated to integrate field instruction in its curriculum from the first to the fourth year of study (SACSSP, 2020a). Together with the teaching and learning of the social work theoretical knowledge, ethics, values, and principles, the SACSSP (2020a) as one of the standards for Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), stipulated in section 4.4.2a that 700 hours of actual social work in the field are to be completed by students over the four years of study and evidence for this fieldwork is to be provided. The document on norms and standards for BSW was released just before the report of the first case of COVID-19 in South Africa; before the national lockdown was enacted and university students were sent back home, as result no measures were included in it on how the stipulated hours were to be completed amidst COVID-19.

The SACSSP (2020b), in the general notices 2 of 2020 released after the enactment of the national lock-down, recommended in section 5.3.4a that the field instruction of students

in social work and other social service professions, other than that of fourth or final year students, be suspended until circumstances have normalised. The Professional Board of Social Work (PBSW) then virtually met with Heads of Schools of Social Work and the Association of South African Social Work Education Institutions (ASASWEI) executive committee in August 2020 to discuss (with regards to practice) the fate of students in their fourth year of study (SACSSP, 2020b). Mutually, they agreed that up to 40% of the hours that should be completed in the fourth year could be replaced with simulated practice as stipulated in the table below:

Table 2.3.1: Social Work simulated practice

Social Work method	COVID-19 practice guidelines
<p>1. Casework</p>	<p>a. Casework probably presents the biggest challenge as the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions limit the required face-to-face contact sessions for casework and simulated cases do not necessarily sufficiently strengthen competence in casework;</p> <p>b. The PBSW does not support casework counselling with friends, family or BSW classmates, due to the ethical implications it presents;</p> <p>c. Virtual counselling with clients who are not friends or family, or with students from other departments in the university, could be considered;</p> <p>d. Approaching the Child Guidance or Student Counselling Centres, Disability Units, Aids Units, and other support units at universities, for placements during this period, could also be considered;</p> <p>e. Schools of Social Work may also collaborate with SADAG, Lifeline or university crisis lines for students to do intake and referrals.</p>

<p>Group work</p>	<p>a. Facilitating activity groups with fellow students, neighbours, people in your street, students in your campus residence who are not BSW students, especially as Covid-19 has brought with it much stress and anxiety that may well be addressed via educational and support groups. Covid-19 precautions of social distancing and wearing masks must be adopted.</p> <p>b. Therapeutic groups with family, close friends and classmates should be avoided, due to ethical concerns regarding personal/professional boundaries, but therapeutic groups could be run with non-BSW students who are back at university;</p> <p>c. Offering group work services to NPOs dealing with gender-based violence, especially during the pandemic period;</p> <p>d. Analysing the group dynamics and group work skills in videos on group work;</p> <p>e. Developing a detailed plan/contract for a 6/8 session group with a particular population group, even though these groups are not actually run;</p> <p>f. Running online group empowerment sessions linked to life skills themes.</p>
<p>Community work</p>	<p>a. Doing an online assessment of an actual community and then designing and planning an appropriate intervention based on the assessment;</p> <p>b. Analysing a community problem and designing and planning an intervention to resolve the problem;</p> <p>c. Developing information packs on Covid-19, resources available and how to access these (especially in relation to a specific community) and doing a door-to-door dissemination of the information, where conditions allow;</p>

	<p>d. Analysing videos and news articles on community service delivery protests, and doing an assignment that focuses on alternative ways of achieving the same objectives;</p> <p>e. Running a small-scale community work intervention programme with the people living in students' immediate vicinity on a topic of relevance to them;</p> <p>f. Community work is harder to simulate than group or casework and therefore universities could consider an assignment based on the above, which could be followed by spending a week or several days at a community work placement when this becomes possible. This may become increasingly possible as we move into Level 2. The intention is to allow the student to achieve the competencies for community work.</p>
--	--

Source: (SACSSP, 2020b)

It is worth noting that it was also agreed in the virtual meeting that these stipulated simulated practice activities were to be used as a last resort and not a first option. Universities were tasked to “continue negotiations with agencies, to take on students as the lockdown levels decrease” (p. 3). With all the above being said and the suspension of field instruction for first, second and third-year students in mind, the researcher sought to elicit from the students their experiences of learning social work through the blended learning approach with simulated practical placement scenarios.

2.4. The challenges and opportunities forwarded by blended learning

2.4.1. Challenges

Digital divide (access) and technological competence

The most prevalent challenge to the smooth sailing implementation of blended learning or any type of technology-mediated learning for all disciplines globally is the issue of the digital divide between the diverse population of students. The digital divide, as defined by Goldingay et al. (2020), refers to “inequalities in access to, and use of, the internet and information and communication technologies” (p.70). They added that this definition has expanded over time to acknowledge technology illiteracy as well as limited knowledge of the benefits of technology use. This expansion is also known by Van Deursen and Van Dijk (2019) who referred to having an Internet connection as the first-level digital divide and Internet skills and usage as the second-level digital divide.

Mpungose (2021) added the social aspect to the term and called it ‘the social and digital divide,’ saying that these access issues are a result of social problems, which the researcher views as accurate. On the subject of social problems, he mentioned “socio-economic factors such as race, social class, gender, age, geographical area, and educational background” to be determinants of the level of the digital divide in a university context (p. 10). Goldingay et al. (2020) also stated that the important principles of access and equality may be compromised if the use of technology is adopted without the consideration of the fact that not everyone will have equal access, adding that this may be due to problems such as generational factors, income, location, or time. They saw this as crucial, especially in the training of social workers.

Structural inequalities

Letseka and Pitsoe (2013) asserted that the reality in South Africa is that not all communities have equal access to resources, including technology; some communities lack access to electricity, which is also necessary for accessing technological resources. These are challenges entrenched deep in the inequalities in the country as Nel (2005) acknowledged them in her study, noting issues such as the diverse student population from different socio-economic backgrounds (affordability), improper preparation of students for higher education, and students' lack of technological skills. Zimba et al. (2021) confirmed this and simplified the termed issues to poor computer literacy and limited access to devices or even to the internet (limited or no network connectivity); Covid-19 and the forced adoption of remote teaching and learning in South Africa have brought forth clear evidence of the continuation of some of the past inequalities.

Globally, the literature reveals that universities and students located in rural contexts were disadvantaged the most because of the social and digital divide; the rural parts in developed countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia experienced it from the onset of their adoption of digital technology and continue to experience it although it is vastly investigated and investments into broadband infrastructure were made (Riddlesden and Singleton, 2014; Goldingay et al., 2020). In developing countries, Hill and Lawton (2018) stated that:

For hundreds of millions of people in rural parts of the developing world, the digital age has not even started. In 2016, an estimated 46% of the global population was able to access the internet from home (Internet live stats). In India the proportion was only 35%, in spite of that country's urban tech hubs and impressive digital infrastructure. Throughout Africa, broadband hardly exists beyond urban hotspots. (p.603)

In South Africa, Dube (2020) corroborated the assertion that rural-based universities and students were disadvantaged more because of the social and digital divide. He stated that many learners in rural contexts find themselves excluded from schooling and are unable to access online resources due to a lack of infrastructure, the unavailability of electricity and electronic gadgets, adding that even the educators were not qualified or trained to assist with blended learning. He went on to express how this approach to learning appeared to favour “urban and well-privileged learners, thus, widening the gap between the poor and the rich, instead of uniting the nation in the fight against COVID-19” (p.137). Landa et al. (2021) also expressed that the complete adoption of online platforms as a strategy to maintain the delivery of education while respecting the ethos of social distancing subjected university lecturers and students that were forced to operate from underserved village homes to a challenging experience of trying to teach and learn. This is evident in what was shared by the students they interviewed; an excerpt from one of the students interviewed reads:

Our university is disadvantaged. It is not like the other universities that were exposed to online before and that have the means. The pace here is very slow; we are still waiting and we do not know when exactly we are going to get the laptops. Our parents are so poor that they cannot afford to buy data for us. We just heard that we were going to start online learning on the 1st of July 2020.
(p.174)

Another student shared that they had challenges accessing course content that was uploaded and assessment tasks as a result of digital illiteracy and the lack of technical skills (Landa et al., 2021).

Mpungose (2020) stated that social media platforms were used immensely by students because of their familiarity. Social media is defined by Basitere and Mapatagan (2018) as a “web-based and mobile applications built on technology of web 2.0, which allows individuals

and communities to create, exchange and modify existing or new user generated content in a digital environment through multi-way communication” (p.14), it is said to include applications (commonly used by university and college students) such as, Whatsapp, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and Skype. While other students shared that social media platforms such as WhatsApp helped communication with educators – educators would send the work that was uploaded on the LMS system on WhatsApp for easy access – others, however, still felt disadvantaged because: “Certain phones do not have applications and space to open modules. Not everyone owns a sophisticated smartphone with high compatibility” (Landa et al.,2021, p.174). Zvomuya (2021) also submitted that the WhatsApp platform, in particular, was being used by social work students and their lecturers in Zimbabwe as a platform to share the learning material. The above-mentioned challenges serve as barriers to the use of blended learning in South Africa and, in turn, may hinder some students' engagement in social work education.

Impacts of self-directed learning and self-isolation

Along with the lack of technological competence, Rasheed, Kamsin, and Abdullah (2020) found that self-regulation and student isolation are other challenges faced by students; they stated that students lack the self-regulation skills needed in the use of online technology. On the subject of self-regulation, they deduced procrastination, limited preparation before class, poor time management skills (“learners use most of the time intended for studying in the online environment for other activities” [p.4]), online help-seeking challenge, and the improper utilization of online peer learning strategies to be the specific challenges shared by students. Simanovic, Cioarță, Jardine, and Paul (2021) also mentioned procrastination as one of the challenges their social work student participants in Scotland shared, however, they specifically ascribed it to the asynchronous component of blended learning; the students

voiced that as much as pre-recorded classes were needed, easy accessibility facilitated procrastination, they saw the possibility of live interaction (synchronous) as an important part of learning. In support of the above points, one of the students interviewed by Landa et al. (2021) confessed: “As we are used to regular interaction with lecturers, time management and self-discipline are a challenge, resulting in incomplete work, mediocre performance and plagiarism” (p.174).

Rasheed et al. (2020) deduced students’ alienation and isolation in blended learning, students feeling isolated and disinterested, students’ problems with synchronous online communication with the use of video projection, the microphones and speakers, remote students’ uncomfortability in being the centre of attention, to be the challenges shared by students. Students fall into isolation and alienation because of their hesitancy to participate in online communities which may be consequent to reasons such as their “personality, sense of transactional distance in online environments, lack of confidence and trust in the online community participants, lack of communication cues (facial expression, voice tone etc.), connection difficulties (e.g., low internet speed), poor writing skills or language barrier” (p.7).

Constructivist theorists asserted that social interaction is an important component of the learning process and that knowledge is built through interaction with other people (Maksimović, 2020; Boethel and Dimock, 2000) so social isolation and alienation may potentially threaten the learning process, and although Rasheed et al. (2020) stated this to apply to students in general, this is especially worrying in programs such as social work that require the sharing and understanding of students’ real-life experiences in order to learn a specific skill set. Another worrying detail for social work education in the literature is the emphasis that blended learning is more effective in delivering theoretical content but does not let students practice and learn effectively (Mphahlele, Seeletso, Muleya & Simui’s (2021). If

there is no engagement in online environments as a result of student isolation and the limited opportunity for effective practice of skills, students may run the risk of not fully grasping taught content and will therefore find it challenging to apply what was taught. An excerpt from one lecturer interviewed by Landa et al. (2021), although not specifically referring to social work students, substantiates this:

Most of the time one can determine students' comprehension or lack thereof by their facial expressions and body language, which one will not have access to in online teaching, so as a lecturer, you really do not know for sure if students are grasping and understanding the material that you are posting online. (p.174)

Landa et al. (2021) focused on how the urgent emergent move to online platforms of teaching and learning affected students in general, thus, the researcher saw it important to discern from the student participants what implications a lack of engagement in the online environment as a result of student isolation and alienation, and the resultant challenge of learned content retention, have for their preparation for social work practice.

Threats to students' holistic well-being and professional confidence

Literature reports that it may be quite difficult for students to stay engaged in the online environment if the environment they are in is physically and psychologically inconducive. Student participants' responses in Landa et al. (2021) indicated that they were experiencing psychological distress consequent to the indefinite confinement in physically inconducive environments; one participant shared that:

It is hard to learn when both the physical and psychological environment is negative. Some of us are confined in an environment where the homes are near taverns; we live with the extended family with many people in the household.

There is overcrowding and many other factors weighing on us psychologically.
(p.174)

Simanovic et al. (2021) also had 'home schooling' as a challenge mentioned by their student participants, they coupled it with increased care responsibilities noting that "students are also parents, children, carers, and employees living within particular social, familial, and economic contexts" (p.132). In addition to their educational responsibilities, they had to "care for and shield their vulnerable or elderly relatives all while experiencing illness, loss, and grief amid the global rise of infections and deaths" (Simanovic et al., 2021, p.132). There were also concerns that certain types of families were prone to financial hardships by cause of the pandemic. One of the students in Landa et al. (2021) disclosed that, in their physical environment, there was an "absence of peace because of poverty and domestic conflicts" (p. 174). Other students expressed that they found it particularly challenging to study at home given that there are many distractions, as a result, they were left demotivated.

Most student participants in Simanovic et al. (2021), first years especially, worriedly expressed that schooling at home "might affect their student identity and a sense of belonging to a student community. They argued that their physical presence at the university was paramount to meet and connect with others" (p.135). While the use of online platforms to deliver education was seen by first-year students as a lost opportunity to meet new people and develop a sense of community within the university environment, older students worried that this would have implications for the Social Work program, particularly the quality of their degree: "as social work training is inherently practice-oriented, our participants worried that without a strong grounding and opportunities for learning in the community, they would not be sufficiently prepared for practice upon graduation" (Simanovic et al., 2021, p.135).

The above-mentioned challenges, especially those mentioned by local authors, affect a significant proportion of the student population in South Africa; although this study sought

to focus on students' experiences of the use of blended learning in social work education, it is probable that the findings of this study may be reflective of some of the above-mentioned challenges since the population at the university under study is diverse in terms of the demographics mentioned by Mpungose (2021) above; race, social class, gender, age, geographical area, and educational background. Numerous authors in the literature emphasized that institutions have a moral obligation to cater for the educational needs of all students (Goldingay et al., 2020; Mhlanga and Moloji, 2020; Simanovic et al., 2021). Locally, educational resources were of high need.

The CHE (2020) stated that the activities of the DHET and individual HEIs have met the access challenges (devices, data, connectivity, and its cost) head-on and were mitigated through deals negotiated with internet service providers for low-cost internet access to students, as well as zero-rating of institutional websites. According to Mhlanga and Moloji (2020), a website is defined as zero-rated "when a mobile operator does not count the usage of the application or website against a user's monthly data allotment, which renders its use as effectively free" (p.6).

A contradicting statement of the CHE in its guidelines, however, states that the same ERT that has supposedly mitigated access challenges threatens to exclude or disadvantage many who are not economically or functionally able to participate in such practices. The Council acknowledges that although a physical device and data are necessary requirements for participation in the ERT, they are not the only sufficient requirements (CHE, 2020). It also acknowledges that this change, together with the constraints that come with it, pose psychosocial problems for students, and threatens their well-being; it mentions that students may be "intimidate by personal context, ability, comfortability, isolation, privacy, and a myriad of social conditions..." (CHE, p.10). Dinh and Nguyen (2020) share the same concern in Malaysia; they state that the pandemic has caused a stressful situation for both educators

and students, they refer specifically to social work educators and students. They have termed the stressful situation as an 'enforced adaptation' listing technological and pedagogical issues, including personal matters that may affect students and educators psychologically, emotionally, or socially (Dinh & Nguyen, 2020).

Most of the challenges extracted from the local literature were identified as affecting students in general, it remains unclear how local students have been affected by the implementation of blended learning within social work education in particular; as mentioned earlier, the social work curriculum is unique as it requires the attainment of theoretical knowledge, practice of skills, and praxis (SACSSP, 2020a).

2.4.2. Opportunities

It is very important to note that the blended learning approach, in all its forms as defined in Heilporn, Lakhal, and Bélisle (2021), had already been in place in some developed countries such as the UK, USA, and Australia when the pandemic struck. In Canada, blended learning environments that allow online synchronous activities instead of face-to-face emerged in the last 15 years (Heilporn et al, 2021), in South Africa however, the complete move to online platforms of learning from the 'face-to-face combined with online' type of blended learning was imposed, therefore there is a paucity of (student) benefits mentioned in the local literature as compared to the challenges. The reviewed literature revealed that blended learning has benefits for institutions, educators and learners, this section focuses solely on the opportunities it affords students.

Primarily, the move to virtual environments of learning was to minimise the spread of COVID-19, therefore, despite the challenges students faced learning from home, they were safer there to some extent. The use of the synchronous and asynchronous type of blended learning is widely appreciated in the literature for its increased flexibility and convenience.

Students, globally, are said to appreciate the time and cost savings afforded by blended learning on trips to and from their everyday university schedules (Lakhal and Bélisle, 2020; Mpungose, 2021; Simanovic et al., 2021; Heilporn et al, 2021). Also, with regards to costs, Zvomuya (2021) stated that the adoption of virtual platforms in social work education in Zimbabwe has presented a relief for economically disadvantaged students who were expected to submit hard copies of their research reports and other materials which they now submit as soft copies cost-free. The flexible nature of blended learning also accommodates the diverse population of students including those of mature age with other (work) responsibilities and gives others the opportunity to take on other responsibilities outside those that are educational, moreover, all students are able to access the material anywhere and at a time convenient for them (Simanovic et al., 2021).

Notwithstanding the challenges brought forth by blended learning, Kajjita, Nomngcoyiya, and Kang'ethe (2020) submitted that students were encouraged and afforded the opportunity to equip themselves with new attributes (honesty, confidentiality, and professionalism) and skills in light of the technological advancements informed by present and future trends. Holden, Norris, and Kuhlmeier (2021) offer a different view, they argue that the move to the virtual environment as a result of the pandemic has presented faculties and administrators with challenges of academic dishonesty, it is believed that the platform offers more cheating opportunities. Chang (2021) also acknowledged that there are privacy issues in the online environment, especially in work that is done collaboratively. The researcher is of the view that the above-mentioned issues of academic dishonesty and the lack of privacy may have implications for social work education as they could potentially blur the importance and assimilation of ethical practice in social work.

Another benefit shared by Zvomuya (2021) is that blended learning promotes enhanced communications. Mpungose (2021) consolidates this point by sharing that this

approach allows for spontaneous communication through, sometimes, the simultaneous use of videos, animations, audio, and graphics in content delivery, which through both its synchronous and asynchronous platforms accommodate students' different learning styles. The researcher saw it crucial to find out whether social work students were aware of such benefits and whether they (if aware) were able to take advantage of them in their learning. Mpungose (2021) also stated that the use of digital platforms for learning provides opportunities for immediate feedback both synchronously (live, real-time meetings) and asynchronously (emails and through LMS platforms).

Some social work students in Zimbabwe appreciated that the adoption of blended learning helped them build resilience, honed their skills in working flexibly and remotely, and made them embrace the possible use of technology in their practice (Zvomuya, 2021), the embracement of the new normal. On the subject of resilience, with learning seen by cognitive constructivists as an adaptive activity, strategies had to be employed to alleviate the perturbations caused by the imposed, unfamiliar approach to learning, and to adjust and get the most out of blended learning. The researcher is of the view that adapting can be an individualised activity because of students' uniqueness, thus the need to enquire about their subjective experiences.

2.5. The strategies employed in preparing and adjusting to blended learning.

The sudden move to the online learning environment, which was completely unfamiliar to some, has undoubtedly had an impact on the university student population, however, constructivists submit that learning is an adaptive activity and that, cognitively, students are responsible for and capable of adapting to the new environment (Yilmaz, 2008). The adoption of a teaching and learning approach that is learner-centred and therefore self-regulated substantiates the above submission. The researcher sought to discern the strategies

needed to help students adapt to blended learning and those that they employed in their learning.

Murphy (2008) stated that the virtual learning environment calls on students to sharpen their metacognitive abilities because these are crucial in self-regulated learning. Metacognition, according to Tobcu and Ubuz (2008), refers to a person's knowledge of his or her own cognitive processes or thinking. They posited that metacognition includes self-awareness (e.g., being aware of what one knows and what one does not know, also being aware of one's learning styles), knowledge about tasks (e.g., knowing that tasks vary in their level of difficulty), and knowledge about strategies or factors that can influence cognition (e.g., knowing that rehearsal can help comprehension or retention of the taught content).

