Reframing purpose and conceptions of success for a post-Covid-19 South African higher education

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ABSTRACT

The Covid-19 pandemic raised immense challenges for universities. Staff and students had to quickly transition to an unfamiliar mode of emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) with its associated affordances and losses. The experiences of students and staff and the lessons learned during this time will affect the provision of teaching and learning in the future. During ERTL, a group of academics and teaching and learning support staff from different faculties at a large research-intensive public university in South Africa came together to support each other and share experiences of enhancing teaching and learning in higher education. This led to reflection on the impact of Covid-19 on the higher education landscape through community of practice. The aim of this conceptual paper is to discuss alternative notions of institutional purpose and lecturers' conception of success that might influence the emerging post-Covid-19 higher education landscape in the global south. We claim that a more nuanced and critical understanding of these concepts is essential to evaluate the gains and losses experienced during Covid-19. Our argument hinges on our reflections of supporting teaching and learning during 2020 and 2021, and our observations of the challenges experienced by lecturers as they transitioned to ERTL. We suggest that it was in the moments of disruption and disequilibrium that lecturers were required to re-think the purpose of their courses and of higher education more broadly. Furthermore, it challenged us as a collective and individually to reflect critically on the measures of success within courses that changed dramatically in response to the prevailing circumstances, as well as more broadly within the sector.

Introduction

On 22 January 2021, Patrick Culbert wrote in the Chronicle of Higher Education that talking about the "silver linings" of Covid-19 is an "insult [to] those who have struggled or lost loved ones" (Culbert, 2021). This is a view that resonated with many educators in South Africa (SA) who have experienced immense challenges that impacted on student and staff well-being in the context of Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL). However, Culbert (2021) also highlights that, as educators, the valuable lessons we have learned from our experiences of online teaching will be sustained post-Covid-19. It is in this context that we, a group of learning and teaching professionals and academic leaders/managers from four faculties at the large research-intensive public university where we work, present our views of this pivotal moment in higher education (HE), catalysed by Covid-19. In this critical enquiry, which emerged as a result of reflections on this moment within the context of a cross-faculty teaching and learning community of practice (CoP), we first discuss different notions of success that dominated prior to and during ERTL at the HE institution where we work. We then present and discuss some of the challenges and tensions that arise as a consequence of conflicting notions of purpose and success, and state our claim for a more nuanced understanding

of purpose and success to evaluate the affordances and losses experienced by SA HE stakeholders during the Covid-19 pandemic. Lastly, we show how cross-faculty conversations like the conversation on which this paper is based can enable a shared vision of purpose and success that presents possibilities for the development of a more socially and intellectually responsive HE system, building on the learning and teaching principles that emerged during ERTL. We wished to develop our personal knowledge through reflective practice and to reframe the notion of affordances and success in relation to teaching and learning in a time of crisis.

Defining "success"

The word 'success' is prevalent in modern cultures, with conventional understandings of the word usually relating to four key aspects of modern life. These include money and financial security (or access to societal goods), the achievement of particular goals or competencies, a sense of self-worth and identity underpinned by core values, and belonging and/or respect earned in a community (Weiten, Dunn & Hammer, 2014). Seen in this light, the definition of success aligns with the notion of achievement of something one wants or has been trying to do or get, relative to a set of indicators against which one can measure how close or far one is from achieving success. However, considering success in relation to the root word 'succedere', meaning "come close after", allows for a reframing of the notion of success, not only in terms of the achievement of specific and often finite goals, but also in terms of the possibilities that arise as a consequence of the achievement of those goals. Conceptions of success are thus unique and consequently as diverse as the individuals and institutions holding them.

Long before Covid-19, conceptions and notions of success within SA and global HE were notably diverse (see for example the chapter titled Success in Higher Education[1] (Wood & Breyer, 2017) in a book by the same name). Success in SA HE contexts may, for example, be defined in terms of pass rates (Letseka & Maile, 2008; Tewari & Ilesanmi, 2020), throughput rates (Strydom, Kuh & Mentz, 2010), and attrition (Otu & Mkhize, 2018; Van der Bijl & Lawrence, 2019; Zulu & Mutereko, 2020), or