Murphy (2008) argued that students engaged in blended learning must be in control of their thinking or cognitions. In controlling their thinking, she emphasized the importance of the development of skills in planning, monitoring, and evaluating the work they engage in. She gave comprehensive examples of the three processes as adopted from the Metacognitive Awareness Inventory by Schraw and Dennison (1994): in planning, students are to ask themselves questions about the material before they begin engaging it, possibly even set goals on what is to be achieved after engaging; in monitoring, students are to ask themselves periodically if they are meeting the goals they set and; in evaluating, students are to ask themselves if there was an easier way to do things after they finish a task (reflection). The honing of students' metacognitive abilities, or simply put, the implementation or practice of the above-mentioned three processes in blended learning is a strategy mentioned in the literature (Murphy, 2008; Tobcu and Ubuz, 2008; Yeh et al.,2019). However, Murphy (2008) reported that students' knowledge of metacognition was difficult to measure.

Also, with blended learning being learner-centred and self-regulated, literature asserts that it requires a behavioural change on the students' part or rather the development of

behaviours that would foster learning and ensure the successful achievement of academic goals (Lytle, 2013; Mock, 2015; Yeh et al., 2019). Yeh et al. (2019), in their quantitative study on students in the USA, identified time management as a strategy that is very crucial in blended learning; they define time management as a self-management skill with a focus on one's ability to use time effectively or productively, in this case, to achieve successful learning. Morrison (2012), in the same light, went on to suggest that the planning of weekly study times could help students manage their time productively.

Another strategy as per Yeh et al. (2019), is one of structuring the physical environment of students to reduce distractions and disturbances during the learning process, they added that it should be a regular space dedicated specifically to studying. Du (2016) in China saw students' environmental structuring to be very crucial saying it has the potential to exert a positive influence on a range of adaptive activities and outcomes in online settings. The researcher is aware that, as important as this strategy is for the learning process, socio-demographic factors such as home location, overcrowding within the household, multiple responsibilities at home and financial hardships may serve as a barrier (Landa et al., 2021; Simanovic et al., 2021) and a qualitative study in the South African context could help provide context-specific data.

Help-seeking is another strategy mentioned in Yeh et al. (2019). They define help-seeking as "a mechanism that includes behaviours such as understanding solutions and searching for academic support from others to prevent educational failure" (p. 27). Help-seeking behaviours are seen as crucial in blended learning as they allow for the role of an educator as a facilitator supporting students in their process of creating knowledge. Students seek help not only from educators but from their peers as well (Mock 2015), this helps them address and overcome challenges, and it endorses the importance of social interaction as implied by social constructivists (Yilmaz, 2008).

The use of social media in for learning is another strategy that features a lot in the literature (Annamalai, 2018; Basitere and Mapatagane, 2018; Mpungose, 2020; Zvomuya, 2021). Evidently, like all the other mentioned strategies, social media has been used in teaching and learning even pre-COVID-19; Annamalai (2018) in Malaysia has explored how the use of the social media application, WhatsApp, “can enhance traditional teaching and learning activities in higher education and further support their learning outside classroom hours” (p.209). Basitere and Mapatagane (2018) in South Africa investigated the impacts of the use of WhatsApp on Chemical Engineering students’ learning; Mpungose (2020) also in South Africa and Zvomuya (2021) in Zimbabwe incorporated the use of social media during COVID-19 in their studies, they reported that there has been an increase in the use of social media for learning during the pandemic. The researcher sought to focus particularly on social work students.

Last but not least, persistence surfaced as another strategy adopted by students to make the most of blended learning. It is referred to as the “continuous effort despite the presence of obstacles or difficulties,” and it has been proven to be related (without the influence of the pandemic) to the successful completion of online courses (Yeh et al., 2019). Along with continuous effort making, Adesope, Zhou and Nesbit (2015) reported that student motivation is crucial in self-regulated learning. Most of the strategies mentioned in this section are those adopted and deployed by the general student whether in contact or virtual classrooms, locally or globally, the researcher, as mentioned earlier, sought to contextualise the study to Social Work students at a higher education institute in Durban, South Africa. It is also important, therefore, to narrow in on the students’ perceptions of the social work skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter sought to present the available literature on the use of blended learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic; it gave a brief background on COVID-19, the effect it has had on higher education and how this resulted in the use of blended learning. It also gave a detailed conceptualization of blended learning which highlighted the advancements of ICT in education during the pandemic. This chapter further critically analysed the available literature that is specific to the use of blended learning in Social Work education. The relevant legislation and policies informing and guiding the adoption of this new approach to learning were also reviewed.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

3. Introduction

According to Chilisa and Kawulich (2012), the research methodology section summarizes the research process by explaining how the research proceeded. They state that "the methodological process is guided by philosophical beliefs about the nature of reality, knowledge, and values and by the theoretical framework that informs comprehension, interpretation, choice of literature and research practice on a given topic of study" (p.3), these are detailed below.

3.1 Research Paradigm

A paradigm, also termed the researcher's worldview, is defined as a basic set of beliefs that guides research action (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The two authors state that a paradigm defines for researchers the nature of their inquiry along the dimensions of epistemology, ontology, methodology and axiology. The epistemology dimension specifies the ways of knowing and how researchers come to know about certain phenomena; ontology specifies the nature of reality that is to be studied and what can be known about it; the methodology dimension specifies how researchers may practically study what they believe can be known; and finally, axiology specifies the ethical issues that need to be considered in research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017).

Adopting the qualitative approach, this study's ontological assumption is that there is not a single reality for all people especially given people's heterogeneous nature (Creswell, 2014). The epistemological assumption follows that knowledge is developed through people's subjective experiences. To understand the personal experiences of students with blended learning, this study employed the constructivist or interpretive research paradigm, which according to Walliman (2011), states that the view of the world that people see is the creation

of the mind that can only be experienced personally through their perceptions which are influenced by their preconceptions, beliefs, and values. It is an inductive approach, meaning that initially, the researcher assumed an empathic stance and was directed by what participants were sharing. This paradigm was relevant because it helped the researcher understand the multiple 'realities' of the students' experiences of using blended learning in social work education during COVID-19.

3.2 Research Design

This study utilized an exploratory research design. Zimba et al. (2021) pointed out that exploratory research aims to offer an initial rather than definitive analysis of a particular phenomenon. As much as blended learning is not a new phenomenon, its total adoption in social work education in South Africa was newly introduced during COVID-19. This research design allowed the researcher to engage with the participants and obtain their raw experiences of learning through blended learning.

3.3 Sampling Strategies

De Vos, Strydom, Fouche, and Delport (2011) stated that in qualitative research, the participants selected are those that are best able to offer a special perspective, experience, or condition which the researcher wishes to understand. This study utilized non-probability sampling. With non-probability sampling, researchers recruit only specific populations to investigate a particular topic (Neuman 2011). This study adopted the purposive sampling strategy. As the pre-selection criteria, the study required that a participant be a registered university student registered at the chosen university in Durban. The participant had to also be enrolled in the undergraduate Social Work program in levels one, two or three, taking it through blended learning.

This study did not focus on a specific gender, a specific age group, or a specific racial group, it recruited fifteen (15) participants. Procedurally, the researcher first wrote a letter to the UKZN gatekeeper to obtain permission to recruit participants in the university. After permission was granted, the researcher recruited participants through social media platforms (WhatsApp and Facebook); a poster with information about the study was posted on the two social media platforms, and the first fifteen (15) students to respond in favour of the proposed study and who met the criteria were recruited.

3.4 Data Collection Method

Creswell (2014) referred to data collection as a high-quality process aimed at gathering information to answer emerging research questions. This study used semi-structured interviews as its data collection method. De Vos et al. (2011) argued that semi-structured interviews offered both the researcher and participants more flexibility. Furthermore, the researcher could follow up on particularly interesting avenues of inquiry that emerged during the interview to which participants were readily available to provide a complete picture.

The researcher asked open-ended questions about the participants' experience of blended learning, particularly in relation to the knowledge they acquired in the Social Work program; their perceptions of the skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning, their perceptions of opportunities and challenges forwarded by blended learning in the Social Work program and to understand the strategies the participants used to prepare and adjust for blended learning. The semi-structured interviews were conducted virtually (Zoom), and during the times personally preferred by participants. Participants preferred to be interviewed in IsiZulu. All fifteen (15) participants consented and permitted the researcher to record the interviews. The length of the interviews depended on the availability of the participant and

the disturbance by external factors such as network coverage. The longest interview was 01:42:14 (rapid network failure was experienced) and the shortest was 00:27:03.

3.5 Methods of Data Analysis

3.5.1 Data management

The data obtained from the recorded interviews was transcribed verbatim and translated from IsiZulu to English. The participants' identifying details were not included in the final transcripts, numbers (1-15) were used to identify the participants instead. The data was kept safe and was only accessible to the researcher and the research supervisor. The audio recordings and transcripts are secured in an electronic file with password access.

3.5.2 Data Analysis

Neuman (2011) defined data analysis as the process of inspecting, cleaning, transforming, and modelling data to discover useful information informing research findings. This study used thematic content analysis as a method of data analysis. Braun and Clarke (2006) declared thematic analysis to be a qualitative method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data. The data obtained from the recorded interviews was transcribed verbatim. After the transcription of data, the researcher analysed the data by re-evaluating it and generating main themes that aligned with and answered the research questions. This is depicted using the six steps of the thematic analysis process:

a) Familiarizing oneself with the data.

The researcher listened to the recorded interviews and transcribed them verbatim. Thereafter, the researcher read through all fifteen transcripts several times and wrote notes to capture initial thoughts about and observations of the data.

b) The assignment of preliminary codes to data in order to describe the content.

For an exploratory research study such as this one, the codes and themes depended on the data obtained (what was said). The researcher adopted the open coding process, which was done by initially organising raw data to try and make sense of it. While reading through the transcripts, the researcher took note of similar and recurrent codes shared by different participants and categorized them into more abstract codes, a process called axial coding (Scott & Medaugh, 2017).

c) The search for patterns or themes in codes across the different interviews.

After categorizing the codes formed from raw data to form abstract codes, the researcher looked at the list of codes and their associated excerpts, focused on the emerging patterns, and then collated the codes into broader, well-interpretive and themes and sub-themes.

d) Reviewing of themes.

The researcher read through all the excerpts related to the codes to see if they supported the derived sub-themes, and also checked to see if the sub-themes overlapped as they were to give a coherent, distinctive representation of the data accurately.

e) Defining and naming themes.

Four main themes emerged from the findings, namely, benefits and challenges presented by blended learning; strategies employed in blended learning; students' perceptions of social work skills and knowledge; and self-doubt. There emerged numerous sub-themes under each theme; the first main theme has eight sub-themes, the second and third main themes have three each, and the fourth main theme has two.

f) Producing the report.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Brennen (2017) advised that "because interviewers frame each research project, introduce issues and topics into conversations, and influence the direction each interview will take, it is important that interviewers remember that imbalances may exist in power relations between researchers and participants" (p.31). She warned that researchers using qualitative interviewing as a methodology should be sensitive to potential ethical dilemmas that could arise from the use of personal information. The researchers assumed the moral responsibility to protect participants from physical and emotional harm and used knowledge and experience to act with integrity, honesty, and fairness, all important criteria of ethical conduct covered in the axiology dimension of research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). As the first step to ensuring the protection of participants, the researcher obtained ethical clearance the UKZN's Human and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC). Below are the ethical principles the researcher will ensure:

- **Informed consent**

In recruiting participants, the researcher sent an informed consent form to the potential participants. In the form, the researcher delineated, in simple terms, the scope, intention, and goal of the study. The form had a section for participants to sign, agreeing to be interviewed and recorded. This was done to avoid deceiving and coercing participants into being a part of the study. The consent form also included details on what was expected from the participant should they agree to participate in the study. Additionally, it informed participants about their right to ask questions about the study. All participants' questions were answered.

- **Voluntary participation and the right to withdraw**

The researcher informed the participants that participation in the study was voluntary, that they would not be forced to participate if they did not want to and that they had the right to withdraw at any stage of the research process bearing no negative consequences whatsoever for this action. None of the participants opted to withdraw from the study.

• **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Brennen (2017) stated that participants have a right to privacy, and it is important that their identity be protected when they request that. The researcher ensured that the participants' identities were protected with the use of pseudonyms in place of their real names; participants are identified with numbers (1-15). For confidentiality purposes, the researcher assured the participants and ensured that the information (data) obtained from them is kept safe and is only accessible to the researcher and supervisor. The interview records and the transcribed files are secured in an electronic file with password access.

• **Non-maleficence and beneficence**

Given the context in which the research was conducted, and the multiple technological constraints alluded to in the literature as experienced in South Africa, the researcher anticipated emotional and psychological harm in asking participants to talk about their blended learning experience and their consequent challenges. Conversations about these triggered sensitive emotions for some participants; the researcher, as planned, made this known to students before they agreed to participate. The researcher referred participants who needed psychosocial counselling to the UKZN Student Support Services Division for help. To observe the COVID-19 protocols and not put the participants' health at risk, the researcher conducted the interviews virtually. The researcher purchased an hourly one-gigabyte data bundle (1024 megabytes), which was used for the interview. This was a data incentive to the

participants who were inconvenienced by the interview and not a benefit for participating in the study. The virtual interview demanded that participants make time for the interview and be in a conducive environment that allowed them to talk about their experiences freely and without disturbances; this was communicated with them before they sign the consent form.

3.7 Trustworthiness and Authenticity

Ponelis (2015) states that the criteria used to evaluate the findings generated by research within the interpretive paradigm (qualitative) differ from those applied within the positivist paradigm (quantitative). The value of a positivist study is judged by the degree to which its results can be generalized to the wider population. In contrast, the value of understanding that emerges from an interpretive study is determined by the degree to which it fits and works with participants' perspectives. The criteria for trustworthiness and authenticity in qualitative research are termed differently from those used in quantitative research; the criteria include dependability (reliability), credibility (validity), confirmability (objectivity), and transferability (generalizability) (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). These are explicated below:

• The criterion of dependability

Cope (2014) defines dependability as the consistency of data under similar settings or conditions. A study would be deemed dependable if the study's findings were replicated with similar participants in similar conditions (Cope, 2014). The researcher used qualitative research methods that are appropriate for an exploratory study. The processes of data collection and analysis have been described in detail to ensure dependability.

• The criterion of credibility

Credibility refers to the truth of the data or the participant's views and the interpretation and representation of these views by the researcher (Cope, 2014). To evaluate the credibility, the researcher reflected on the experiences of others as mentioned in the studies included in the literature review. Although student experiences are subjective, there are recurrent and similar factors among their responses as the study's participants and among previous studies conducted on the same topic and the same population. For the credibility of the study's findings, the researcher also included excerpts of the participant's exact responses in specific themes. The researcher also adopted what Babbie and Mouton (2001) call "member checks," meaning that after transcribing the obtained data, the researcher took the transcripts back to the participants and checked with them that what the researcher transcribed and translated was what they actually meant (p. 277). All members reported that their interviews were accurately transcribed and translated. Moreover, the findings have been peer reviewed by the research supervisor to ensure the credibility of the research findings.

- **The criterion of confirmability**

Confirmability refers to the researcher's ability to demonstrate that the data represent the participants' responses and not the researcher's biases or viewpoints (Cope, 2014). For confirmability, the researcher included excerpts from the participants that support each emerging theme in the final report. Additionally, all audios and transcripts are safely kept for confirmation by a third party should the need arise.

- **The criterion of transferability**

Transferability refers to findings that can be applied to other settings or groups (Cope, 2014). According to Cope (2014), "a qualitative study meets this criterion if the results have meaning to individuals not involved in the study, and readers can associate the results with

their own experiences" (p.89). A detailed account of the research context and environment is included in this write-up to enable the readers to assess the findings' capability of being transferable.

3.8 Study Limitations

According to Rajkoomar (2015), "no research project is without its limitations, and there is no perfectly designed research" (p.11). This research project is situated in a specific context, the Social Work discipline at a university in Durban; as such, the researcher cannot make claims of generalizability for all fields in higher education. However, the findings and recommendations may be transferable (with necessary adaptations) to other disciplines in the higher education sector.

The use of virtual interviews without videos served as a limitation. The interviews were conducted without videos to minimise issues of network coverage; as a result, the researcher did not get the opportunity to observe the participants' non-verbal gestures, which are also of great importance as they sometimes direct conversations that bring out interesting information. The researcher used listening skills to detect uncertainties and probe for clarity where needed.

Social Desirability also served as a limitation, Perinelli and Gremigni (2016) describe it as some respondents' proclivity to report an answer in a way that they believe is more socially acceptable than their genuine answer. They do this to project a favourable image of themselves and to avoid receiving negative evaluations or judgement. In dealing with this, the researcher remained neutral, adhered to ethical principles and standards, and continually assured participants of confidentiality and anonymity.

3.9 Conclusion

This chapter gave a detailed account of the research process by explaining the proceedings of the research process. It outlined the research paradigm adopted by the researcher in this study, as well as the employed research design. The sampling technique and strategy were explained, followed by detailed descriptions of data collection, data analysis, and data verification. Lastly, ethical considerations adhered to were discussed, and the limitations of the study were also acknowledged. The next chapter presents the study's findings.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4. Introduction

This chapter consists of three sections; it begins with a brief description of the participants' socio-demographic information, followed by a summary of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the collected data. Lastly, a discussion of the themes and sub-themes is presented. The data were analysed using thematic content analysis and the constructivist theory of learning was used as a theoretical lens in the data analysis process.

4.1 Participant socio-demographic information

This study sampled and interviewed a total of fifteen (15) social work students to explore their experiences of learning through blended learning. The following are the descriptive sociodemographic details of the participants: Four of the interviewed students were in their first year of study, six were in their second year and five were in their third. The average age of the participants was 20,07 years; the youngest participant was aged seventeen (17) and the oldest was aged twenty-three (23); all participants reported to have begun their university journey immediately after they had matriculated. There was almost a fair representation of both males and females; seven males and eight females participated in the study.

Twelve participants reported having been at 'home' when they first started with blended learning and three were in the university residences. Out of the twelve that were at home when they started with blended learning, ten were in rural areas and the other two were in urban areas. Most of the participants that were at home reported having moved to university residences once the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions loosened and they were permitted to move; seven moved to university residences, while five remained at home. Of the five that remained at home, two could not get residence space, one reported having trouble getting a permit from the university allowing them to move, and two chose to remain

at home (circumstantial reasons). The participants' socio-demographic information is summarised in table 4.1 below.

Table 4.1: participant socio-demographic details

Participant	Year of study in Bachelor of Social Work (2021)	Age	Gender	Geographical location
1	1	18	Male	University residence (on-campus)
2	1	17	Female	University residence (off-campus)
3	1	19	Female	University residence (off-campus)
4	1	18	Female	Home (urban area) Moved to a University residence (on-campus)
5	2	20	Female	Home (rural area) Moved to a University residence (off-campus)
6	3	21	Female	Home (rural area)
7	2	20	Male	Home (rural area)
8	2	20	Male	Home (rural area)
9	2	19	Male	Home (rural area) Moved to a University residence (off-campus)
10	3	21	Female	Home (rural area) Moved to a University residence (off-campus)
11	2	21	Male	Home (rural area) Moved to a University residence (on-campus)

12	2	20	Male	Home (rural area) Moved to a University residence (off-campus)
13	3	22	Female	Home (rural area) Moved to a University residence
14	3	22	Male	Home (urban area)
15	3	23	Female	Home (rural area)

4.2 Presentation of themes and sub-themes

In this section, the researcher presents the themes developed from the in-depth individual interviews with the participants. The themes formed derived from the objectives of the study and the sub-themes were developed from the raw data or the shared experiences of the participants. The table below gives a summary of the themes and sub-themes.

Table 4.2 summary of themes and sub-themes

Themes	• Sub-themes
1. Benefits and challenges presented by blended learning	Part one: Benefits <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flexibility and convenience • Managing roles beyond being a student • Academic benefits • Self-development and self-reliance Part two: Challenges <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Challenges as a result of Structural Inequalities • Inconducive home environment for home-stay blended learning • Technological incompetence and academic challenges • Adjustment and mental health challenges

2. Strategies employed in blended learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help-seeking and Support • The use of social media • Behavioural change and self-motivation
3. Students' perceptions of social work skills and knowledge learned in blended learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Poor development and retention of knowledge and skills • Perceived role of lecturers in skills and knowledge acquisition • Impact of academic dishonesty on the acquisition of knowledge and skills
4. Self-doubt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-doubt due to limited knowledge • Self-doubt due to the lack of practical experience

4.3 Theme one: Benefits and challenges presented by blended learning

This theme presents the findings on the benefits and challenges brought forth by blended learning as reported by the study's participants. It consists of a total of eight sub-themes divided into two parts; part one presents the benefits of blended learning as experienced by the study's participants and has four sub-themes namely, flexibility and convenience, socio-economic benefits, academic benefits, and self-development and self-reliance. Part two presents the challenges and has four sub-themes: challenges as a result of structural inequalities, challenges as a result of the socio-economic circumstances, technological incompetence and academic challenges, and psychosocial challenges.