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[1] In their chapter, Wood and Breyer (2017) outline many of the diverse conceptions and notions of success characterising HE globally. Naturally, there are parities with notions and conceptions of success within SA HE. Some of these include, as per Wood and Breyer (2017), "improving economic prosperity" (p. 1), expanding "opportunities for learning to students from non-traditional backgrounds" (p. 2), creating "conditions under which students from varying backgrounds can flourish and succeed" (p. 2), and delivering "work-ready graduates for a labour market that is undergoing disruption" (p. 2). They also break down success into four categories for stakeholders to consider (i.e. individual, institutional, national, and global (p. 3), while proposing a transition model of success for the sector (p. 5).

discussed in relation to subsidy and/or the financial performance and stability of the sector or an institution (Styger & Heymans, 2015; Wangenge-Ouma & Cloete, 2008). Some separate conceptions of success along gender or racial lines (Mabokela & Mawila, 2004; Walker, 2018) link it to transformation (whether of the curriculum or human or both) (Fomunyam, 2017; Zembylas, 2018), or focus more intently on the success of academic staff on the one hand (Barkhuizen & Rothmann, 2008; Pienaar & Bester, 2006) or students on the other (Case, Mogashana, Marshall, & McKenna, 2018; Scott, 2018). Even within the staff and student categories, there are different ways of defining success. The success of an academic may be defined in relation to their research and publication productivity (Callaghan, 2016; Von Solms & Von Solms, 2016), their contributions to teaching and student learning, or their involvement in enhancing communities and pursuing social justice agendas (or a combination of these). Similarly, views about student success may distinguish between undergraduate and postgraduate students, focus particularly on academic success or the student's learning journey (Burger & Naude, 2020), or incorporate more holistic conceptions of student success (including socioeconomic, psychosocial, skills, and life-long learning dimensions) (Case et al, 2018; Scott, 2018). Regardless of the view or lens, conceptions of success within SA's highly complex HE sector remain, arguably, contested, with no single, agreed-upon definition of success. The challenges we highlight here are those that arise when these differing conceptions compete in collective spaces like HE institutions, where some notions of success may be privileged over others, in line with the dominant purpose and material interests of the institution, which is what happened during ERTL.

Covid-19 and notions of success

The literature produced in the higher education sector since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic reflect the shifts and tensions experienced during ERTL, but tended to focus largely on issues of social justice and equity (Bozkurt & Sharma, 2020; Czerniewicz, Agherdien, Badenhorst, Belluigi, Chambers, Chili…, 2020), descriptions of challenges and successes in moving into the online space (Bao, 2020; Cutri, Mena & Whiting, 2020; Czerniewicz, 2021; Egan and Crotty, 2020; Karakaya, 2020), the difference between online learning and ERTL (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020) and the psychological and emotional difficulties experienced by students and lecturers (Bali, 2020; Corbera, Anguelovski, Honey-Rosés & Ruiz-Mallén, 2020; Flaherty, 2020). Thus, in the Covid-19-related literature, student success tends to be framed in relation to how successfully students transitioned to and utilised the online environment (Bush & Knisely, 2021; Hattar, AlHadidi, Sawair, Abd Alraheam, El-Ma'aita & Wahab, 2021), with indicators of success (generally) being equated with

higher pass rates at the end of 2020, regardless of the pandemic, global emergency, and adjustments to curricula and teaching practices. Despite a petition against these assertions from SA HE stakeholders who lamented both the loss of human life and the social dimensions of learning, and researchers (e.g. Iglesias-Pradas, Hernández-García, Chaparro-Peláez & Prieto, 2021; Jang & Lee, 2021; Wasfy, Abouzeid, Nasser, Ahmed, Youssry, Hegazy…, 2021) highlighting the manner in which the shift in teaching approaches during ERTL impacted on student performance, there has been little focus on the ways in which ERTL has interrogated and deconstructed long held notions of what constitutes student success.

Problematizing implicit assumptions

We introduce the example of how saving the academic year became implicitly more important (at the institution where the authors work) than, for example, maintaining healthy work/home life balances. This implicitness is important to note. The fact that this assumption of success was elevated above another (i.e. successfully completing the academic year as opposed to student and staff wellness) without making it explicit to the institutional community at the advent of ERTL, meant that few people (if any) would have been consciously aware of it or able to engage with it critically. At first, there was the assumption that everyone would work to ensure the continuation and completion of the academic year. With it came the expectation for staff to work longer hours and over weekends. What manifested then was an internalised pressure to work rather than rest, made easier by the already blurred lines between work and home environments. Arguably, no one could have predicted the trajectory of the pandemic and concomitant lockdowns, yet in this instance completion of the academic year (i.e. a measure of HE success in 2020) was elevated, which contributed to issues with staff well-being and burnout (Flaherty, 2020).

The implicit/explicit dichotomy

The implicit/explicit dichotomy has larger implications when interrogating diverse notions and conceptions of success for SA HE contexts. Individuals (let us call them agents as per Archer (1995; 2000; 2005) who occupy and navigate SA HE spaces are presumably implicitly aware of the diverse notions of success at play when discussing success for/within SA HE contexts. However, seldom would opportunities arise for these to be made intentionally explicit. In other words, conversations about notions of success as a construct are rarely held, with discussions in relation to success in SA

HE primarily revolving around measures or outcomes of success[2], rather than the underlying ideas or their interplay. This latter point must be emphasised. Not making explicit diverse notions of success for agents within SA HE spaces may: i) allow some notions of success to be conflated with others and/or (as previously mentioned) some notions of success appearing to be elevated above others; and ii) may preclude agents from being adequately aware of/versed in the constructs driving notions of success within SA HE contexts and/or the ways in which this creates tensions that may enable or constrain their ability to enact agency in their spaces. We posit here that notions and conceptions of success within SA HE contexts are predominantly implicit and that this implicitness curtails open discussion of how certain notions of success were ranked higher than others during ERLT. Our intention in this paper is, therefore, to attempt to make explicit the predominant notions of success at our institution, the interplay between these, and the implications of dominating notions of success in the longer term, for students, staff and the institution in general. This is achieved by drawing on Archer's (1995; 2000; 2005) Social Realist theory to support our argument in favour of a significant re-conceptualisation of success in higher education in the global south.

Methodology

During ERTL, our group, comprising seven teaching and learning specialists and academic leaders/managers from four faculties, came together to support each other during this challenging time and to share experiences of enhancing teaching and learning in HE spaces. This led to reflections on the impact of Covid-19 on the HE landscape through CoP. As a collective, we all value the development of our personal knowledge through critical reflective practice by articulating our ideas to others through a process of ongoing dialogue and engagement with relevant literature (Ashwin, Boud, Coate, Hallet, Keane, Krause…, 2015). Although the data in this study was obtained through a combination of narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2006) and focus group discussions (Rabiee, 2004), what the authors present is a critical enquiry of conceptions and notions of success beyond the pandemic. Powell and Single (1996:499) define a focus group as "a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research". Usually, the topic is also of common interest to the group members, or it could be

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[2] Again, in principle we are not averse to measures and outcomes that help monitor and quantify success in or for SA HE contexts. On the contrary, much of what we do as individual academics, as learning and teaching specialists, and as educators rely on or revolve around developing/implementing/using reliable and equitable measures and outcomes to monitor and quantify success in our professional spaces. Yet we do find it problematic when these are inadequate, not responsive to needs, conflated with certain other notions of success, and/or when some notions of success are elevated above others to the detriment of the agents affected by that elevation.

something that members have common experiences with. The addition of narrative inquiry among participants familiar with each other introduces an extra dimension by allowing for the inclusion of "secret stories" "told only to others in safe places" (Clandinin, 2006:7). For this paper, the focus group consisted of all seven authors, who are involved in supporting teaching and learning in various roles within their respective faculties. As part of a CoP that formed organically during the transition to ERTL, our critical enquiry around notions of success emerged as a result of sharing (and subsequent critique of) our experiences of "success" during ERTL. Our research sought to expand and generate new ways of understanding successful participation during disruption.

To structure our enquiry, each member of the group first participated in a free writing exercise that was focussed on our experiences and notions of success during ERTL. Each participant then shared their free writing with the focus group, followed by an online discussion of these individual experiences, moderated by one of the participants who was nominated in advance. The discussion was recorded and the transcription, as well as the individual free writing, were subsequently analysed and coded according to notions of purpose and success related to the three key stakeholder groups of interest in this study, viz., students, staff and institutional notions of purpose and success. The transcript was further analysed through a loose application of the Social Realist categories of structure, culture and agency (Archer, 1995; 2000). Social Realism (and by association Critical Realism) was selected because of its affordance of a unique set of tools with which to critically interrogate, analyse, theorise and draw inferences about the many complexities and interplays that characterize HE systems and contexts. Through the analysis of the data in relation to these categories, and identification of emergent patterns and themes through inductive analysis, we worked towards a shared understanding of the varying and complex interpretations of success in our context, thus the critical enquiry presented here.