4.3.1 Part one: Benefits presented by blended learning

4.3.1.1 Sub-theme one: Flexibility and convenience

Flexibility and convenience emerged in most participants' responses on the opportunities or benefits presented by blended learning. They appreciated that this approach to learning saved them time and energy by eliminating the travel to and from campus for their class schedules.

Participants shared the following:

"I'd say that...because the tests were difficult, but being always at res (university residence) and you do not have to waste time and energy going to campus was exciting, nothing else"

(Participant 1)

Another participant concurred:

"What was exciting for me is that I do not go to campus. It is tiring going to campus every day, it's so tiring waking up every day. That is what was exciting. This is wrong but it makes me happy, I have to say. Going to campus every day made me tired...I don't know but I dislike going to campus. The other problem I have is that as I am living off campus, it's the

bus problem." (Participant 6)

One participant shared the same sentiments and additionally appreciated that one could easily attend classes anywhere at any given time:

"Like sometimes you know as learners we have difficulties, like catching the bus on time (laughing) and everything. Yeah, so you know that you are gonna attend classes from anywhere you are and at any time...Yah, and the pressure, like it was lesser than when we

were on campus" (Participant 5)

Another participant concurred:

"It happens that sometimes you are busy with something...you see now as I speak to you, I am not home but we are able to connect. And now as we speak, I have lost count of how many

times I applied for residence, I did not get it but I can continue with my work, I do not get disturbed. If there is something disturbing me, as soon as I am okay, I am able to study or learn at anytime I want, it's not like at this time I am on campus or I have to be on campus. You find that you have 1 or 2 lectures a week, you are able to go and be busy with something else in your spare time, you are able to set for yourself what you would be doing at a certain time; even if there may be a bad situation at home, you are able to attend to that situation and also adjust in your learning.” (Participant 7)

Literature speaks widely about the time and costs that students reported to have saved since the adoption of blended learning (Lakhal and Bélisle, 2020; Mpungose, 2021; Simanovic et al., 2021; Heilporn et al, 2021). The participants in this study noted how this approach's flexibility has saved them the time and energy it would take them to commute to and from the university campus for their everyday university schedules. Some participants revealed that they would have challenges attending classes that were scheduled very early in the morning because they struggled to wake up early enough to make it in time for the lectures, thus they appreciate that with blended learning they were able to attend those lectures and not get left behind. This approach to learning has also reportedly made it convenient for participants living far from the university to join lectures and not worry about their woes of struggling to find accommodation at the university. The participants also reported having benefited socio-economically from the flexibility of blended learning.

4.3.1.2 Sub-theme two: Managing roles beyond being a student

The flexible nature of blended learning allowed the participants to manage roles beyond the one of being students. During their stay at home amidst the pandemic, participants indicated experiencing a sense of fulfilment in playing the roles that were needed to assist their families. Most participants indicated experiencing a sense of fulfilment in being home with

family and being of service to them during that time of need. Participants shared the following:

“...another thing is that some of us are not from affluent households or families, so blended learning had a good impact on my side because by the time I was home, it was me who looked after mom and my daddy and helped to look after my siblings since they were old, they depended on pension. When I got my NSFAS, I contributed towards some of the things done at home.” (Participant 13)

One participant appreciated blended learning for allowing her the opportunity to fulfil her motherly duties:

“Okay, what I can say can be a best experience is being at home, especially because I have a baby, my baby is in creche. So, as I have a 5-year-old baby, in 2019 he stayed with my mom, I was not around since I was at school. But now I am home, and I can be able to see his schoolwork, I teach him homework, so it gave me that thing to be a parent, to spend time with my baby, be able to teach him this and that. I get to sign and go to meetings so I’m more involved than if I was in Durban...so now I can see if he is not doing well, if he is aggressive, and I speak to him, as a parent, I know everything that happens to him. That is the best thing that happened to me in blended learning.” (Participant 15)

The flexibility that came with blended learning also benefited participants economically; one reported having opened a shop during COVID-19 while learning through blended learning:

“Yes, I started this shop recently, I’d say that I’m benefiting because obviously if it was contact learning, I would not be getting time to sell. I mean there are lectures, practicals, I wouldn’t be selling.” (Participant 11)

Reflected above is that blended learning contributed towards the social as well as the economic lives of the student participants within social work; they got to be of service to their

families, taking care of the vulnerable, fulfilling responsibilities and being of financial assistance in their financially constrained homes. Consistent with the findings above, Simanovic et al. (2021) stated that the flexible nature of blended learning affords students the opportunity to take on other responsibilities outside those that are educational. Some participants have reported having benefited socially, emotionally, and economically all while still fulfilling their academic responsibilities. Given the nature of social ills within South African societies, strong family bonds and structures as well as economic freedom are paramount. In sharing their experience of blended learning, participants also noted numerous academic benefits.

4.3.1.3 Sub-theme three: Academic benefits

This sub-theme presents the following benefits: recording of synchronous lectures, increased assessment submission time, and reduced fear of participation during synchronous lectures. The participants noted these as empathic responses to their differing situations, circumstances and challenges.

Recording of synchronous lectures

The study findings alluded that pre-COVID-19, students had mandatory traditional lectures for which attendance registers were signed. During COVID-19, participants indicated that synchronous lectures are recorded, and this affords those who cannot attend for various reasons, including issues with connectivity, lack of internet data, home responsibilities or just negligence, a chance to catch up at a time suitable for them. Students access the lecture recordings and other course materials asynchronously on LMS platforms. These platforms support different formats of content, such as text, video, and multimedia so students can learn

the content through these formats at their own pace and time (Agaçi, 2017). Participants shared the following:

“...Before, when you did not attend a class, there was a register, so there was that thing that if you do not sign a register and then not qualify for DP and they wouldn't be lenient with you because of attending, but now I attend or not attend, I don't care...it's not the same since zoom lectures are recorded” (Participant 6)

Confirming the recording of lectures in blended learning during COVID-19 and sharing how this was helpful to her, one participant said:

“Also, I had to- for me to catch up properly on some things I had missed because there are now recordings, the lecturer records each and every session that we have. So now each time after that lecture or maybe in the evening after resting, I go back to the recordings and listen properly and refer to some readings given” (Participant 13)

Lecture recordings were of much help to participants who had trouble accessing the internet while learning from home:

“... it was difficult because you see being home and have no access to internet, that was difficult in that sense... most of the time I would wait for the night, the early hours of the morning to listen to recordings and to surf the internet, that is when I did my assignments.”
(Participant 5)

The findings were indicative of the multiple reasons why participants appreciated that lectures were recorded; for some participants, this was very helpful as they were sometimes not able to attend lectures due to the lack of internet access and connectivity issues. Simultaneously, the recorded lectures reduced others' interest to attend synchronous lectures.

Increased assessment submission times

The participants revealed that in blended learning, enough time is given to students to write assessments as compared to when some of them learned in contact. They appreciated the time given and shared that it helps reduce pressure previously experienced when writing contact examinations. Participants shared the following:

“Ahh okay the thing I like about blended learning is that usually when we write tests, you get enough time to write. Usually, the lecturers open the test for the whole day. It’s not like when we’re writing at OMSH or SU (examination halls), there you have the specified time of arrival to write, but here you have enough time to prepare properly and pass, and assignment submissions, if on Moodle the submission is closed and has passed, you still can submit via late submission. Unlike if we were attending on campus, you’d have to beg the lecturer or a tutor to receive your work” (Participant 14)

Another participant concurred:

“With regard to time, you are given enough time to do something. They do not rush you that now now you must submit, you know? They give you maybe a whole month to do an assignment, a test opens for two or three days. So that is why I find it easy.” (Participant 2)

These allocated times shared by participants may have been of help to them but when compared to examinations and submissions in contact learning, it raises concerns about the participants’ ability to manage their time well in their learning. Time management is an important skill in learning and in social work for efficiency (Lešková, 2019). Moreover, there are also concerns about how academic integrity can be ensured when this much time is given for ‘take-home examinations’ (Mavundla & Mgutshini, 2021). The participants in this study have alluded to a lot of academic dishonesty happening among students in blended learning,

this will surely have negative implications for the social work profession, which needs principled and ethical trainees.

Reduced fear of participation during lectures in blended learning

Some participants indicated an appreciation of synchronous lectures because this mode of teaching and learning reduced their fear of participating or engaging during the lectures. Senior participants (second and third level) who have an experience with contact learning shared a sense of fear in presenting in the presence of an audience, virtual presentations helped relieve participants from this fear, and some feel that virtual presentations should be continued. Others indicated that they are able to freely engage in lectures without fear of being mocked or laughed at when learning through blended learning and this has had a good impact on their grades. Participants shared the following:

“Presentations, the way presentations were so exciting, I feel like we could do presentations once more. It is good to do them online....(laughing) My problem is I am scared of people. I may be confident that- be confident that I say that I am going to present but when I am there, I panic, I start hyperventilating but now since it’s online, they see you, it’s fine you opened the video, but you know that you are alone. You are presenting what you have written down.”

(Participant 10)

Another participant concurred:

“Mhh my best moment was last year during my presentation, I even thought if I did this on campus in the presence of people I’d be frightened. The presentation where we did group work, the one with sessions and role plays. That one was my best moment because I was free, you speak nicely and there were not many people looking at you. I know as a Social Worker I must get used to many people, but there is still that fear, you see? So, it assisted me there I

don't want to lie. It really helped me, having to participate freely in the presence of those 8 people, and it's not like you see each other, they only see you in the video.” (Participant 6)

One participant reported on how participation in lectures was easier for introverted people because it was done on Zoom and not in a lecture hall:

“The way they teach us and the advice they give, you can see that if we were in school, it'd be so much fun. But now we can be free because some other people are introverted too much, they are able to participate on Zoom and ask questions with no fear of being laughed at by others, and even if they do laugh at you or write things about you, it is not the same as if it was happening face to face in the lecture hall.” (Participant 7)

And lastly, learning synchronously yielded better grades than learning in contact for another participant because the environment allowed them to participate freely:

“My best moments were when we were in class, if the network worked well, we interacted well with the lecturer, even participating in class, if you participated in class, it was like you do not become shy like on campus when you have to participate, and people look at you. You could ask freely, When I look at my marks, especially where I communicated with my tutors, I used to get better marks there.” (Participant 8)

The shared responses on the reduced fear of participation in blended learning contrast with Rasheed et al.'s (2020) findings of students feeling isolated and disinterested, and students being uncomfortable being the centre of attention in blended learning. They found that students fall into isolation and alienation in blended learning because of their hesitancy to participate in online communities which may be consequent to reasons such as their “personality, sense of transactional distance in online environments, lack of confidence and trust in the online community participants...” (p.7). In this study, participants shared quite the opposite; participants with shy personalities indicated that this type of learning

accommodated their personality and gave them the confidence to freely participate in lecturers.

The researcher noted in the shared responses that some participants (especially those in level three) are aware that not being in the presence of an audience may somewhat have negative implications for social work. Participant 10 mentioned above that one is alone and is presenting what they have written down, this indicates that presenting to the audience while alone and behind a screen gives space for the reading of notes, an opportunity that discourages prior preparation for and inhibits the learning or development of social work skills required by this exercise (communication skills, the confidence to speak to the recipients of social work services). Participant 6 shared having knowledge that being a social worker requires that one be comfortable with crowds of people, so is appreciating the opposite not indicative of the negative implication blended learning may have for social work? There are, however, other crucial skills that participants reported having learned as a result of the adoption of this type of approach to learning.

4.3.1.4 Sub-theme four: Self-development and self-reliance

4.3.1.4.1 Self-development

Participants reported having developed significantly since the beginning of blended learning; first-entrant students shared that they have developed technological skills and confidence using technological devices for learning, and they have developed personally by learning how to be responsible and take charge of their learning, proving that learning is indeed, as per the constructivist theory of learning, an adaptive activity (Yilmaz, 2008). The Participants shared the following:

“...the transition from high school, being in varsity and then you find that this is the way things are done, yeah, it was tough for us, but we are thankful because we learned a lot of things, you see? New things, and then we learned from those new things.” (Participant 12)

Another participant concurred and detailed what he learned:

“That was my good experience on how studying through blended learning was like; how to use a laptop, how to use Zoom, how to respond to a lecturer one and talk to them online while everyone else is listening. You answer, you open your video and give an answer, you present virtually, things like that, yeah. How to write a test online, yeah. It was a good experience that wow, this is how things are done virtually.” (Participant 1)

In the same manner, another participant reported that:

“My good moments would be being able to get new experiences and learning how to do things online, because if it wasn't for blended learning, I wouldn't have learned how to submit things online, I wouldn't have learned how to attend Zoom meetings, Microsoft Teams. I wouldn't have learned all of that, accessing the library online...the experience, it was nice” (Participant 4)

Self-awareness and a sense of self-responsibility were skills another participant developed through the blended learning experience, he shared that:

“Personally, I think it made me to be self-aware. Know myself, how do I manage things, besides school work but my personal life and academically, now I know lots of information because of blended learning, like doing things virtually, you know? Like using laptops and stuff.” (Participant 9)

Tobcu and Ubuz (2008) noted that it is very important that a student engaged in learning as self-regulated as blended learning sharpens their metacognitive abilities and this is

to have knowledge of his or her own cognitive processes or thinking. Self-awareness is included in metacognition (being aware of what one knows and what one does not know, also being aware of one's learning styles), this is consistent with participant 9's response. The participants also shared that blended learning taught them to rely on themselves more than they do on others.

4.3.1.4.2 Self-reliance

With blended learning being student-centred and self-regulated, the development or honing of self-reliance skills is seen as crucial (Murphy, 2008). Participants in all levels of study indicated that although they were in communication with fellow students, lecturers, tutors and mentors about academic work, blended learning required that they be more independent and self-reliant to thrive in their learning. The participants shared the following:

“I can say that I was not used to this blended learning. I was used to physical learning with the teacher present, but what I can say is that it has taught me to be independent. Do not look what other people are doing but do what is good for you.” (Participant 3)

Another participant concurred:

“(A short pause) I think it impacted me in a good way. I learned to be independent, learning on myself. I started working on myself, not having a teacher in front of me helping me with my work so I learned to manage my time, doing a study timetable, when am I going to study and when am I going to rest and relax. So, I learned time management, how to manage time.” (Participant 4)

In the same manner, another participant shared:

“...okay first of all I created a timetable. A timetable for knowing what to study and the duration. So that assisted me a lot to learn to study on my own and not depend on the lecturer that they explained something in class, I also want to have my understanding, go, and search on google to see how I can put this thing into simpler terms, so I’ll understand it well. I did it like that, created time for all my modules I did.” (Participant 14)

The participants’ responses suggested the participants’ realisation that blended learning required them to take charge of their learning. In addition to the above responses, one participant shared that it motivated her to be disciplined, “to self-learn, and smart learnt,” that is, to find effective ways to do academic work. Being responsible and accountable for one’s learning are other skills other participants shared to have honed during blended learning, one participant shared:

“...and responsibility, it taught me I’m in charge for my education...There’s nowhere I’ll write that I can’t cope with blended learning and people’s lives then have to stop because of me; It’s either I move with the moving train so, it encouraged me to be responsible in things I do.” (Participant 15)

All these responses denote some participants’ realisation that blended learning is learner-centred and self-regulated (Lytle, 2013). Although beneficial, self-development and self-reliance in self-regulated learning may encourage students to focus on a more individualistic approach to learning which would cause them challenges and frustrations in a program such as social work where working as a collective is compulsory, this requires that students be able to balance work done individually and that which is done as a collective in blended learning to support both collaboration and active learning on their part (Klette, 2018). Challenges of and in working in collaboration with others have been reported by the participants in this study.

4.3.2 Part two: Challenges presented by blended learning

While there are evident benefits to blended learning, it is not without limitations given the abrupt nature of its implementation within South African universities. Scholars such as Kajiita et al. (2020) and Weeden and Cornwell (2020), have indicated that blended learning was implemented as a means to save the academic calendar in 2020 during COVID-19. It is notable from the findings that this was without consideration that blended learning has its own pedagogy and methodology for successful implementation (Barbour, LaBonte, Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Kelly, 2020). It was further without consideration of the challenges within South African communities with inequality being at the fore and a core of the challenges. This study identified the following challenges:

4.3.2.1 Sub-theme one: Challenges as a result of Structural Inequalities

The findings of this study have confirmed that there are structural inequalities serving as hindrances to equal access to resources (including technology) in South Africa as asserted by Letseka and Pitsoe (2013) and Makhanya (2021). The reality is that some communities in South Africa lack access to electricity, which is also necessary for accessing technological resources. The findings of this study indicated that participants who were forced to move back to their rural areas during the pandemic were most disadvantaged and faced difficulties when trying to access both the synchronous classes and asynchronous work for learning as compared to their urban counterparts. Participants mentioned facing issues of connectivity (slow or no network), and the lack of electricity as reasons they could not access learning resources, they shared the following:

“It was challenging at first. It was challenging because we were more used to the traditional ways of learning from school, and now we have to attend classes on Zoom and everything, it

was difficult because you see being home and having no access to internet, that was difficult in that sense.” (Participant 5)

Another participant noted how being home (rural area) and experiencing connectivity issues affected his engagement in synchronous lectures and his ability to follow what is being taught:

“Blended learning came with a lot of problems since we went back home. I had to go back to Bergville. The network here is not good, most of the time I was feeling like I’ve been left behind in many classes...Even the lecture matter, we felt like if we were left behind in class- even the network disturbs, and some other time you cannot pick up what they were talking about, you cannot hear what they have been talking about, and you also cannot participate properly in that meeting because of the network.” (Participant 8)

Another participant concurred and shared the following details:

“Blended learning started when we were still home, at home we had network issues. I myself, the network at home sucks, I can say that. It is poor in the worst way, so there are difficulties. You’d find that you raise your hand there then they say speak and there goes the network, it’s either it kicks you out or you are cut, and you’d find that you are attending but still when the lecturer talks, there are some things you are unable to hear. Sometimes it kicks you out, when it kicks you out, the lecture continues obviously, and it lets you in and when you are in you are obviously lost, you do not know what they are talking about, and in the section of the chats on Zoom, once you get out, they get cleared and are removed. So when you arrive, you do not find those that were there. So obviously you can’t catch up even in the chats what they were saying. So, it is difficult.” (Participant 11)

Another participant shared that her home is in an area with no electricity, and this affected her access to lectures:

“...but in the previous years, I was home most of the time. So what happened was that I was in an area with no electricity, so if my phone has no battery I cannot attend, if there is no electricity I have no network, I cannot attend.” (Participant 13)

Participants also indicated that connectivity issues were better in the urban areas as compared to rural areas:

“Aiy no I did not experience them because I’m not far from the university. I’m from INanda so INanda’s network is not as the same as that one of rural areas. The network is stable, grand and works perfectly fine.” (Participant 14)

Another participant concurred and shared the means she had to make in order to access her school work:

“Yeah it’s due to network, it is better when we are back at res (university residence, urban area) because at home actually the network would be gone for the whole week. When the electricity goes, it also goes. So in order for you to have access to school work, you need to go to town, and at town it’s not like you go there regularly, you only go for that time. When you arrive and check you find that you have emails and work, and you saw late.” (Participant 10)

The above reflections reveal how students were challenged with access to lectures due to inadequate and unreliable electricity which affects network and connectivity for students in South African communities. It is important to note that this is not only a South African challenge, Tamrat & Teferra (2020) stated that in Africa poor connectivity and frequent power interruptions are serious challenges. Hill and Lawton (2018) also stated that an estimated forty-six percent (46%) of the global population was able to access the internet from home in 2016 and throughout Africa, broadband hardly exists beyond urban hotspots. This statement is substantiated by the findings of this study as some participants who were

from urban areas shared not experiencing difficulties accessing learning resources.

In South Africa, Dube (2020) corroborated the assertion that rural-based students were disadvantaged more because of the social and digital divide. He stated that many learners in rural contexts find themselves excluded from schooling and are unable to access online resources due to a lack of infrastructure, and the unavailability of electricity and electronic gadgets, adding that even the educators were not qualified or trained to assist with blended learning. He went on to express how this approach to learning appeared to favour “urban and well-privileged learners, thus, widening the gap between the poor and the rich, instead of uniting the nation in the fight against COVID-19” (p.137). However, some issues such as load-shedding and the resultant lack of network connection were noted to have affected all participants (both from the urban and rural areas). Participants also shared that their socio-economic circumstances had an impact on their engagement in blended learning during COVID-19.