Findings and discussion

Within a university community, the existence of multiple viewpoints and definitions is inevitable, given the diversity of roles within the institution. In the rest of this paper, we attempt to illustrate these varying notions of success within our institution, how these fit into the bigger academic project, and how Covid-19 foregrounded some of the tensions that arose as a result of these differing conceptions of success. We contend that an awareness and understanding of these different notions of success could also facilitate the establishment of a better balance between/among existing tensions, with the potential to enable individuals to once again exercise

their agency in ways that would allow for the fulfilment of personal and institutional notions of success. What follows therefore, is an account of these notions of success that emerged from our conversations in the CoP during ERTL. Our regular online meetings and reflections broadened our frameworks from individual faculty concerns to a wider, cross-university view, which highlighted significant commonalities in our experiences and possibility for joint solutions. From our deliberations, five central categories emerged prominently, providing us with a nuanced perspective that extended our conception of success as a result of the enforced, seemingly short-term radical change in teaching within the institution. We argue that we can no longer interpret our changing practices in a uniform way and need to challenge mechanistic conceptions of success in higher education.

Institutional notions of success

Our findings demonstrate how within the SA HE system macro- (national) and meso-level (institutional) policy frameworks (i.e. structures) influence and drive meso-level institutional cultures and micro-level (individual) beliefs and values. National research imperatives within the SA HE sector (see Callaghan, 2016; Von Solms & Von Solms, 2016) and the identification of the institution where the authors work as a research-intensive university, has inevitably influenced institutional culture. This has been enabled by macro- and meso-level policy frameworks, incentive systems, and funding mechanisms that support the research imperative[3]. This in itself is not necessarily problematic as research and the production of new knowledges form the foundation of HE systems. Both undergraduate and postgraduate teaching rely on these knowledges to be able to facilitate and enable learning, while institutions rely on subsidies generated by the production of research output as a source of additional income. The problem arises when the research imperative (driven through structures[4] and cultures) is elevated above its learning and teaching counterpart. Again, this elevation (initially implicit) has resulted in quite specific conceptions and notions of HE success for institutions and agents. For many years, research imperatives have dominated (at least in the minds of many academics and SA HE managers) perceptions about who is successful within the sector (Callaghan, 2016; Von Solms & Von Solms, 2016) and how to measure/quantify that success (e.g. publication output in peer-reviewed accredited sources). This has often come at the cost of

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[3] Beyond the structural incentives in SA HE, the production of substantial research output is intrinsically linked to academics' identities as experts in their fields.
[4] These structures include probation and promotion policies, research funding both nationally and institutionally, and the way in which subsidies for publication units in accredited sources is an important funding stream for SA HE institutions.

developing and/or striving for high quality learning and teaching practices and curricula, and assessment innovation. Moreover, the skewing in notions and conceptions of one form of success has inhibited both career progression for many learning and teaching professionals, as well as their ability to enact agency in professional spaces[5].

Another notion of institutional success is driven by the fact that income is generated through subsidies linked to pass rates, throughput rates and attrition rates. Intrinsically linked to institutional reputation and prestige (indicated by various global ranking systems and dependent on the quality and quantity of research output), these metrics are considered extremely important within the SA HE sector as a measure of success. This point emerged quite glaringly in our discussions and reflections on the implications of massification, which seems to underpin some of the reasons why people are focused on pass rates, "rather than the individual learning journeys and experiences of our students" (as per Participant 4). Apart from financial implications, these metrics also drive perceptions of institutional excellence and ranking, which then influences student choices and enrolment rates. This link between notions of success and financial stability came through strongly in our data, in line with Styger & Heymans (2015) and Wangenge-Ouma & Cloete (2008), who explicitly describe success in relation to subsidy and/or financial performance and stability of the sector. As Participant 4 pointed out, "long before Covid-19, conceptions and notions of success broadly within the South African higher education sector were noticeably diverse". He emphasized the point, supported by others in the CoP, that regardless of the view or lens, "success within South African higher education contexts have always been difficult to encapsulate neatly 'in a box'".