4.3.2.2 Sub-theme two: Inconducive home environments for home-stay blended learning

Participants reported multiple issues that challenged their engagement in blended learning during the pandemic; inconducive physical environments, disturbances and distractions at home; attending to care responsibilities were some of the reported challenges faced.

Literature reports that it may be quite difficult for students to stay engaged in the online environment if the environment they are in is physically and psychologically inconducive (Landa et al., 2021; Simanovic et al., 2021). Most participants reported that they went back to homes shared with extended families and homes used to generate household income thus, they experienced overcrowding which made it difficult to learn. Participants shared the following:

“We had to adjust even there (to COVID-19). On top of that, we are all here with the family, everyone is here it is a full house, especially me- I used to stay at res (university residence) so, when we started with blended learning, I was at home. So, it is full at home, there are even children and a creche. My mother has a creche in the yard, so you’d find that I have to adjust to living this life now.” (Participant 15)

In the same manner, another participant said:

“Yeah, it is that now we’re all in the same house and then I have to learn in the same space, you see? Parents do not understand what’s going on, they send you around while you are studying, children come in and out of the house, a child does not understand. They make noise thus disturbing you... Yeah even though I had it (own room), it is accessible to everyone at home. Everyone comes in easily; I can say that I did not have a formal space where I knew that no one would disturb me.” (Participant 12)

Added to the disturbances experienced at home, some participants did not have their own space where they would engage with the learning content when they got the time, one participant said:

“Another thing, it was a must that I use it during the day, that was my problem because I share it at night with an employed person, so they have to sleep at night or in the evening. So, it’s a must that I study during the day and during the day there is work that will disturb me so yeah, but then I tried to work nevertheless until we got permits and returned.” (Participant 11)

Other participants reported on the different roles or “care responsibilities” as Simanovic et al. (2021) put it, that they had to take once back home; these were traumatic and made it challenging for them to stay engaged in blended learning and focus on their academic responsibilities, one participant shared:

“I think it impacted me negatively last year. It’s been a very difficult year last year since I was home. I had to face bigger things than me and that made me to drop academically. Yeah, maybe if I was not home maybe things would be different; what happened is mom got sick in front of me, she suffered a stroke, and died in front of me. So, I had to deal with that stress together with school stress, and so that affected me a lot, but I made it through... by that time

I had a 7-day-old baby, a new-born actually. The worse part was that I gave birth via operation (Caesarean delivery)...” (Participant 13)

Simanovic et al. (2021) also noted that ‘home schooling’ was a challenge for their student participants, this challenge was coupled with increased care responsibilities noting that “students are also parents, children, carers, and employees living within particular social, familial, and economic contexts” (p.132). In addition to their educational responsibilities, students had to “care for and shield their vulnerable or elderly relatives all while experiencing illness, loss, and grief amid the global rise of infections and deaths” (p.132). Other students expressed that they found it particularly challenging to balance their school work with their household responsibilities. It was initially difficult for their parents and guardians to understand that their being at home, “sitting and staring at a screen” was studying, said one participant; blended learning was new to participants and even more so to their parents and guardians, everyone had to adjust to the new reality. Other participants shared the following:

“Yeah environment, especially environment because we have to learn through internet. The environment at home, network, load shedding and also you know? Also, family; you are studying here, it is not understandable that you’re home and you are learning at the same time. So even parents do not understand what is happening, you are really studying or what- because we are new to this thing.” (Participate 12)

Another participant said:

“It is not easy, and never been. Like I’ve explained that most of my time, I was at home and at home you have to do house chores even though you’re studying, they do not understand that. When you have to cook, they have to eat regardless that you got to study.” (Participant

13)

Assuming the responsibilities, one participant said:

“Another thing, I think it was something that most of us had a problem with. You see when you are at home, when you’re home obviously there will be house chores, things you have to do first before you do your schoolwork. I think that’s one of the problems we faced because.. let me make an example with men. I can’t just wake up in bed and focus on the laptop, you see? Things like that. You’d find that I have things to do. Like you’d find that the yard is dirty, it has to be cleaned. That takes the whole day you end up not learning maybe. My home is in the farms, you’d find that there is no water, and it must be fetched so, you see?

Household responsibilities alone are a disturbance” (Participant 11)

Another participant shared the same sentiment and noted that proper time management would help with the balancing of household chores and academic responsibilities:

“But at first if we were gonna have a class at 9am, I would wake up at around that time and want to start washing the dishes. And here at home the parent does not understand “you knew you had a class, why do you wake up at quarter past 8?” so now I have a problem, people are now angry because of me, and my class is 2 hours, maybe 2 and half hours. So, I end up leaving the class because they are shouting: “You cannot sit down while there are a lot of dishes, and the floors are not mopped, what will a person coming to this house say when there is a person staring at their laptop?” so, it then seems as if you are being forced to stop attending a class to do the house chores, but, if you introspect, you see that they’re not wrong, I’m the one who can’t manage my time.” (Participant 15)

What is reflected in the above responses is that due to economic challenges most households cannot afford adequate housing that is conducive for students' learning. As evident in the Equality Report (2018), this reflects the economic status of most South Africans as they still live under the poverty line, with unequal distribution of resources and huge inequalities. Hence, the participants posited that circumstances in the environments that they had to learn from were not as favourable, and initially had a negative impact on their academic participation and performance; student academic performance is measured through students' overall marks gathered from assignments and assessments allocated in a course within a particular period of study (Adebola, 2021). Those located in the rural areas indicated that giving every student access to the university residences so that they also get access to campus facilities, that is better resources, would be the solution to the above-mentioned challenges. This suggests that better resources (better infrastructure, better connectivity, conducive learning environments) are in the urban areas, and supports Hill and Lawton's (2018) findings that in Africa, such resources hardly exist beyond urban hotspots.

4.3.2.3 Sub-theme three: Technological incompetence and Academic challenges

This sub-theme presents four challenges under the following headings: technological incompetence, insufficient internet data disturbed engagement in blended learning, group work activity challenges in blended learning, and reduced motivation to attend online synchronous classes

Technological Incompetence

The challenges mentioned in the above two themes are entrenched deep in the inequalities in the country. Nel (2005) acknowledged these inequalities in her study, noting issues such as the diverse student population from different socio-economic backgrounds (affordability),

improper preparation of students for higher education, and students' lack of technological skills. Zimba et al. (2021) simplified the termed issues to poor computer literacy and limited access to devices or even to the internet (limited or no network connectivity); COVID-19 and the forced adoption of remote teaching and learning in South Africa have brought forth clear evidence of the continuation of some of the past inequalities. The participants in this study confirmed this above-mentioned assertion as they shared how their competence in the use of technological devices, or their lack thereof impacted their learning in blended learning. The participants shared the following:

“...you see blended learning, when I first heard about it, I was a little bit scared because I was not used to using technology, you see? I didn't have a laptop, it was going to be my first time having my own laptop, to use it. So, I was a little bit scared how I'm going to do this, but my sister helped me a lot with that.” (Participant 4)

In the same manner, another participant said:

“We had a little time of studying since when we arrived there were strikes and all that. Then we were told to go home, and when we were home, laptops arrived. We didn't even know where to begin from and do what, you see? It was really difficult... not being used to technology. They would not tell us that there is a class today, that became difficult since you did not even know how to join a class, things like that... it took us time to understand that this is done this way, and this is done that way.” (Participant 7)

The participants did not only struggle to operate the given gadgets to access the synchronous classes, but it was also difficult for them to access the asynchronous learning platforms in order to receive communication about lectures. One participant said:

“Even on LEARN (asynchronous learning platform), we struggled to even check announcements, that the link was on the announcements. You'd sit and wait for an email to

come so you see that you have a class tomorrow, but the link was pasted long ago on the announcements. You just had to log in and click. These are all the things we discovered late that, that no, there's something like this and something like that. There was no one to tell you that 'do so, log in to announcements. To find out that you spend 2 weeks not attending classes, you are relaxed, but when you check people are posting on the group that we've studied to this far and you are lost because announcement, you are not familiar with it, and you get surprised that there is something like that.' (Participant 1)

After having learned how to access academic resources some participants also reported that they lacked the skills to type work, attach documents and submit work online, thus most of them failed to finish writing online tests, and this had a negative impact on their academic performance. Some participants reported having never used a laptop before they came to the university, being technologically competent was advantageous for very few participants. In their responses, participants also noted that they were not the only ones battling with the use of some of the tools used in blended learning, they indicated that lecturers also had some difficulties, one participant said:

“So, it was very difficult to adjust, also I think even on the lecturers' side, maybe they were also not more trained, you'd find that they can't do screen sharing, you'd find that the class finishes having not done something effective or productive at that time, especially when we had just begun.” (Participant 15)

Another participant said this is because blended learning was introduced “fast without thinking about issues,” to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Participants also claimed that some content, particularly that which needed to be done practically, was not adequately taught because lecturers did not know how to teach it online. Landa et al.'s (2021) findings stated that the urgency with which blended learning was adopted did not afford academics an opportunity to be adequately trained to execute their duties using this approach.

Technological incompetence was seen as a big inconvenience in the use of blended learning, participants also reported being inconvenienced by the limited amount of internet data received to access academic resources.

Limited internet data disturbed engagement in blended learning

Chisadza, Clance, Mthembu, Nicholls, and Yitbarek (2021) stated that a lack of internet connectivity and data has an impact on learning and teaching. Participants have confirmed that the university has supported them in various ways since the beginning of blended learning, and this includes providing them with a monthly data bundle. Salubi (2021) mentioned that this was done to prevent a digital divide among students, especially those from low-income backgrounds. The participants in this study revealed that the provided internet data was not sufficient to sustain them until the next bundle was provided, and this had a negative impact on their learning; participants shared the following:

“... the 10GB the university offers us is too small to attend with the whole month all the 2-hour classes. You have to research about all the assessments you have to write, so it’s too small for those things.” (Participant 14)

“...with the data from school, you can only attend 5 to 6 classes then it will deplete, and after that it will be hard to attend others due to no data... When the workload becomes a pile at the same time, and I failed to even catch up, keep with another one because data would simply deplete. That also became a challenge.” (Participant 8)

Participants shared that a lot of data was allocated for midnight use and this did not make sense to them because classes were attended during the day, one participant said:

“The data we are given during the day is little, and we are given a lot of data at night. The way they reasoned it is that most people study during the night, it’s not all of us who study during the night. There are people who are able to study during the day... and during the day

we attend classes, we do not attend them at night. They give us a lot of data during the night, but we attend classes during the day.” (Participant 10)

The issue of insufficient internet data was a big challenge for participants and was a call for concern because it resulted in the shortening of lectures which participants revealed involved the delivery of content instead of lecture facilitations that consisted of content discussions with and among students. This delivery of content by lecturers is indicative of the passive role that students then assume in the learning process as opposed to that of being active in their knowledge creation having lecturers for facilitation and support (Olusegun, 2015; Yilmaz, 2008). It was also reported that issues of insufficient data resulted in the frequent postponement and sometimes cancellation of synchronous lectures. The participants shared the following:

“There must be a class where people will be able to ask questions, and people respond. There must be something like that, not a class where there is teaching but where questions are asked. There must be classes like that, blended learning can continue, but they mustn’t only teach and give us work.” (Participant 9)

“Second challenge is that I feel like when we attend online, we do not get much time with our lectures. I feel like there is less time, and they become considerate of data and everything. The time is less that we get with our lectures.” (Participant 8)

When compared to lecture engagement in contact classes, participants noted that assignments would be well explained and students would be given time to consult lecturers without worrying about their internet data depleting, however, this is not the case in blended learning. They shared the following:

“Actually, in school the lecturer explains how the assignment will be to everyone in the class. He or she clarifies the assignment that 1,2 and 3 is written like this and like that. Then if

there are those that want to go and ask on a side, then the consultation times are like this. Then you go there, and they explain, when they explain they don't mind that...you also don't put the data depletion into mind, you see all that? you just relax and listen. It's not the same as... Another thing you have to look at in blended learning is data even if you don't understand something, you can't say you don't understand, you must be considerate of data. You then agree even though you did not understand."

Another participant concurred:

"If you need clarity, in terms of clarity...Even though we get it, it is limited because there is time, we have to save data, everything is about time and its costing." (Participant 12)

Participants revealed that lectures were sometimes cancelled because students did not have internet data:

"I think our complaints made the time to be shorter since now we do not have a way to request to be injected the 20GB in the day and 10GB in the night because we most use data during the day. At night it is rare that we do, that I wake up to do this and that... Sometimes it happens that we request reps (class representatives) to ask on our behalf that we do not have data and we request that the class not be there. Now you have to request not to have a class, and the one (data) available is for the test so we end up not having enough time with our lecturers." (Participant 7)

Some participants reported that blended learning was not a problem but that students must be given enough data and they should be given an extended time with lecturers. With the reported challenge of limited internet data, it is not surprising that participants had challenges engaging in the activities done in the social work course through blended learning.

Group work activity challenges in blended learning

The participants noted that social work requires that they work in groups a lot and have revealed that working with people electronically has been a challenge for multiple reasons.

The participants shared the following:

“When we do class activities like as groups and everything. That was the most challenging part because we couldn’t come together to do the work. We had to do it at different times of the day, and people were not from the same geographical areas, you see? So, it was difficult because, yeah... We couldn’t finish the work on time because we live in different places. And then the practicals, also when we do the practical activities... Like last year when we were doing our tutorials for 203 (social work module) I think, yeh the group work. We were supposed to facilitate and cofacilitate for group work and we couldn’t because of the connectivity issues and everything.” (Participant 5)

“We do have challenges, right now we have 2 group works and then since it’s blended learning like this. We do not get time to maybe meet as a group to do work because people will complain about a lot of things. One will say they’re home and there is no network, so in that way, there are many challenges even between group members that we maybe we do not get the work done.” (Participant 13)

Another participant shared that working in groups was one of his worst moments in blended learning because of the deliberate behaviour of group mates not wanting to contribute to the given tasks:

“I saw that it was difficult to work, especially when we are working in groups In Social Work, most of the time we work with groups and that’s where you see that blended learning aiy (no), maybe things could have been easier if we were in contact learning because we will meet surely, meet and discuss and there is a good discussion if you are together, now on

Zoom one would switch off their mics and you will speak alone as if you're now a lecturer, you are teaching them...Working with groups in blended learning yoooh was the worst, worst one of them all. Like I said, people don't wanna work, even when we were still home, people would complain about data and we would say okay fine we're not gonna use Zoom, WhatsApp call or video call. We'd then request everyone to be online at 8 maybe so we can use chats. We used Chats and VNs (voice notes), but you'd find that people are not online, we are discussing, right? We write a message and some will bluetick it...only two people respond, it means you discussing in 3s now. But you can see that a certain person is online, you see new posts." (Participant 11)

As per SACSSP (2020b) group work in social work was to be simulated for students in levels 1 to 3 of their studies, the participants revealed that they found it challenging to complete the simulated group activities because students were in different geographical locations, students had connectivity problems including insufficient internet data, and lastly other students took advantage of the mentioned reasons and made excuses to get marks without contributing to the tasks given. While some participants understood these to be genuine reasons for group members' lack of participation, others expressed much frustration and stated that some group members would not make an effort at all and *"did not understand that we have problems too"* (Participant 13).

Working collaboratively or learning as a collective rather, is one of the most important components of social work education (Uranta & Ogbanga, 2017), social constructivists state that it is also pivotal in blended learning. Collective learning, according to Doos and Wilhelmson (2011), refers to "learning through interactive and communicative action creating synergy" (p. 489). Collaboration among students helps them to build relationships, a core social work standard as per the CHE (2015), it also brings about shared knowledge on and understanding of the real-world activities students engage in that are

supposed to develop their cultural competence (Phelan, 2015). The learning of these competencies, therefore, is hindered when students find it difficult to engage in activities meant to develop them, and this is a call for concern. Another challenge that surfaced in the participants' shared experiences was the lack of motivation to engage in blended learning.

Reduced motivation to attend online synchronous classes

Engagement in social work is important for acquiring skills and for knowledge development, however, due to the recording of lectures some participants did not see the need to attend and that is a challenge for the training of competent social workers. Participants reported that blended learning has negatively impacted their motivation to engage in blended learning as it has made it challenging to attend lectures and thus has had an impact on their academic participation and performance. The participants shared the following:

“Yeah, even when I want to wake up and attend, sometimes I think ahhh everything will be posted, even the lecture will be recorded. Why wake up and attend meetings? (lectures)...(Laughing) Yeah, I think it's on everyone. It's not only on me. People think that everything they will get it online, why wake up?” (Participant 4)

Another participant said:

“I'd say that it makes me lazy, because you know that even if you do not attend the class, there is an uploaded recording of the class. You do not mind not to attend the class, but the time I was a first year, attending in class, I made sure I was always in class, the lecturer would find me in class. I sat over there in front, but here nobody recognises me, in my first year, I used to sit in front, so usually the lecturer speaks to people in front, so I would be part of those people, but now I don't even participate in class when they speak, I keep quiet. Yooh,

I don't know what's happening. It is really challenging, and it has turned me into an average student, my marks dropped.” (Participant 14)

Another participant concurred:

I can see this thing (blended learning) makes me lazy. I sometimes regret not attending but again I'd not attend, because no one notices if I attended or not. So, it is affecting me badly, and since zoom lectures are recorded, it's not the same because if you are in class, you can be able to ask questions. When you simply listen, you'd be confused and say if I attended, I'd have asked this, so it is affecting me badly.” (Participant 6)

The participants indicated having reduced motivation to attend and participate in lectures, and this was said to be because lectures were recorded and would be accessed asynchronously. However, participants expressed that recorded lectures came with challenges because one could not ask for clarity from lecturers while listening to the recorded lectures as one would easily ask in synchronous lectures; the participants reported having to put in extra time and work to get through the confusions from the recorded lectures. Some participants reported that not attending lectures because of the reduced motivation has been of detriment to them because “not all classes were recorded” so, they would be left behind and this affected their academic performance. According to Murphy (2010) important basic counselling skills such as attending, listening and clarity-seeking skills, are learnt even through interactions or discussions in classes, the researcher thus sees the reported lack of attendance and reliance on recorded lectures as worrisome in the training of social work students.

Hermanto, Rai and Fahmi (2021) noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on students' attitudes and motivation in general; most participants reflected on how difficult it was for them to transition from contact learning to blended learning, participant 3

said: *“What I can say is that it is not the same as talking to a person. Being taught through the laptop makes it hard for me to pay attention. You hear the person better if you are with him or her physically it is easier to pay attention there.”* Maqableh and Alia (2021) stated that some of the challenges experienced by students in this approach to learning include reduced focus. The shared experiences of this study’s participants have indicated that participants have been faced with a multitude of challenges (some more than others) since the beginning of blended learning that caused them perturbations and have had an impact on their focus in this type of learning.

4.3.2.4 Sub-theme four: Adjustment and mental health challenges

The CHE (2020) acknowledged that this change to blended learning, together with the constraints that come with it, poses psychosocial problems for students, and threatens their well-being; it mentioned that students may be "intimidate by personal context, ability, comfortability, isolation, privacy, and a myriad of social conditions..." (p.10). The participants reported experiencing adjustment and mental health problems as a result of the challenges they were faced with in blended learning, they shared the following:

“There was a module where there would be tutorials. We used to submit almost in every 2 weeks, and you were a first-year, you’re not used to submitting online, more work come in. You have to attend a tutorial and the tutor tells you to submit work and then after 2 weeks you are given another one. That is pressure and you become stressed that you can’t do a certain thing, there is that little stress and at the same time you need to complete the work, and they say you must reference while you are a first-year, no one has explained to you about referencing. You need to learn all those things... My worst, eish, as I said the matter of tutorial, I was failing to submit other works. That’s where I was frightened and became

stressed like, yoooh what if I fail? I became stressed over that, coz I failed to submit other work. Failing to even complete it, that was hard.” (Participant 9)

The academic workload was a common issue affecting participants, another participant said:

“It gives me anxiety. I worry so much about my studies, you know? Like I tend to worry so much, I feel like I can’t keep up with the work. I feel like I’m left behind every time I feel like I got to catch up instead of keeping up with the work, you know?... personally, it gives me anxiety, this whole thing just gives me anxiety. I worry so much about everything, so much yeah... The way the workload becomes much whereas the time is less. The work becomes too much at the same time.” (Participant 8)

One participant shared that the state of her social circumstances together with the academic pressures at the beginning of blended learning overwhelmed her:

“At first, I can say that it (experience) was kind of negative because there was a time I felt like deregistering. Nothing came together in my studies at the beginning of blended learning, my marks dropped a lot... It affected me psychologically... I wished to deregister, not that I wished, I wanted to” (Participant 15)

The above responses reflect the negative impact blended learning has had on the wellness of social work students, especially those who are novices to social work and the university lifestyle. The challenges that participants reported having experienced in blended learning (structural, socio-economic, academic) have caused them a lot of perturbations and in turn, negatively affected their academic performances. The participants reported having to adapt to this psychosocial aspect as well for both their well-being and academic success. Constructivists submit that learning is an adaptive activity and that, cognitively, students are responsible for and capable of adapting to newly introduced environments (Yilmaz, 2008); although some participants shared the measures they themselves took to adapt without any

help, others revealed that support from family, friends and university personnel helped them make adjustments that eased their adaptation.

The participants' responses also indicated that they were made aware of the services, such as counselling services, available for their use within the university, and some of them reported having used them. It was also noted that the lecturers' responsiveness and empathy helped ease the participants' anxiety and stress because it showed an understanding of the students' situations. The next theme presents the strategies the participants adopted in their preparation for and adjustment to blended learning.

4.4 Theme two: Strategies employed in blended learning

This theme presents findings under three sub-themes namely: help-seeking and support, the use of social media in learning, and behavioural change including self-motivation.

4.4.1 Sub-theme one: Help-seeking and Support

The participants in the study revealed that blended learning had been very stressful for them, the stressful situation forced participants to adapt quickly for learning to continue. In engaging the 'enforced adaptation' as per Dinh and Nguyen (2020), participants shared multiple strategies that helped them. With blended learning being a new phenomenon to them, seeking help navigating it was pivotal. The participants shared the following:

“Well, what can I say? I believe that you have to speak. Don't- what can I say? you must open up, maybe let me put it like that. Talk to other people, I'd say it is important, that's why you find- sometimes you'd find that people are panicking now., and stress, all that. But there was not a time when I was in a state of panic because they always- even here in Social Work, they say we must speak out even though we are Social Workers we must speak to

professionals, but I believe speaking helps, it avoids a lot of things actually.” (Participant 11)

The participant above reflected on the importance of dealing with the self as social work students, which was reportedly vital during blended learning to counter the implications it had on the mental wellness of students; the participant further reveals the supporting role that was played by the social work lecturers, that is encouraging them to seek professional help and communicate to deal with the challenges presented by blended learning on mental health. The findings in Dinh and Nguyen (2020) and Landa et al. (2021) reveal that blended learning presented students with distress, however professional help assisted to alleviate it. The participants also shared that help was sought from the university personnel with tutors being the most preferred because they were reportedly approachable and easily accessible, one participant revealed:

“... I can't think of any now besides the tutors. They are very helpful so that we adjust. In the tutorial, it is easy than in the lecture venue, in the lecturer's class. It is easy to speak to tutors, approach them to tell them the challenges you're facing then they would refer you, and give you numbers for counselling sessions, it's another form of support. I've never received but I usually see in class the students who need it, they got it from tutors.”

(Participant 14)

The participants mostly sought help from peers, peer support reportedly played a role in participants' adapting to blended learning, one participant said:

“Blended learning taught so many things... It taught me to try so hard, gather with other students for clarity and to also make use of the tutors anytime for further clarity. What I understood about blended learning is that all those who did not pass the way they wanted or those who did not pass at all, it was all in their hands. ...Usually if there is where I need

clarity in, I ask those who I think have a better understanding than me. When there is no one who understands, I then write an email to the lecturer to state all the aspects I didn't understand. I also use the classroom opportunity, where I state that I did not understand."

(Participant 3)

Another participant concurred:

"... my Social Work peers were also able to help whenever. Uhm like let's say you couldn't download the material from Moodle or learn, they'd always share with us in the groups, we'd help each other in that sense." (Participant 5)

Help-seeking behaviours are seen as crucial in blended learning as they allow for the role of a lecturer as a facilitator supporting students in their process of creating knowledge. According to Mock (2015), students seek help not only from lecturers but from their peers as well and this helps them address and overcome challenges. The participants have indicated a hierarchy of university personnel available to support them in adapting and adjusting to blended learning. Help was sought first from their tutors and peers who they felt were approachable and easily accessible as compared to the lecturers because one had to send a formal email to get help from the lecturers. The participants have also reported that communication with lecturers was sometimes hindered by the lack of internet data to send emails, lecturers' lack of responsiveness and for some (mostly first-level students), the fear of writing to the lecturers and asking for help.

From the participants' responses, the researcher gathered that blended learning improved communication between students and university personnel (tutors, mentors, and student counsellors) and between students themselves in their attempts to manoeuvre through this approach and benefit from it; and the responses support the importance of social interaction in this approach to learning as implied by social constructivists (Yilmaz, 2008).

The social interactions occurred mostly on social media platforms as they were reportedly an affordable option to access information and academic material for some participants.

4.4.2 Sub-theme two: The use of social media in learning

The use of social media applications in teaching and learning has increased exponentially during COVID-19 (Mpungose, 2020). The participants reported using social media applications such as WhatsApp and YouTube more during the pandemic than before; they relied on social media for learning and communicating with peers, mentors, and tutors. The participants shared the following:

“We had to use social media; WhatsApp, we had to create WhatsApp groups, and used Zoom where we can have a Zoom session then discuss things. Although we would not be on the same page, things did not work as they would if we were together, seeing each other... They were created by students during Zoom sessions of lectures. So, towards the end of it then they created groups, they’d say that ‘here is the group for this module, where we can meet and discuss things the lecture says.’” (Participant 12)

The participant’s reflection above indicates that the use of social media in learning was an effective strategy that enhanced communication between students and further allowed learning to be student-centred where students were able to take initiative towards their own learning, assuming an active role as proposed by the constructivist theory.

The following are the account of students regarding the use of this platform during blended learning. One participant reported that some social work practice work was done and assessed on the WhatsApp application:

“No, I don’t recall doing them online, where there is a client and you are a Social Worker, even if it’s my classmates and we study together we make a video and we come back, and

they correct to see where the mistakes were? No. What we do because we worked on WhatsApp, they would tell us to do it too, just that you do voice notes, and they could then come and correct us here and there.” (Participant 7)

The WhatsApp platform was also used as a supportive space where students shared their challenges and possible solutions, one participant said:

“At first, I can say that it was kind of negative because there was a time I felt like deregistering. Things never came together, but being in touch with others and understanding, seeing the problems we face on the WhatsApp group. I said ‘it’s fine I will do like this’. I think in the end, it produced a good impact because now I can study at night...” (Participant 15)

The participants also revealed that academic material that they would otherwise find on the used asynchronous platform, was shared on WhatsApp to help those that had problems accessing it because of connectivity issues or the lack of internet data, this is another benefit of collective learning (Doos & Wilhelmson, 2011). Another social media platform that was reportedly helpful to participants during blended learning was YouTube. They used the platform to learn both technological and social work skills. The participants shared the following:

“The thing that I did, which helped me was to get on YouTube and checked how to use zoom. So, YouTube is helpful. That is where I got that this is how you join, how to unmute yourself, how to do this and how to do that. There was no one to help us on how to log in to zoom... Yes, I had a problem. I didn’t know laptop because even right now there are some things I don’t know in it. When you can ask me to do certain thing in it, I don’t know how, so It’s because there is YouTube now so I was able to...” (Participant 1)

The YouTube application helped participants learn social work skills by watching online sessions, one participant said:

“I have a tendency of going to YouTube to watch social work sessions. So, as I had said that for me, I study better if I’m watching something practically, YouTube helps me a lot in these circumstances. Some things, like Social Work skills, principles, ethics, all those roles, I pick up some of them through those videos since we learned, like for instance, respect, ethics, so something like that.” (Participant 11)

In the same manner, another participant said:

“What I saw was that you need to be used to YouTube and other. You need to look at some things from there. Search on YouTube if you want to do this, how can you do it, because most of the things are posted there, they are practical. They do something, and you see how to do it... yeah. it is something that assisted me a lot because even when I had texted someone, they would explain using their knowledge and you find that you are unable to do per their explanation because it happens that I can explain something to you, but you’d not understand me. I may talk to you, tell you to do like this and if I try, I cannot. But if I take the video and look at it, you then understand, maybe if I want to connect my laptop or connect to Wi-Fi, I need to do this. Yeah, things like that.” (Participant 7)

The researcher found from the participants’ responses that this mentioned platform helped them in multiple ways; it was cheaper to access compared to the LMS platform, and it kept students connected, those who were able to attend lectures would come back and update those who could not about upcoming assignments and assessments. They also shared learning materials within the created groups on this WhatsApp platform and sometimes conducted practice work on it. Annamalai (2018), in her enquiry, found that WhatsApp, “can enhance traditional teaching and learning activities in higher education and further support their

learning outside classroom hours” (p.209), this is evident in the participants’ responses although being in contact or in a physical environment is still seen as ideal for learning.

The YouTube platform is a video-sharing website where one is able to watch videos online. This platform has been used in online education even pre-COVID-19 and one of the benefits of using it, according to Snelson (2011), is that it provides online access to vast quantities of free public videos on a wide range of topics. Mphahlele et al. (2021) stated that blended learning is more effective in delivering theoretical content but does not let students practice and learn effectively, it is understandable that participants would opt to go to YouTube in search of videos explaining how devices are used and those showing the social works skills taught to them being used in practice. The participants taking it upon themselves to use such a platform for their learning is an indication that participants are aware of their learning styles and are taking an active rather than a passive role in their learning, an important proposition made by constructivists for success in self-regulated learning (Olusegun, 2015). Another strategy participants reported having adopted to adjust and adapt to blended learning was that of changing their behaviour to one that fostered learning.

4.4.3 Sub-theme three: Behavioural change and self-motivation

The development of behaviours that would foster learning and ensure the successful achievement of academic goals is necessary in self-regulated learning (Yeh et al., 2019). Managing their time well, avoiding distractions and motivating themselves were some of the behaviours participants adopted in blended learning. One participant shared the following details of her change in behaviour:

“I think what worked for me, what made me cope; whenever I went to class, I had a book and a pen to take notes. When the lecturer was teaching, I did not think I will see the slides later.

Whenever he explained something, I would write that down as if I’m in a physical class.

Whenever there was something I didn't understand at that time, I was not shy. I raised the question, either I wrote on the chat box or I raise my hand then the lecturer points at me and ask where I was not clear. I knew that since a person gets data, they'd use it in bad ways.

They'd use TikTok for an hour, nearly finishing the school's data. I used to also use Instagram a lot, so I resisted social media for a short time. I lessened the distraction, by not being visited by friends at home, since you all home, one from DUT so you all study online.

Maybe you all go to town, maybe you receive NSFAS, and you meet today for coffee. So, you'd end up not attending the class at 12 because you'd come back at 11:30 and end up not attending it. If you did, you'd attend it in a restaurant and there is noise. So, you muted yourself, but you attended for the sake of attending. So, I chose to eliminate myself from distractions and moved away from things that disturb me. What else? I was organised in terms of time management. I managed my time in a right way, managed to meet deadlines, stayed away from the TV also.” (Participant 15)

Creating a study timetable for the productive use of their time was the most prevalent response from the participants, one participant said:

“I can say that all those challenges did not occur repeatedly. As they happened, I learned a lesson that focusing more on a single module and ignoring others can make me fail. I needed to give each of them equal attention, by means of a timetable creation. That would allow me to know that during this time I am focusing on this module and on this time, I am focusing on this one.” (Participant 3)

Self-motivation and assuming responsibility for own learning also featured in some of the participants' reflections; despite the myriad of challenges, participants reported that they were motivated to take the responsibility to practise behaviour that would help them reach their academic goals, one participant said:

“You know there is- I do not know if it is an expression or what: “there is always a solution to the end of every problem,” every problem has to have a solution at the end. Firstly, I came here for a degree, you see? If I am going to complain and say, “blended learning is this and that,” and I miss some things because I did not check the announcements. At the end it is my responsibility to do that. I saw that I had to check announcements regularly, I have to log in to LEARN regularly to check my link, what new has been uploaded and I must start early when I log in to class..” (Participant 1)

The participant reflections above highlight the importance of students’ behavioural change in blended learning. Time management was the most prevalent in the participants’ reflections, some reported having applied it while others reported that it would have been very helpful to them. This affirms the findings of Yeh et al. (2019) that time management is a very crucial strategy to use in this approach to learning. While some participants reported having motivated themselves and assuming the responsibility to effect productive learning through managing their time well and adopting behaviours that facilitated their learning, some reportedly took time to realise the importance and usefulness of these exercises. One participant said:

“There are times where I thought, had I not taken this test lightly, had I studied enough and gave myself enough time study, and not say that because we are writing it online- maybe I would have got better marks” (Participant 1)

Students in Landa et al.’s (2021) study did confess that time management and self-discipline are a challenge thus they produced mediocre results, this supports participant 1’s excerpt above.

Some of the participants in this study revealed having used most of the time intended for studying in blended learning for other activities online (Rasheed et al., 2020), and these

activities reportedly used up most of their internet data. Such behaviours were reportedly detrimental to the participants' learning process. However, the researcher noted the accountability that was reflected in the participants' responses, this was an indication that they know they also have a role to play in their learning process in blended learning (Yilmaz, 2008). This theme presented the strategies the participants adopted in preparing for and adjusting to blended learning, the next theme presents their perceptions on the social work skills and knowledge learnt through this approach to learning.

4.5 Theme three: Students' perceptions of social work skills and knowledge learned in blended learning

The findings on the perceptions of students on the social work skills and knowledge learned through blended learning are presented in this theme under the following headings: poor development and retention of knowledge and skills, the perceived role of lecturers in learning skills, and the impact of academic dishonesty on the learning of skills.

4.5.1 Sub-theme one: Poor development and retention of knowledge and skills

Social work knowledge acquisition is assessed through assessments and examinations while skill development has, until the occurrence of the pandemic, been assessed through field instruction (Keeney, Byrnes, Young, Beecher, 2021). During the pandemic, both social work knowledge and skills were assessed online through formative and summative assessments and simulations. The participants in this study reported being disheartened by the lack of practical experience in blended learning as a result of the pandemic, they shared the following thoughts and concerns about the use of the online environment in the delivery of the social work program and its influence on the retention of the content taught:

“Yoh okay it is really tough learning skills and grasping them. Usually when you learn them, it’s for the test or assignment. Grasping them and keeping them in the head is difficult, I can put it that way. It is difficult.” (Participant 14)

Another participant concurred and detailed as follows:

“You see in blended learning, it’s the honest truth, we study to pass. If you can ask me about things from first year, I’ll be unable to respond to you. The things I know from first year are the things I learned while we were still doing contact learning. That was like 1 or 2 months, then lockdown struck. Everything else that came after that, hay, I would be lying to you if I say I know. So now that’s my concern, blended learning made us lazy to study, that’s number 1... I’m worried that I don’t think that the quality of a Social Worker or the skills we are supposed to develop, we are developing them as Social Workers due to blended learning.”

(Participant 11)

Below is an excerpt of the conversation with participant 12 on the question of the social work skills learned through blended learning. The excerpt further reveals the participants experienced difficulty to grasp and retain the knowledge and skills learned through this approach, this participant struggled to remember and answer the question posed to him:

Interviewer: What Social Work skills did you find to be easy to learn and grasp online? As you mentioned that in Social Work we got casework skills, group work skills, and community work skills, from those skills which ones were easy to learn and grasp online? Which ones were difficult?

Participant 12: (Inaudible)

(Silence from participant 50:03 – 50:27)

Interviewer: Hello!

Participant: Hello

Interviewer: Can you hear me?

Participant: Yes hello. I hear you.

Interviewer: You were saying?

Participant: I was saying please remind me what skills were those so that I will remember clearly, because now eish.

The participants expressed, with regards to the learning of skills and retention of the knowledge learned, that the online environment has not been effective as they found it difficult to grasp the content delivered to them through blended learning. The researcher noted from the participants' reflections that the reasons behind their struggles to grasp and retain what is taught to them were their reduced motivation to engage in blended learning (it made them lazy), poor time management due to having multiple responsibilities, and connectivity issues. Literature informs that the students' perceptions of the social work knowledge and skills acquired are informed greatly by the challenges and opportunities they experienced while engaged in blended learning and they may also be influenced by the students' contexts (Dinh & Nguyen, 2020; Keeney et al, 2021; Smoyer, O'Brien, Rodriguez-Keyes 2020), this is supported by the above findings.

The findings revealed that most participants had negative perceptions of the online environment and its influence on the development and retention of social work knowledge and skills, another concern was the methods used to assess the acquisition of knowledge and skills in blended learning. Some participants revealed that most assessments were done through multiple-choice tests (MCQ), they felt that this method of assessing did not foster their learning, one participant said:

"... I have noticed in a lot of modules, almost all modules - it's MCQs. There are others with case studies, but mostly, it's MCQ... there's little that you learn from the MCQ... it must be

something more practical, if it is theory, I must write 8 lines explaining what I've learned, I think in that way we can learn because MCQs can be crammed.” (Participant 15)

The participant explained further:

“So, if you are going to write things with straight forward questions, ones that need you to explain in brief, sometimes you get that feeling that even if you do not write it exactly as it should be academically, but I understand this, I'm being tested on what I know. Even if I could write that such such a theory states this and that then they maybe say, 'briefly explain,' I can then explain that it is used in such cases so that the lecturer will see that this one has more understanding, but if it is an MCQ, it's a straightforward answer, it's either D or G. So, it's like in the end, we do not know anything and if we learn about MCQ then they bring a written test on a theory when you were expecting an MCQ, you will obviously fail that test.”
(Participant 15)

The participant's above reflection suggests that blended learning inhibits the learning of social work skills, which means that it does not allow students to apply the knowledge and skills they learn. This supports the conclusions made by Dinh and Nguyen (2020) and Mphahlele et al. (2021) that blended learning is more effective in delivering theoretical content but does not let students practice and learn effectively. However, the blended learning platform offers a variety of tools for assessments (Agaçi,2017), this then brings into question the technological competence of the users of the platform (educators), whom it was found by Landa et al. (2021) that most were incompetent due to the lack of training on the tools used in blended learning. The reported challenge to learn and grasp taught skills experienced in blended learning evoked in participants feelings that social work would be better learned the traditional way, in a physical classroom, one participant said:

“Yeah, what I can say- I am able, a little because you know I feel like if we did some things on campus, I feel like I would’ve gained more information than the one I got, because we were going to do the other things practically” (Participant 12)

The researcher found in the literature that there is a common concern about the effectiveness of blended learning in delivering social work education; more than half of the respondents in Smoyer et al. (2020) in the USA and most respondents (eighty percent) in a survey conducted by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2020) stated that they preferred in-person (face-to-face) learning over blended learning (Cited in Kourgiantakis and Lee, 2020). They reported low retention of the taught content; they felt they learned less through blended learning. The participants in this study felt the same.

There were differing views on the skills the participants found to be easily learned in blended learning and ones they found challenging, the common statement in their reflections, however, was the need to be in contact for the learning and application of skills. The participants shared the following:

“Uhm, you see, even if I won’t name them or say them in the way that they follow each other, but in- let me say from when the client enters the office. You’re supposed to show respect when you’re with a client right? from the moment the client enters so, on this, theory alone, I don’t think it’s enough... Being non-judgemental, that you can learn from your notes and understand that you’re not supposed to be judgemental, confidentiality as well and this one that says- that form, I forgot what it is called, but the form that you sign when you have to explain to the client if ever you disclose the information they can report, something like that. Or that if ever there is a person- if ever the information we are talking about here puts someone in danger, or it’s either a client or someone else then you have to tell the police, you see? So that I can learn that from reading books...” (Participant 11)

Another participant added the following, identifying that some techniques which are important in social work practical education were difficult to implement in blended learning:

“We once role played on campus, I feel like it was better when you are there, it is easy, you can see the person, you can see if they are confused by a certain question. Now here online, the person would just keep quiet, and you won’t be able to identify if they are quiet because they are confused by a question or they are just quiet because they do not know the answer, you see?” (Participant 6)

The above participant further explicates her view on the techniques she found challenging to learn in blended learning providing another cause of the challenge, she said:

“The ones for non-verbal communication, that is difficult to learn in this way we are learning. I made an example of the one we did last year, the sessions we did last year. Even when we opened the videos, but we can’t identify them, and people are so relaxed. We are just sitting there. You can’t identify that they are expressing a certain feeling or emotion, you can’t, you are only seeing a person. It is difficult I have to say, it is difficult on that side. Then there are the ones which were fine, the confrontations, that was easy. You can confront people, it is easy. The one I can say is hard, is non-verbal communication.” (Participant 6)

Participant 6 indicated that group work practice in blended learning was done through mock group work simulations on Zoom (Azman et al., 2020). She shared that the challenge in identifying and implementing skills was experienced because the participants in the mock session were “relaxed”. This relaxation of fellow social work students in learning sessions may either be a result of participant familiarity and comfortability with the group constituents (classmates, friends) or the failure of students to tune into the ‘mock’(imitation) and be creative to facilitate the learning of skills. Familiarity and comfortability emerged in the participants’ reflections; one participant shared that:

“I don’t think if we are doing it right now as we are learning through blended learning, we communicate like we are on the streets because we have this thing that we are in a group with our friends. The way you speak, you’re comfortable in the language from the street.”

(Participant 15)

Another participant shared that she preferred doing an interview with her friend (practising casework skills) over a person she was unfamiliar with because she would be comfortable and be able to implement skills freely. Although mock sessions are an encouraged activity for the learning of skills in simulations, the PBSW acknowledged, through the simulated practice activities for fourth-year students, that it can be difficult to learn important social work ethics such as the building and maintenance of personal/professional boundaries (SACSSP, 2020b).

On the issues of ethics, another participant shared how it was difficult to develop and consolidate a professional identity in blended learning, she said:

“All those skills, those little things we’re supposed to see, pick up, it is hard to pick them up online. Instead, we say we’re still in school and not in the real world. Then when I do my practicals at DSD, I will wear dresses and do this and that. We join classes in our pyjamas, you join while in bed and just tilt your phone, all those things do not equip us to be people who will be Social Workers who need to possess skills. It does not equip us because I remember Mam Anny (Pseudonym), she always told us we’re not ready, she feels like we’re not read the way we talk, the way we write there on the chat box. You see all those things fall under skills” (Participant 15)

The above perceptions of the participants reinforce the point that the forced adoption of this approach to learning is worrisome for a programme such as social work because field instruction is an essential component of this programme. According to Keeney et al. (2021), field instruction is considered to be the signature pedagogy in social work which allows students to “integrate theory and practice in hands-on interventions with actual clients” (p.2).

The changes made consequent to the pandemic have had “far-reaching effects on the quality of social work skills that such students may have...” (Zvomuya, 2021, p196). Participant 7 above mentions that being sent videos to copy how to do social work would help them learn some skills, this denotes the role that students expect the academic staff to play in their learning.

4.5.2 Sub-theme three: The perceived role of lecturers in skills and knowledge acquisition

The constructivist theory of learning posits that the lecturer’s role in the learner-centred pedagogy used in blended learning is that of facilitation and support (Yilmaz, 2008). Social work lecturers are to facilitate and support the students’ skills and knowledge acquisition. The participants in this study shared their views of the role lecturers have to assume in their learning, they shared the following:

“The lecturer has to come up with an option to try and do some interviews online and maybe have zoom where we can record the video and see how we are doing, and he or she can come and correct us to identify where the problem was.” (Participant 7)

“I think some of them but when it comes to the skills it would be okay if we meet physical and mam (lecturer) to also be there for observations. You may think that I am okay with this only to find out that mam as a lecturer will discover that you are not good in some aspects, but online she will not be able to see that.” (Participant 3)

The participants’ reflections above pose that the lecturers have to create an environment that allows students to acquire knowledge and learn skills, this denotes that lecturers are expected to design the online platforms in a way that fosters learning. The participants also posed that lecturers have to be there in the process of learning to observe if students are developing skills accurately. The participants’ views on the roles lecturers have to play are consistent

with Tucker (2022), who states that while students are responsible for “doing, making, thinking, discussing, questioning, problem-solving, collaborating, and reflecting” (para. 5) as active agents in their learning process, lecturers are responsible for experimenting “with new technology tools, learning platforms, and instructional strategies to engage students in their online schedules” (para. 1).

Another role participants noted was that of support through giving students detailed feedback on the work they submit. The participants indicated that feedback on the learning of skills in blended learning is of paramount importance, one participant said:

“I think Dr Mbuso (pseudonym) returns feedback and you can see, when she has marked either essay or short questions, they’d come back with detailed feedback. If it was an essay, the feedback she would give you tells you that ‘here and here your answer is lacking or you could’ve included this and that,’ you see? Things like that. (Participant 11)

The participant went on to explain how the lack of feedback is has a negative impact on their learning:

Other lecturers mark and bring back a percentage and that’s that. They give an assignment, okay they teach obviously, we learn, and they go through that assignment again, give us guidelines on how to do it, how to tackle it. But once you submit, when results come back, the feedback that comes back says you failed or you passed, you wrote well or did well. I’m happy with the way- you see, those kinds of feedback but not those that say to students one by one, “what you wrote, this is my comment on it,” you see?... If you answered a question, maybe you wrote it wrongly, and you got the answer wrong, even next time if it happens that it appears, you won’t know what to write because feedback was not provided.” (Participant 11)

The above participants’ reflections indicate that lecturers are expected to observe the students’ learning process to ensure the accuracy of the skills learned and knowledge

acquired. They are also expected to give feedback on the work students submit.

Kourgiantakis, Sewell, and Bongo (2019) identified similar roles; these authors stated that feedback is an important mechanism that enhances student learning, and they added that it is based on observation meaning that observation and feedback go hand-in-hand. They asserted that giving feedback in simulation-based learning enhances knowledge, improves skills, developed professional judgment, and increases self-reflection, all important competencies in social work education. Although blended learning is student-centred and self-regulated, lecturers still have very important roles to play to ensure students develop the skill set required by the program.

4.5.3 Sub-theme four: Impacts of academic dishonesty on the acquisition of knowledge and skills

All participants, in their reflections, alluded to a lot of issues of academic dishonesty in blended learning; being at home alone, the lack of motivation to engage in learning, easy access to lecture notes and the time given to write assessments reportedly led to the loss of academic integrity among students. Academic dishonesty has had an impact on the learning and retention of skills learned because participants copied from their notes and passed assessments without any understanding of the content, the participants shared the following:

“Firstly, blended learning has some good and bad impacts on me. Personally, the bad impact is that I have the tendency- because we were writing online, I do not study most of the time ... but academically it is good because I get the right marks than those I think I would get in contact learning... here in blended learning you get time to open slides while we are writing.” (Participant 2)

Another participant said:

“I was still explaining, you’d find that it’s not that it is studying, like I had explained before that for me this thing is impacting us, hence I said if you can ask me something from first year, I don’t know it. So, I won’t say it is studying, it is more like cramming because really you study only that portion for that particular test or assignment. So now there are no challenges, you do not have that challenge of having to study and be dedicated... besides, we all know that nowadays since we write online and tests are online, cheating is obvious. My concerns lie there.” (Participant 11)

Participant 6 concurred and expressed how she cannot say she learned anything since the beginning of blended learning, which was when she was in her second year of study. She said:

“I feel like it’s because of lockdown, this thing of being at home. It’s a good thing you said you will hide me (both laughing), you see during second year? We were copying. I do not want to mention second year as the year where I studied and learned things, we copied. I only studied in my first year and last year, which is third year. What killed me was this thing of second year, you’d relax. We copied when blended learning had just begun, it was not that strict. They had not noticed that students were copying. We did whatever we wanted, we opened groups and shared answers, you see all that? If we didn’t close, and there was no lockdown. All this would not have happened. Even if we had studied but this thing of studying at home ruined things. It destroyed me” (Participant 6)

Participant 11 again revealed that online paraphrasing tools were used to evade plagiarism, he said:

“Like I said blended learning makes us lazy. You don’t think, you do not think. It’s like you take something from google scholar and put it on a paraphrasing tool, then it comes out written differently then you take it to Word, it’s like you wrote it.” (Participant 11)

Academic dishonesty is a common concern in the literature on self-related learning; Holden et al. (2021) found that the move to the virtual environment as a result of the pandemic has presented faculties and administrators with challenges of academic dishonesty, it is believed that the platform offers more opportunities for cheating. Mavundla and Mgutshini (2021) and Nabee, Mageto, Pisa (2021) also had concerns about university students' cheating and plagiarism in take-home examinations and assignments, they suggested that further research should be conducted on how authenticity, honesty, quality and integrity can be maintained in these assessment methods. Some participants were concerned themselves about the impact academic dishonesty has on their development of skills and ultimately, the impacts it will have on the kind of social workers they will be, one participant said:

“It will cost us in the end. It will look like we are social workers that are uneducated, social workers who just appeared out of nowhere to call themselves social workers.” (Participant

11)

The issues of academic dishonesty have negative implications for social work education as they blur the importance and assimilation of ethical practice in social work. This theme presented the students' perceptions of the knowledge and skills learned through blended learning; the next theme talks about the students' self-confidence in practising the social work skills acquired through blended learning.

4.6 Theme four: Self-doubt

The participants' confidence in putting skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning into practice is influenced by their perceptions of both the ease and difficulty faced in acquiring them. This theme presents findings on the participants' expressed lack of

confidence or self-doubt under the sub-themes: self-doubt due to limited knowledge and self-doubt due to the lack of practical experience.

4.6.1 Sub-theme one: Self-doubt due to limited knowledge

The participants revealed having limited social work knowledge and skills to feed into their confidence to put the skills they learned through blended learning into practice. All participants reflected on the application of the skills learned in their respective levels of study; they shared the following:

“Yeah, I’m bit nervous... I feel like I’m not fit enough. I’m nervous, I don’t want to lie. Like maybe I do not know what will they need, I know that what I have, what I’ve been taught, like maybe something will be needed or needed more because I feel like I don’t understand the whole things, I don’t understand everything I was taught. I do have some challenges somewhere, somehow... Yeah, I can say working in groups, communicating with the client, I’m not sure whether I’ll do it the way it is required perfect.” (Participant 12)

The participant above expressed that he doubted he could apply the skills learned and knowledge acquired in blended learning owing to the challenges to grasp and retain skills.

The lack of understanding of the taught program content evokes in participants feelings of uncertainty and fear which inhibit their confidence to apply skills taught to them in practice, another participant concurred:

“For now, I think I do not take enough knowledge, but another thing is that there is this fear of not thinking I can do it. Fear is the most challenging thing, there is just no self-confidence. I do not think I can go and face people, but that’s what I need to work on.” (Participant 7)

Although some participants reported not having the confidence to apply taught skills because they felt they did not know enough, others reported having grasped and retained some of the taught skills and were confident about applying them, one participant said:

“I’d say no and yes (laughing) because there are others- like I said there are activities we were engaged in whereby we- there is another activity we once did; they sent us a session of a social worker and a client, we were told to observe and point out the skills used or ethics and those unethical. So, yeah I think there are things that I spotted that I can do and others that I may not be able to do so that’s why I am saying yes and no. But I think I am ready...

Like I said, I’m pretty good at communicating with people. So that’s not an issue.”

(Participant 11)

Confidence in applying learned skills in practice is informed by one’s personal account of how much one has learned in this self-regulated approach (Lawrence & Abel, 2013). In the above accounts, the participants revealed what had or had not been done in their different levels of study to foster their learning and help build their confidence. Issues of self-awareness and self-esteem were also noted in the above accounts; the concern in the literature about how the self and the use of self can be taught in blended learning is eminent (Bentley et al., 2015; Kourgiantakis and Lee, 2020).

4.6.2 Sub-theme two: Self-doubt due to the lack of practical experience

One major concern that featured in the participants’ reflections was the lack of practical experience owing to the cancellation of field instruction during COVID-19. Above being disheartened about this, the participants reported that it has had an impact on their confidence to put some taught skills into practice. They reported being knowledgeable of and being confident to apply the skills they were able to practise (through mock sessions) in simulations as compared to those they were not able to practise, they shared the following:

“I am not sure. I have high hopes not to getting a supervisor who will be harsh on me. I don’t know whether with the skills I have, I’m ready or what. According to me, I don’t see myself ready to sit down with a person on a casework and be able to do everything alone. We are

expected in our fourth year to be able to do that alone, but I do not see myself being able to do all that. I feel like group work is easy compared to casework. Casework, I feel like when I arrive in the field I can get a right supervisor, who won't expect much from me, to know everything.” (Participant 6)

Another participant boldly concurred:

“You see group work, I am sure because we did it, we did sessions and recorded on zoom so it's the one I can do better because usually we practised it in class, unlike casework, I don't remember where we did casework in one-on-one session between client and a student social worker, like practising it in class. But we usually do group work. It is the one that was emphasized a lot. So, I think I can ace it, even if everything is included but I can do it better than the other ones.” (Participant 14)

Another participant said:

“We need something to be more practical so that we can be able to have those skills that we need because we know that if we were in the lecture hall straight, the time for being with a client was gonna come and we are doing something practical... there is that thing saying if we were in school, you would have found a way to be shown what to do when the client arrives, be practical... So now it is hard to learn it online, even now we are confused that when they say there is no time for practicals, we have that fear that- or maybe when you go to a child welfare centre from your home or a police station, it is difficult to even know what you will do when you get there.” (Participant 7)

Getting practical experience was seen by the participants to be very important, they needed to be ‘shown’ the skills through practising so they would master them and be able to apply them in practice. The mastering of skills, according to Warren, Reilly, Herdan, and Lin (2021), boosts students’ confidence. Russo, Warren, Neri, Herdan, and Brickman (2022) added that students’ character and their perception of the learning environment also

contribute to their confidence to apply the skills acquired in blended learning. All these factors need that the learning environment be designed appropriately and strategically to include, in this case, simulations that allow students to learn skills practically. The issues of educators' technological incompetence and lack of adequate training in this approach to learning resurface again here (Landa et al., 2021).

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter presented the findings of this study. It gave a brief description of the participants' socio-demographic information, followed by a summary of the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the collected data. Four themes were derived from the findings, namely, benefits and challenges presented by blended learning, strategies employed in this approach, students' perceptions of social work skills and knowledge learned, and self-doubt. These themes together with their sub-themes (also derived from the findings) were analysed and discussed. The next chapter draws conclusions and makes recommendations based on the findings of the research.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5. Introduction

This chapter consists of two sections, it will first give an overview of the achievement of the study's main aim and objectives. Then, recommendations for social work education and further research will be made.

This study aimed to explore the experiences of social work students taking the program through blended learning during COVID-19. This aim was to be achieved through the following objectives:

- a. To identify opportunities and challenges forwarded by blended learning as experienced by social work students
- b. To understand the strategies that social work students employed in preparing and adjusting to blended learning.
- c. To explore the social work students' perceptions of the skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning.
- d. To establish the social work students' self-confidence in practising social work skills acquired through blended learning.

5.1 Major conclusions that are aligned with the main aim and objectives of the study

The achievement of the aim and objectives of this study will be presented by way of stating what was found in the literature and in this study. The constructive theory of learning will also be engaged in this overview.

5.1.1 Objective one: To identify opportunities and challenges forwarded by blended learning as experienced by social work students

5.1.1.1 Opportunities forwarded by blended learning

The consensus in the local literature is that blended learning was the response forced upon the higher education system to salvage the 2020 academic year threatened by the COVID-19 crisis (CHE, 2020; Landa et al., 2021; Mhlanga and Moloji, 2020; Mpungose 2021). Although it was only fully adopted during the pandemic in South Africa, blended learning is not a new phenomenon in other parts of the world, especially in developed countries. This approach to learning has been endorsed by their HEIs as an approach, which when designed with care, presents students, educators, and universities with numerous opportunities. This study sought to identify the opportunities or benefits it has brought social work students recruited into this study.

The findings revealed that most of the opportunities presented by blended learning stem from its flexible nature. It was convenient as it saved students time and energy by eliminating the travel to and from campus for their lecture schedules. It also allowed students to learn from anywhere and at any time. These findings are consistent with those in the literature, students globally are said to appreciate the time and cost savings afforded by blended learning on trips to and from their everyday university schedules (Lakhal and Bélisle, 2020; Mpungose, 2021; Simanovic et al., 2021; Heilporn et al, 2021). The flexible nature of blended learning also afforded students the opportunity to attend classes they never got to attend while learning in contact because they were either too early or too late.

Simanovic et al. (2021) posited that the flexible nature of blended learning affords students the opportunity to take on other responsibilities outside those that are educational. The findings in this study confirmed this as they revealed that students benefited socially, emotionally, and economically all while still fulfilling their academic responsibilities; they

got to be of service to their families, took care of the vulnerable, fulfilled responsibilities and were of financial assistance in their financially constrained homes. Being available to assist their loved ones reportedly relieved students of the worry they would otherwise feel when away from their homes. Students were able to be present parents, they used their bursary (NSFAS) allowances to help in their households and started businesses. According to Davids, Ryan, Yassin, Hendrickse, and Roman (2016), the nature of social ills within South African societies makes strong family bonds, family structures as well as economic freedom paramount. Blended learning allowed for the bonding of families in this difficult time and made it possible to execute plans for the sustenance of family livelihoods at a time when many lost their jobs.

Academically, the findings revealed that students benefitted from the recording of synchronous classes, increased assessment submission time and they experienced a reduced fear of participation in lectures. The appreciation of synchronous class was on the basis that some experienced a lot of connectivity issues and could not access the learning platforms. The lack of internet data, being caught up in home responsibilities were among other reasons why students were not being able to attend lectures in real-time. The recording of the live classes gave students a chance to catch up on work at a time suitable for them, giving them control over their time and their pace for learning, that is, personalising learning. This denotes the self-regulated nature of blended learning in which constructivists propose students should be active and autonomous (Olusegun, 2015). Autonomy, however, can negatively impact the students' learning process if the recording of classes encourages them to neglect classes because this results in piled-up work and the inhibition of the learning of important social work attending skills such as communication and clarity-seeking skills. The increased amount of time given to students for assignment submissions and the writing of assessments in blended learning was beneficial to students, although it raises concerns about

students developing their ability to manage their time well in their learning. Time management is an important skill in learning and in social work for efficiency (Lešková, 2019). And it also raises concerns about students' academic integrity (Mavundla & Mgutshini, 2021), which the findings allude to a lot of academic dishonesty happening among students in blended learning. This will surely have negative implications for the social work profession; social work trainees are likely to lack ethical competence.

Blended learning has lastly been beneficial to students by encouraging the development of self-reliance and self-development skills; novice students in their reportedly challenging transition from high school shared having developed technological skills and confidence using technological devices for learning. The findings also reported that students have developed personally by learning how to be independent, responsible, and take charge of their learning. These findings signified students' realisation that blended learning is learner-centred and self-regulated (Lytle, 2013). Although beneficial, self-development and self-reliance in self-regulated learning may encourage students to focus on a more individualistic approach to learning, which would cause them challenges and frustrations in a program such as social work where working as a collective is compulsory. This requires that students be able to balance work done individually and that which is done as a collective in blended learning to support both collaboration and active learning on their part (Klette, 2018). Blended learning was reported to have saved HEIs amid the pandemic, but it was not without challenges.

5.1.1.2 Challenges forwarded by blended learning

The adoption of blended learning in South African HEIs consequent to the pandemic reportedly presented students with a myriad of challenges, this is confirmed in both the literature and findings. The most prevalent challenge experienced by students worldwide was

that of not getting equal access to the learning environment as a result of the social and digital divide (Goldingay et al., 2020, Landa et al., 2021; Mpungose, 2021). Factors such as, but not limited to location, income, and time affected students' access to the platforms used in blended learning. Similarly, the findings revealed that the students' social circumstances, geographic location, socio-economic status, and educational background factored in their inability to access and participate in blended learning.

Most of the mentioned challenges in the findings stem from the social and digital divide. COVID-19 displaced most students from their university residences to their rural and urban homes; the students who were in the rural areas reported experiencing the most challenges accessing and staying engaged in blended learning as compared to their urban counterparts. This was due to the lack of infrastructure resources in the rural areas; the students reported experiencing difficulty accessing the blended learning platforms due to issues of connectivity (issues with electricity and limited or no network) and being technologically incapacitated. Social and digital divide are global issues (Riddlesden and Singleton, 2014; Goldingay et al., 2020), the above findings however, specifically revealed that communities in South Africa are still unequal with others being far behind in terms of social and structural development (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2013; Nel, 2005). COVID-19 and the forced adoption of remote teaching and learning in South Africa have brought forth clear evidence of the continuation of some of the past inequalities. The adoption of blended learning favoured those who were geographically located in urban areas and those who were technologically competent (Dube, 2020).

The findings evidenced that connectivity (network and electricity) made it difficult for students to stay engaged in blended learning, and this limited their participation in the activities planned to equip them with social work knowledge and skills. Furthermore, working collaboratively was a challenge in blended learning due to connectivity issues as

students could not all be online when they needed to be. Uranta and Ogbanga (2017) stated that working collaboratively is one of the most important components of social work education, and social constructivists stated that students rely on each other to help create knowledge in student-centred learning, making collaborations pivotal in blended learning as well (Maksimović, 2020). Students learn core social work standards such as relationship building and the establishment of a professional identity through collaboration (CHE, 2015), and collaborations also bring about shared knowledge on and understanding of the simulated real-world activities that are supposed to develop their cultural competence (Phelan, 2015). The learning of these competencies is hindered when students find it difficult to engage in activities meant to develop them, and this has serious implications for social work practice; whether blended learning trains students to be knowledgeable and competent social workers is questionable as a result.

The home environment was reported to be inconducive for learning. Lack of private space, lots of home distractions and expectations to take on family responsibilities including caring for their vulnerable loved ones in addition to their educational ones posed a challenge. These findings are consistent with those of Simanovic et al., (2021) that found that ‘home schooling’ was a challenge for students because, in that context, students were also “parents, children, carers, and employees” (p.132). These challenging circumstances reportedly took a toll on the students.

The swift adoption of blended learning forced students to adapt to a new learning environment within a short period of time and with close to no experience. The reviewed literature acknowledged that this posed psychosocial problems for them, and threatened their well-being (CHE, 2020; Dinh & Nguyen, 2020). The findings evidenced that the multiple constraints that students faced in blended learning caused them a lot of perturbations. Stress and anxiety were reported as the common mental health challenges students experienced in

their attempts to adjust to the new learning changes. It was confirmed that the challenges experienced have had a negative impact on the students' well-being, however, the assistance of fellow students, university counsellors, academic tutors, and lecturers helped them overcome. The students' resilience corroborates the proposition by cognitive constructivists that learning is an adaptive activity and that students are cognitively capable of adapting to the new environment (Yilmaz, 2008).

These reported findings demonstrate that the implementation of blended learning in South African Universities must consider the socio-economic conditions of students for it to be successful. The legacy of apartheid on the SA education system is evident in this study. Many students from previously disadvantaged homes and schools lacked exposure to technological skills. The intersection between poverty and a poor education system impacted greatly on and compromised some students. Also, the swift changes to blended learning were drastic and thus have left many students vulnerable to poor mental health challenges. Considering that some students may have had pre-existing mental health challenges, support services in higher education must be equipped and prioritised.

5.1.2 Objective two: To understand the strategies that social work students employed in preparing and adjusting to blended learning.

Literature asserts that searching for academic support from others is a strategy students employ to prevent educational failure in self-regulated learning (Mock, 2015; Yeh et al., 2019). With blended learning being a new phenomenon to the participants, seeking help navigating it was pivotal. The findings revealed that there is a hierarchy of university personnel available to support students in adapting and adjusting to blended learning. Tutors and peers were reportedly approachable and easily accessible as compared to the lecturers. The formalities of having to send emails, having limited data, lecturers' lack of

responsiveness and for some (mostly first-level students), the fear of writing to the lecturers were reasons reported to have discouraged consultations with lecturers. Emails were sent to lecturers for matters that only they could assist with.

According to Yilmaz (2008), social constructivism stresses that interaction among all parties involved in student-centred and self-regulated learning is important to facilitate learning. This is confirmed in the findings; the interaction with peers, tutors, and lectures helped students address and overcome the academic and mental health challenges they come across in blended learning. The use of this strategy improved communication between students and university personnel (tutors, mentors, lecturers, and student counsellors) and between students themselves, and this helped them adapt to this new approach to learning. The social interactions occurred mostly on social media platforms as they were reportedly an affordable option to get information and support. The findings indicated that social media applications such as WhatsApp and YouTube became useful resources during the pandemic for both communication with peers, mentors, and tutors and learning. These platforms supported collective learning as academic material that would otherwise be found on the used asynchronous platform, was shared on WhatsApp to help those that had problems accessing due to connectivity issues or the lack of internet data. These findings support Annamalai (2018) who found that social media can be used to “enhance traditional teaching and learning activities in higher education and further support learning outside classroom hours” (p.209).

The findings also revealed that behavioural change and self-motivation were necessary in blended learning. The development of behaviours that would foster learning and ensure the successful achievement of academic goals is imperative in self-regulated learning (Yeh et al., 2019). Time management, avoiding distractions, and self-motivation were some of the behaviours that helped adaption to blended learning. This is consistent with the assertion of Yeh et al. (2019) who stated that time management is a very crucial strategy to

use in this approach to learning. Self-discipline through resisting the entertainment social media platforms and other online activities that took time away from their studies and depleted their learning internet data (Rasheed et al., 2020), lessening distractions, and regularly checking emails and announcements on the LMS platform to keep up to date were behaviours that helped foster students' learning.

These reported findings have demonstrated that students needed to be very strategic and resilient to adjust to blended learning. The unity and the spirit of ubuntu among students and the university personnel are applaudable and have somewhat helped students adjust to blended learning. The adoption of this approach needed that there be all hands on deck and a slight loosening of assistant-student boundaries to facilitate the adjustment.

5.1.3 Objective three: To explore the social work students' perceptions of the skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning.

The findings revealed that the online environment has not been effective in supporting the acquisition of knowledge and learning of skills as students found it difficult to grasp the content delivered to them through blended learning. Literature informs that the students' perceptions of the social work knowledge and skills acquired are informed greatly by the challenges and opportunities they experienced while engaged in blended learning and they may also be influenced by the students' contexts (Dinh & Nguyen, 2020; Keeney et al, 2021; Smoyer et al., 2020). This is supported in findings as reduced motivation to engage in blended learning (it made them lazy), connectivity issues, and poor time management due to having multiple responsibilities were reasons behind students' struggles to grasp and retain what is taught to them.

The findings also discerned some concerns about the methods used to assess the acquisition of knowledge and skills in blended learning. Most assessments were reportedly

done through multiple-choice questionnaire tests (MCQ), and students felt that this method of assessing did not foster learning. The lack of practical experience in blended learning was another raised concern, this implied that this approach does not allow students to apply the knowledge and skills they learn. It supports the conclusions made in the literature that blended learning is more effective in delivering theoretical content but does not let students practice and learn effectively (Dinh & Nguyen, 2020; Mphahlele et al., 2021). However, Ağaçi (2017) stated that blended learning platforms offer a variety of tools for assessments, this then feeds into the insinuation that the social work program was not well designed to include the tools that would allow students to apply skills, again bringing into question the technological competence of the designers of the program (educators). The reported challenge to learn and grasp taught skills in blended learning evoked feelings that social work would be better learned in contact.

The constructivist theory of learning posits that the lecturer's role in the learner-centred pedagogy used in blended learning is that of facilitation and support (Yilmaz, 2008). Social work lecturers are to facilitate and support the students' skills and knowledge acquisition. According to Tucker (2022), lecturers are responsible for experimenting "with new technology tools, learning platforms, and instructional strategies to engage students in their online schedules" (para. 1). This is consistent with the findings in this study; lecturers are expected to create an environment that allows students to acquire knowledge and learn skills, they are expected to design the online platforms in a way that fosters learning. The findings cited the importance of lecturer presence to observe if students are developing skills accurately and give feedback. These mentioned lecturer roles are consistent with those mentioned by Kourgiantakis et al. (2019). These authors stated that observation and feedback go hand-in-hand and they enhance student learning by enhancing knowledge, improving skills, developing professional judgment, and increasing self-reflection, all important

competencies in social work education. Although blended learning is student-centred and self-regulated, lecturers still have a role to play to ensure students develop the skill set required by the program.

Academic dishonesty has had a negative impact on students' ability to develop and retain social work knowledge and skills in blended learning because students copied from their notes and passed assessments without any understanding of the content. Being at home alone, the reduced motivation to engage in learning, easy access to lecture notes and the time given to write assessments reportedly led to the loss of academic integrity among students. Academic dishonesty is a common concern in the literature on self-related learning; Holden et al. (2021) found that the move to the virtual environment as a result of the pandemic has presented faculties and administrators with challenges of academic dishonesty, it is believed that the platform offers more opportunities for cheating. This was confirmed in the findings as a lot of issues of academic dishonesty were reported. The findings also revealed that online paraphrasing tools were used to evade plagiarism. Students' reliance on such tools inhibits the learning of important social work skills and principles. The issues of academic dishonesty have negative implications for social work education as they blur the importance and assimilation of ethical practice in social work.

These reported findings demonstrated that the blended learning platforms were not used optimally given their acclaimed capabilities in teaching and learning. Therefore, the training of blended learning course designers is paramount. Also, the training of both students and lecturers on blended learning pedagogies is essential to ensure that teaching and learning is enhanced and that ways to accommodate programs such a social work in this approach are established.

5.1.4 Objective four: To establish the social work students' self-confidence in practising social work skills acquired through blended learning.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, confidence in applying learned skills in practice is informed by one's personal account of how much one has learned in this self-regulated approach (Lawrence & Abel, 2013). In this study, students' confidence in putting skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning into practice is influenced by their perceptions of both the ease and difficulty faced in acquiring them. The findings indicated that students had limited social work knowledge and skills to feed into their confidence, and this was due to the difficulty they experienced in grasping and retaining the taught skills. The lack of understanding of the taught program content evoked feelings of uncertainty and fear which inhibit students' confidence to apply skills taught to them in practice.

The lack of practical experience is another factor that is featured as a cause of students' lack of confidence. The cancellation of field practice during COVID-19 posed a major concern for the students. They reported being knowledgeable of and confident to apply the skills they were able to practise (through mock sessions) in simulations as compared to those they were not able to practise. The students reported needing to be 'shown' the skills through practising so they would master them and be able to apply them in practice. Warren et al. (2021) asserted that mastery of skills boosts students' confidence. Students' character as well as their perception of the learning environment also contribute to their confidence to apply the skills acquired in blended learning (Russo et al., 2022). All these factors need that the learning environment be designed appropriately and strategically to include, in this case, simulations that allow students to learn skills practically.

5.2 Recommendations

The recommendations made below are derived from the findings presented in the previous chapter.

5.2.1 Recommendations for social work education

The findings of this study indicated that blended learning platforms were not adequately designed to deliver the social work program. This may have been due to the circumstances (little time and limited resources) under which this approach to learning was adopted.

Looking at the challenges reportedly resulting from the poorly designed program, it is recommended that time be taken to design a program that makes optimal use of the blended learning platforms.

Enhancing the technological competence of social work students is important, blended learning illuminated this gap. Social work students are a microcosm of society; therefore, they may be indicative of the poor technological skills among students from disadvantaged environments.

Blended learning threatened to exclude and excluded some students from disadvantaged rural areas who experienced access issues due to the lack of infrastructural resources necessary for learning in this approach. When the COVID-19 restrictions were loosened, some students were allowed to go back to their university residences, however, some qualifying students did not have residences to go to even after multiple attempts of applying for them. It is recommended that universities make it a mandate to accommodate all deserving students in university residences to address issues of access in blended learning.

Support from fellow students, tutors, mentors, student counsellors and lecturers has been found to be of great help to students in blended learning, however, concerns were raised about the limited feedback students receive from lecturers on their assignments. With

feedback being an important mechanism that enhances student learning, it is recommended that lecturers provide detailed and constructive feedback to students to help them improve their social work skills and enhance their knowledge.

The work done by student counsellors during COVID-19 has been praised by students who used their services. While some students reported having increased anxiety and stress consequent to the academic challenges faced in blended learning, others experienced trauma from births, loss, and social problems. It is thereby recommended that student support services in universities or social work professionals from the disciplines identify and offer students extensive psychosocial support through trauma and grief counselling.

The effective use of simulations in virtual classes were hindered by the limited amount of internet data students received for learning, it is therefore recommended that universities negotiate with telecommunication companies to provide students with more data for the day than the night.

The lack of practical experience in blended learning was a big concern for students. Students in their third level of study strongly felt that it is important for them to get practical experience. It is recommended that universities and social work disciplines advocate for Social Work (as a professional degree) to be given the precedence given to professional degrees such as Nursing and Medicine to get field practice experience.

5.2.2 Recommendations for further research

The following recommendations were derived from the study's findings and limitations:

- The researcher recommends that a larger with a larger sample of students be done on the effectiveness of blended learning in delivering social work education and on how blended learning affects social work education and delivery. The small sample limits the generalization of the results of this study to the larger student population.

- Blended learning requires the mastery of skills for teaching in the online environment, it is recommended that further research focuses on the training of educators to equip them with blended learning design competencies.
- Further research needs to also focus on the guidelines for delivering program social work education and training in blended learning.
- Lastly, further research needs to focus on how academic integrity could be ensured in assignments and assessments done in blended learning.

5.3 Conclusion

The aim and objectives of this study were achieved as the findings identified the opportunities and challenges forwarded by blended learning as well as the strategies students employed to prepare and adjust to learning through this approach. Furthermore, students shared their perceptions of the social work knowledge and skills acquired through blended learning and explained how these perceptions had an influence on their confidence to apply the acquired knowledge and skills in practice.

This study has demonstrated how the COVID-19 pandemic has upended higher education in developing countries, such as South Africa. It has majorly changed the nature of learning and the lives of students in many different ways; residential students were displaced to remote areas (rural) that are poorly resourced to curb the spread of the highly infectious coronavirus. This displacement illuminated the gaps in infrastructure (including technology) and knowledge (of both students and educators) that made it challenging to access and engage in blended learning revealing the structural inequalities that still exist in society. Blended learning has been adopted for years in developed countries and multiple benefits for universities, students as well as educators have been mentioned in the literature. However, numerous studies expressed much skepticism in the use of this approach to deliver social

work education. Some studies argue that the key to the effective use of blended learning in social work education is contingent on a carefully and strategically designed program. This study brought to light the outcome of an inadequately designed social work program in blended learning. The findings show that the drastic nature with which this approach to learning was adopted found the higher education system (including students and educators) unprepared. COVID-19 has brought about an essential lesson in preparedness.

References

- Adebola, O. O. (2021). Supplemental instruction as a tool for students' academic performance in higher education. *Journal of Culture and Values in Education*, 4(2), 42-45.
- Adesope, O. O., Zhou, M., & Nesbit, J. C. (2015). Achievement goal orientations and self-reported study strategies as predictors of online studying activities. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 53(3), 436-458.
- Agacı, R. (2017). Learning management systems in higher education. UBT International Conference. 190.
- Agee, J. (2009). Developing qualitative research questions: a reflective process, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22(4), 431-447.
- Alanazi, A. (2016). A critical review of constructivist theory and the emergence of constructionism. *American Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 2, 1-8.
- Amiti, F. (2020). Synchronous and asynchronous E-learning. *European Journal of Open Education and E-Learning Studies*, 5(2), 60-70.
- Annamalai, N. (2018). How do we know what is happening in WhatsApp? A case study investigating pre-service teachers' online activity. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 15(2), 207–225.
- Azman, A., Singh, P. S. J., Parker, J., & Crabtree, S. A. (2020). Addressing competency requirements of social work students during the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia, *Social Work Education*, 39(8), 1058-1065.
- Babbie, E., & Mouton, J. (2001). *The practice of social research*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

- Barbour, M. K., LaBonte, R., Hodges, C. B., Moore, S., Lockee, B. B., Trust, T., & Kelly, K. (2020). Understanding pandemic pedagogy: Differences between emergency remote, remote, and online teaching. *State of the Nation: K-12 e-Learning in Canada*.
- Basitere, M., & Mapatagane, N. (2018, June). Effects of a Social Media Network Site on Student's Engagement and Collaboration: A case study of WhatsApp at a University of Technology. In *ECSM 2018 5th European conference on social media*
- Benson, V., Anderson, D. and Ooms, A. (2011). Educator's perceptions, attitudes and practices: blended learning in business and management education. *Research in Learning Technology*, 19(2), 143–154
- Bentley, K. J., Secret, M. C., & Cummings, C. R. (2015). The centrality of social presence in online teaching and learning in social work. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 51(3), 494-504.
- Blanche, M. T., Blanche, M. J. T., Durrheim, K., & Painter, D. (Eds.). (2006). *Research in practice: Applied methods for the social sciences*. Juta and Company Ltd.
- Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. (2008). Presenting methodology and research approach. *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A roadmap from beginning to end*, 65-93.
- Boethel, M., and Dimock, K. V. (2000). *Constructing Knowledge with Technology*. Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory.
- Bordoloi, R., Das, P., & Das, K. (2021). Perception towards online/blended learning at the time of Covid-19 pandemic: An academic analytics in the Indian context. *Asian Association of Open Universities Journal*.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.

- Brau, B. (2018). Constructivism. In R. Kimmons, *The Students' Guide to Learning Design and Research*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/studentguide/constructivism>
- Brennen, B. S. (2017). *Qualitative research methods for media studies*. Taylor & Francis.
- Cabiati, E. (2017). Social work education: The relational way. *Relational social work*, 1(1), 61-79.
- Chang, B. (2021). Privacy Issues in Online Learning Environment. *American Association for Adult and Continuing Education*
- Chilisa, B., & Kawulich, B. (2012). Selecting a research approach: Paradigm, methodology and methods. *Doing social research: A global context*, 5(1), 51-61.
- Chisadza, C., Clance, M., Mthembu, T., Nicholls, N., & Yitbarek, E. (2021). Online and face-to-face learning: Evidence from students' performance during the Covid-19 pandemic. *African Development Review*, 33, S114-S125.
- Christopher Hill & William Lawton (2018) Universities, the digital divide and global inequality, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40:6, 598-610.
- Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Act 108 of 1996
- Council on Higher Education [CHE]. (2020). *Quality Assurance Guidelines for Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning and Assessment During the COVID-19 Pandemic in 2020*. Pretoria: Council on Higher Education.
- Cope, D. G. (2014). Methods and meanings: credibility and trustworthiness of qualitative research. In *Oncology nursing forum*. 41 (1): 89-92.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among the five approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Davids, E. L., Ryan, J., Yassin, Z., Hendrickse, S., & Roman, N.V. (2016) Family structure and functioning: Influences on adolescents psychological needs, goals and aspirations in a South African setting. *Journal of Psychology in Africa*, 26(4), 351-356.
- De Boer, C., Campbell, S., & Hovey, A. (2011). When you come to a fork in the road, take it: Teaching social work practice using blended learning. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 37(3).
- De Vos, A. S., Strydom, H., Fouche, C. B., & Delport, C. S. L. (2011). Research at grass roots for the social sciences and human service professions (4th ed.). Van Schaik.
- Dinh, L. P., & Nguyen, T. T. (2020) Pandemic, social distancing, and social work education: students' satisfaction with online education in Vietnam, *Social Work Education*, 39(8), 1074-1083.
- Doos, M., & Wilhelmson, L. (2011). Collective learning: interaction and a shared action arena. *Journal of Workplace Learning*, 23(8), 487-500.
- Du, J. (2016). Predictors for Chinese students' management of study environment in online groupwork. *International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*, 36(9), 1614– 1630.
- Dunn, J., & Ramnarain, U. (2020). The effect of simulation-supported inquiry on South African natural sciences learners' understanding of atomic and molecular structures. *Education Sciences*, 10(10), 280.
- Equality Report (2018). Achieving substantive economic equality through a rights-based radical socio-economic transformation in South Africa. Available online: https://www.sahrc.org.za/home/21/files/SAHRC%20Equality%20Report%202017_18.pdf [accessed 20 May 2021]
- Garrison, D.R. and Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *Internet and higher education*, 7: 95-105.

- Garrison, D. & Vaughan, N. (2008). *Blended learning in higher education: Framework, principles, and guidelines*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Goldingay, S., & Boddy, J. (2017). Preparing social work graduates for digital practice: Ethical pedagogies for effective learning. *Australian Social Work, 70*(2), 209–220
- Goldingay, S., Epstein, S., & Taylor, D. (2018): Simulating social work practice online with digital storytelling: challenges and opportunities, *Social Work Education, 37*(6), 790-803.
- Goldingay, S., Hodgson, D., Boddy, J., Nipperess, S., & Watts, L. (2020). Online and blended social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia: Negotiating the tensions. *Advances in Social Work and Welfare Education, 21*(2), 62-74.
- Graham, C. (2009). Blended learning systems. In Bonk, C. J. & Graham, C. R. (eds.), *The handbook of blended learning: Global perspectives, local designs*, 3-21. San Francisco: Pfeiffer.
- Grossoehme, D.H. (2014) Overview of Qualitative Research. *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy, 20*(3), 109-122.
- Heilporn, G., Lakhal, S., & Bélisle, M. (2021). An examination of teachers' strategies to foster student engagement in blended learning in higher education. *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 18*, 1-25.
- Heinze, A. & Procter, C. 2004. Reflections on the use of blended learning. *Paper presented at: The Conference on education in a changing environment*, September 13-14, 2004, University of Salford, UK.
- Hermanto, H., Rai, N. G. M., & Fahmi, A. (2021). Students' opinions about studying from home during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia. *Cypriot Journal of Educational Sciences, 16*(2), 499-510.

- Hill, C., & Lawton, W. (2018). Universities, the digital divide and global inequality. *Journal of higher education policy and management*, 40(6), 598-610.
- Hitchcock, L.I. (2022). Learning social work skills from simulations. Available online: https://www.socialworktoday.com/news/enews_0917_1.shtml [accessed 28 May 2022]
- Holden, O. L., Norris, M. E., & Kuhlmeier, V. A. (2021). Academic Integrity in Online Assessment: A Research Review. In *Frontiers in Education*. 258. Frontiers.
- Kajiita, R. M., Nomngcoyiya, T., & Kang'ethe, S. M. (2020). The 'revolution' on teaching and learning: Implications of Covid-19 on social work education in institutions of higher learning in Africa. *African Journal of Social Work*, 10(3), 25-33.
- Keeney, A. J., Byrnes, E. I., Young, J. A., & Beecher, B. (2021). Beyond COVID-19: What's next for skill assessment practices in social work education? *Social Work Education*, 1-12.
- Kivunja, C., & Kuyini, A. B. (2017). Understanding and applying research paradigms in educational contexts. *International Journal of higher education*, 6(5), 26-41.
- Klette, K. (2018). Individualism and collectivism in Nordic schools: A comparative approach. In *Sustainable Modernity*. 59-78. Routledge
- Kourgiantakis, T., & Lee, E. (2020). Social work practice education and training during the pandemic: Disruptions and discoveries. *International Social Work*, 63(6), 761-765.
- Kourgiantakis, T., Sewell, K.M. & Bogo, M. (2019). The Importance of Feedback in Preparing Social Work Students for Field Education. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 47, 124–133.
- Kumar, R. (2011). *Research Methodology* (Ed.). SAGE Publications Ltd.

- Küsel, J., Martin, F., & Markic, S. (2020). University students' readiness for using digital media and online learning—comparison between Germany and the USA. *Education sciences, 10*(11), 313.
- Lakhal, S., & Bélisle, M. (2020). A continuum of blended and online learning. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 11*(3).
- Lakhal, S., Mukamurera, J., Bédard, M., Heilporn, G., & Chaure, M. (2020). *International Journal of Educational Technology in Higher Education, 17*(5), 1-22
- Landa, N., Zhou, S., & Marongwe, N. (2021). Education in emergencies: Lessons from COVID-19 in South Africa. *International Review of Education, 67*(1), 167-183.
- Lawrence, S., & Abel, E. M. (2013) Comparing Outcomes of a Web-based MSW Course to face-to-face Class Outcomes: Implications for Social Work Education, *Social Work Education, 32*:6, 762-772.
- Lavrakas, P. J. (2008). *Encyclopedia of survey research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Lešková, L. (2019). Application of Time Management by Students In Social Work. *Ostrołęc Scientific Society, 433*.
- Letseka, M. & Pitsoe, V. 2013. Reflections on assessment in Open Distance Learning (ODL): The case of the University of South Africa (UNISA). *Open Praxis, 5*(3):197206.
- Linh P. Dinh & Trang T. Nguyen (2020) Pandemic, social distancing, and social work education: students' satisfaction with online education in Vietnam, *Social Work Education, 39*(8), 1074-1083.
- Lytle, R. (2013). 5 tips to succeed in an online course. Retrieved from <https://www.usnews.com/education/online-education/articles/2013/01/14/5-tips-to-succeedin-an-online-course>

- Maidment, J. (2005). Teaching social work online: Dilemmas and debates. *Social Work Education, 24*(2), 185-195.
- Makhanya, T. B. (2021). The phenomenology of colonialism: Exploring perspectives of social work graduates in the African university. *Critical Studies in Teaching and Learning, 9*(1), 38-57.
- Maksimovic, J. Z., & Milanovic, M. A. (2020). *Constructivist approach in the research of gifted-characteristics, significance, and benefits*. University of Nis.
- Maqableh, M., & Alia, M. (2021). Evaluation online learning of undergraduate students under lockdown amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: The online learning experience and students' satisfaction. *Children and Youth Services Review, 128*, 106160.
- Mavundla, A. O., & Mgutshini, T. (2021). *Contexts during the Covid-19 pandemic in South Africa. Covid-19: Interdisciplinary explorations of impacts on Higher Education*. African Sun Media.
- McFadden, P., Russ, E., Blakeman, P., Kirwin, G., Anand, J., Lähteinen, S., Baugerud, G. A., & Tham, P. (2020). COVID-19 impact on social work admissions and education in seven international universities, *Social Work Education, 39*(8), 1154-1163.
- Meredith, C., Heslop, P., & Dodds, C. (2022). Simulation: social work education in a third place. *Social Work Education, 1*-18.
- Mhlanga, D., & Moloji, T. (2020). COVID-19 and the digital transformation of education: What are we learning on 4IR in South Africa? *Education sciences, 10*(7), 180.
- Mock, J. (2015). 7 tips for success when taking online courses. Retrieved from <https://online.illinois.edu/articles/online-learning/item/2015/09/16/7-tips-for-online-success> [accessed 18 May 2022]

- Mohapi, B. J., Agboola, C., & Kang'ethe, S. (2021). Information and Communications Technology (ICT) access for practicals among social work students in an open distance learning university. *Social Work*, 57(1), 1-15.
- Mphahlele, R., Seeletso, M., Muleya, G., & Simui, F. (2021). The Influence of COVID-19 on Students' Learning: Access and Participation in Higher Education in Southern Africa. *Journal of Learning for Development*, 8(3), 501-515.
- Mpungose, C. B. (2020). Emergent transition from face-to-face to online learning in a South African University in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic. *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 7(1), 1-9.
- Mpungose, C. B. (2021). Lecturers' reflections on use of Zoom video conferencing technology for e-learning at a South African university in the context of coronavirus. *African Identities*, 1-17.
- Muhuro, P., & Kangethe, S. M. (2021). Prospects and pitfalls associated with implementing blended learning in rural-based higher education institutions in Southern Africa. *Perspectives in Education*, 39(1), 427-441.
- Murphy, E. (2008). A framework for identifying and promoting metacognitive knowledge and control in online discussants. *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 34(2), 9-30.
- Murphy, S. M., & Murphy, A. I. (2010). Attending and listening. In *Routledge handbook of applied sport psychology*, 12-20. Routledge.
- Nabee, S., Mageto, J., & Pisa, N. (2021). Investigating predictors of academic plagiarism among university students. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research*, 19(12), 264-280.

- Naudé, A. (2016). *The opinions on and use of simulation in undergraduate pharmacy education at South African universities* (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Free State).
- Nel, E. (2005). *Creating meaningful blended learning experiences in a South African higher education classroom: an action inquiry* (Doctoral dissertation, University of the Free State).
- Neuman, W.L. (2011). *Social research methods: qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- Oliver, M., & Trigwell, K. (2005). Can "blended learning" be redeemed? *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 2(1), 17-26.
- Olusegun, B.A. (2015). Constructivism learning theory: A paradigm for teaching and learning. *IOSR Journal of Research and Method in Education*, 5(6):66-70.
- Phelan, J. E. (2015). The use of e-learning in social work education. *Social Work*, 60(3), 257-264.
- Perinelli, E., & Gremigni, P. (2016). Use of social desirability scales in clinical psychology: A systematic review. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 72(6), 534-551.
- Petracchi, H., Mallinger, G., Engel, R., Rishel, C., & Washburn, C. (2005). Evaluating the efficacy of traditional and web-assisted instruction in an undergraduate social work practice course. *Journal of Technology in Human services*, 2(3), 299-310.
- Ponelis, S. R. (2015). Using interpretive qualitative case studies for exploratory research in doctoral studies: A case of Information Systems research in small and medium enterprises. *International Journal of Doctoral Studies*, 10(1), 535-550.
- Power, T. M. (2008). The emergence of a blended online learning environment. *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 4(4), 503-514.

- Rajkoomar, M. (2015). *The development of a framework for blended learning in the delivery of Library and Information Science curricula at South African universities*. (Doctoral dissertation, Durban University of Technology).
- Rasheed, R. A., Kamsin, A., & Abdullah, N. A. (2020). Challenges in the online component of blended learning: A systematic review. *Computers & Education, 144*, 103701.
- Riddlesden, D., & Singleton, A. D. (2014). Broadband speed equity: A new digital divide? *Applied Geography, 52*, 25-33.
- Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, C. M., & Ormston, R. (Eds.). (2013). *Qualitative research practice: A guide for social science students and researchers*. SAGE.
- Russo, A., Warren, L., Neri, L., Herdan, A., & Brickman, K. (2022). Enhancing accounting and finance students' awareness of transferable skills in an integrated blended learning environment. *Accounting Education, 31*(1), 67-91.
- Salubi, O. G. (2021). Access and use of networked electronic devices for educational information management by undergraduates in South Africa. In C. T. Chisita, R. T. Enakrire, O. O. Durodolu, V. Wonderboy & J. M. Ngoaketsi (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Records and Information Management Strategies for Enhanced Knowledge Coordination*. 165-175. IGI Global.
- Sansa, N. A. (2020). Analysis of the Impact of the Covid-19 to the Petrol Prices in China. *Diverse Journal of Multidisciplinary Research, 2*(2), 33-37.
- Scott, C., & Medaugh, M. (2017). Axial coding. *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods, 10*, 9781118901731.
- Siebert, D.C., Siebert, C.F., & Spaulding-Givens, J. (2006). Teaching Clinical Social Work skills primarily online: an evaluation, *Journal of Social Work Education, 42*(2), 325-336.

- Simanovic, T., Cioarță, I., Jardine, C., & Paul, S. (2021). Social Work Education During COVID-19: Students' Perceptions of the Challenges and Opportunities of Online and Blended Learning. *Intersectionalities: A Global Journal of Social Work Analysis, Research, Polity, and Practice*, 9(1), 131-141.
- Smoyer, A. B., O'Brien, K., & Rodriguez-Keyes, E. (2020). Lessons learned from COVID-19: Being known in online social work classrooms. *International Social Work*, 63(5), 651-654.
- Snelson, C. (2011). "YouTube Across the Disciplines: A Review of the Literature". *MERLOT Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 7(1), 159-169.
- South African Council for Social Service Professions. (2020a). *Assessment Tool for the Quality Assurance of the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) programme*. Pretoria: SACSSP
- South African Council for Social Service Professions. (2020b). *PBSW guidelines for meeting the challenges of the 4th year social work students completing their practical placements in a manner that complies with SACSSP registration requirements*. General Notice 2 of 2020. SACSSP
- South African Government. (2020). Minister Angie Motshekga on Basic Education Sector Plans to Support Learners during Coronavirus COVID-19 Lockdown; South African Government, Department of Education Website. Available online: <https://www.gov.za/speeches/minister-angie-motshekga-basic-education-sectorplans-support-learners-during-covid-19>. [accessed 29 July 2021]
- Tamrat, W., & Teferra, D. (2020). COVID-19 poses a serious threat to higher education. *University World News*, 9.
- Terre Blanche, M., Terre Blanche, M. J., Durrheim, K., & Painter, D. (Eds.). (2006). *Research in practice: Applied methods for the social sciences*. Juta and Company Ltd.

- Uranta, D.T. & Ogbanga, M. (2017). Issues in social work methods in contemporary projects in Africa. *International Journal of Management Research*, 3(7), 60-68.
- Van Deursen, A. J., & Van Dijk, J. A. (2019). The first-level digital divide shifts from inequalities in physical access to inequalities in material access. *New media & society*, 21(2), 354-375.
- Walliman, N. (2011). *Research Methods: The Basics*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Warren, L., Reilly, D., Herdan, A. & Lin, Y. (2021). Self-efficacy, performance and the role of blended learning. *Journal of Applied Research in Higher Education*, 13(1), 98-111.
- Weeden, K. A., & Cornwell, B. (2020). The small-world network of college classes: implications for epidemic spread on a university campus. *Sociological Science*, 7, 222-241.
- World Health Organization (WHO). (2020). *Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19)* Situation Report – 51. World Health Organization. Available on: <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/331475> [accessed 29 July 2021]
- Yeh, Y. C., Kwok, O. M., Chien, H. Y., Sweany, N. W., Baek, E., & McIntosh, W. A. (2019). How College Students' Achievement Goal Orientations Predict Their Expected Online Learning Outcome: The Mediation Roles of Self-Regulated Learning Strategies and Supportive Online Learning Behaviors. *Online Learning*, 23(4), 23-41.
- Yilmaz, K. (2008). Constructivism: Its theoretical underpinnings, variations, and implications for classroom instruction. *Educational horizons* 86 (3): 161-172.
- Zhang, Y., & Wildemuth, B. M. (2009). Qualitative analysis of content. *Applications of social research methods to questions in information and library science*, 308, 319.

Zimba, Z. F., Khosa, P., & Pillay, R. (2021) Using blended learning in South African social work education to facilitate student engagement, *Social Work Education*, 40(2), 263-278.

Zvomuya, W. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 pandemic on social work education and practice. *African Journal of Social Work*, 11(4), 189-200.

www.mancosa.co.za/blog/is-online-learning-the-future-of-higher-education-in-south-africa/

APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Gatekeepers letter



15 September 2021

Kwena Tlhaku
School of Social Sciences
College of Humanities
Howard College Campus
UKZN
Email: 217003232@stu.ukzn.ac.za mthembum4@ukzn.ac.za

Dear Kwena

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Gatekeeper's permission is hereby granted for you to conduct research at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), towards your postgraduate degree, provided Ethical clearance has been obtained. We note the title of your research project is:

"Learning during COVID-19: Exploring students' experiences of studying Social Work through blended learning at a university in Durban."

It is noted that you will be constituting your sample by conducting interviews with Social Work students (Taking in account the regulations imposed during lockdown ie restrictions on gatherings, travel, social distancing etc. Zoom, Skype or telephone interviews recommended) on the Howard College Campus.

Please ensure that the following appears on your notice/questionnaire:

- Ethical clearance number;
- Research title and details of the research, the researcher and the supervisor;
- Consent form is attached to the notice/questionnaire and to be signed by user before he/she fills in questionnaire;
- gatekeepers approval by the Registrar.

You are not authorized to contact staff and students using the 'Microsoft Outlook' address book. Identity numbers and email addresses of individuals are not a matter of public record and are protected according to Section 14 of the South African Constitution, as well as the Protection of Public Information Act. For the release of such information over to yourself for research purposes, the University of KwaZulu-Natal will need express consent from the relevant data subjects. Data collected must be treated with due confidentiality and anonymity.

Yours sincerely


Dr KE CLELAND: REGISTRAR

Office of the Registrar

Postal Address: Private Bag X51001, Durban, 4000, South Africa
Telephone: 27 (0)31 260 7971 Email: registrars@ukzn.ac.za Website: www.ukzn.ac.za

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix 2: Ethics Approval



07 February 2022

Kwena Rayneth Tihaku (217003232)
School of Applied Human Sciences
Howard College Campus

Dear KR Tihaku,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00003647/2021

Project title: Learning during COVID-19: Exploring students' experiences of studying Social Work through blended learning at a university in Durban

Degree : Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 15 November 2021 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

This approval is valid until 07 February 2023.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

All research conducted during the COVID-19 period must adhere to the national and UKZN guidelines.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,



Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)

/ms

Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee
UKZN Research Ethics Office Westville Campus, Govan Mbeki Building
Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban 4000
Tel: +27 31 260 8350 / 4557 / 3587
Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics/>

Founding Campuses: ■ Edgewood ■ Howard College ■ Medical School ■ Pietermaritzburg ■ Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

Appendix 3: Information Sheet

Study title: Learning during COVID-19: Exploring students' experiences of studying Social Work through blended learning at a university in Durban.

Investigator: Kwena Tlhaku

Cellphone: 0628985440

Email: 217003232@stu.ukzn.ac.za

Supervisor: Dr Maud Mthembu

Telephone: 031-260-2358

Email: mthembum4@ukzn.ac.za

Institution: University of KwaZulu-Natal, School of Applied Human Sciences

Dear Prospective Participant

My name is Kwena Tlhaku a Masters in Social Sciences (Social Work) candidate from the University of KwaZulu-Natal in the School of Applied Human Sciences. I am conducting a study to explore social work students' experiences of studying social work through blended learning (technology mediated learning). I would like to invite you to participate in this research study. Your participation will involve participating in an online interview (approximately 60 minutes of your time) about your experiences as a social work student. I request your permission to audiotape the interview so that the discussion can be accurately portrayed.

Before agreeing to participate, it is important that you read and understood the explanation of the purpose of the study and study procedures. This information sheet is to help you decide if you would like to participate. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you have any questions, do not hesitate to ask me. If you do agree to participate in the interview,

you are still free to withdraw from the study at any stage and this will not involve any penalty against you. If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to sign an informed consent form to confirm that you understand the study and agree to take part.

Objectives of the study

The main objectives of the study are:

- To identify opportunities and challenges forwarded by blended learning as experienced by Social Work students.
- To understand the strategies that students employed in preparing and adjusting to blended learning.
- To explore the Social Work students' perceptions of the skills and knowledge acquired through blended learning.
- To establish the students' self-confidence in practicing Social Work skills acquired through blended learning.

Risks and benefits

The researcher anticipates no risks or harm in participating in this study except for emotional distress which may be caused by recollection of the asked experiences, to which the researcher, with permission from the participants, will ensure that participants are referred for counselling. For the benefits of the study, it is hoped this study will (1) generate an understanding of social work students' experiences of taking the program via blended learning; (2) from the mentioned challenges and used strategies, this study will suggest ways to support upcoming social work students who may also be engaged in this approach to learning; (3) it will help inform and improve teaching processes; (4) it will stimulate more research on the use of blended learning in Social Work so that the body of empirical

knowledge about this field, that is known to be best taken using traditional methods of teaching and learning, can be augmented. To the participants, the researcher may provide an incentive of one gigabyte of data (1024 megabytes) should the participant be inconvenienced in this regard.

Confidentiality

All information obtained during the course of the study will be kept strictly confidential. Data that may be reported in the research report and scientific journals will not include any identifying information of any participants in this study. Only the researcher and supervisor will have access to research data.

Selection Criteria

This study seeks to recruit first, second, and third – year Social Work students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal

THANK YOU

Appendix 4: Informed Consent

Title of the research study: **Learning during COVID-19: Exploring students' experiences of studying Social Work through blended learning at a university in Durban.**

Researcher: Kwena Tlhaku
Supervisor: Dr Maud Mthembu
Address: University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN)
College of Humanities
School of Applied Human Sciences
Howard College

I _____ have been informed about the study entitled ***“Learning during COVID-19: Exploring students' experiences of studying Social Work through blended learning at a university in Durban”*** by Ms Kwena Tlhaku.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been given an opportunity to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I usually am entitled to.

I have been informed about any available compensation or medical treatment if injury occurs to me as a result of study-related procedures.

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher at 0628985440/217003232@stu.ukzn.ac.za.

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

I hereby provide consent to:

Audio-record my interview YES / NO

Video-record my interview YES / NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Appendix 5: Interview Guide

Title of the study: Learning during COVID-19: Exploring students' experiences of studying Social Work through blended learning at a university in Durban.

Aim of the study: To explore the experiences of social work students taking the program through blended learning.

Socio-Demographics:

Age: 17 years +

Population group: Inclusive

Geographic location: Inclusive (Rural, Semi-urban and Urban)

University: University of KwaZulu-Natal

Discipline: Social Work

Year of study: First, second and third year

Guide:

Objectives	Themes to explore
1. To identify opportunities and challenges forwarded by blended learning as experienced by Social Work students.	Experiences of: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- challenges forwarded by blended learning (psychosocial & academic)- opportunities forwarded by blended learning
2. To understand the strategies that students employed in preparing and adjusting to blended learning.	Understand: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- coping mechanisms employed- availability and efficiency of support- motivation
3. To explore the Social Work students' perceptions of the skills and	Perception on:

<p>knowledge acquired through blended learning.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The learning environment (online) and how it influences the retention of learned skills - Casework, group work skills learnt through blended learning
<p>4. To establish the students' self-confidence in practicing Social Work skills acquired through blended learning.</p>	<p>Establish:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Self-doubt - Fear of putting skills into practice