Measures of quality

There was acknowledgement among the participatory researchers that in a climate of increasing economic pressures, our focus was more on long-term sustainability and ensuring quality of teaching in our programmes. We concurred that problems arise when institutional imperatives and the structures aligned with these imperatives begin to condition institutional culture and constrain individual behaviour and agency. This becomes apparent, particularly in relation to the provision of 'quality' teaching and learning, and was especially clear during ERTL. In addition, some authors such

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[5] Lately though, things have begun to shift (although marginally). Not so much in the prevailing cultures driving research imperatives, but in macro- and meso-level structures that serve to try and rebalance the proverbial scales. For example the National Framework for Enhancing Academics as University Teachers (DHET, 2018), has resulted in the development of an institutional Framework for Continuous Professional Learning of Academics as University Teachers at the institution where the authors work.

as Ashwin et al (2015:279), point out the dangers of measuring success in terms of university rankings and 'league' tables, suggesting that such tables may misleadingly oversimplify the complexity of a high-quality undergraduate education and might entrench social inequalities in their bias towards wealthier, better resourced higher education institutions. Ashwin et al (2015) also illustrate the contested nature of these measures of quality by drawing on studies that show how traditional measures of success and ranking of quality "offer no indication of students' engagement with academic knowledge" (2015:279). Participant 6 expressed similar concerns when she related how students in professional degrees progress from year-to-year in their programmes, without necessarily acquiring an in-depth understanding of the discipline or field. She pointed out that important life-long qualities, such as the capacity to self-evaluate and take on board feedback, are often compromised as students experience the degree as a "rite of passage". She described how students "jump straight from hoop to hoop to hoop focused on marks, and then say 'But that's what everyone has to do'".

These contestations around success became even more pronounced during ERTL, when certain notions of SA HE success began enjoying favour above others. At our institution, as in most other South African universities, saving the academic year became implicitly more important than maintaining a healthy work/home life balance, which in principle was already made difficult by the work-from-home status quo that came with lockdown measures. As Participant 5 mused, "[w]hat are we saving really? Except making sure that the calendar goes through in the way it is supposed to". Similarly, preparing academics rapidly for the shift to remote and online modalities certainly became a metric for gauging how successful SA HE institutions were in responding to the demands of the pandemic and concomitant lockdowns. There was consensus in the group that we need to question how quality teaching is measured beyond ticking the quality assurance boxes to indicate that learning has been successful. To clarify, we do not imply eliminating what exists, but rather that existing quality assurance measures and techniques must be supplemented with a broader range of tools and measures. In so doing, a strong case is made for questioning the nature of certain measures of quality that lead us to assume success, while a more comprehensive view (i.e. less performative and more participative) of success within HE may be absent.

Lecturers' shifting conceptions of success and quality

Faced with the realities of teaching in the online environment and the accompanying loss of embodied authority (which most lecturers were accustomed to in the face-to-face environment),

lecturers had to grapple with the reconceptualization of their changing roles. They were confronted with the need to question the philosophies underpinning their teaching practices, and the criteria for implementing an effective teaching programme. Many HE stakeholders soon realised that dumping course content online was insufficient for promoting student learning and the successful achievement of course outcomes[6]. Rather, successful teaching required greater intentionality in designing courses and facilitating and assessing student engagement. The inadequacy of traditional metrics of success (i.e. pass and throughput rates, retention statistics, and favourable teaching evaluations), metrics that have long been the cornerstone of quality assurance in higher education, were also suddenly questionable.

Despite the challenges and uncertainties that emerged, many lecturers still felt compelled to conduct evaluations of their ERTL offerings. While this was not institutionally mandated, many felt the need to provide these metrics, as institutional staffing and promotions committees require them for confirmation or promotion purposes. In reality, these measures over-rode the reality and challenges of the extreme circumstances of ERTL, indicating the ongoing pressure on lecturers to demonstrate their competence as well-rounded academics. In this respect, the metrics used for employment confirmation and promotion, and the influence of institutional structures on notions of success, were foregrounded, structurally conditioning lecturers' choices and reasons for evaluating courses. What also soon became apparent was the tension experienced by lecturers between the duty and requirement to spend time transforming contact courses to fully online offerings, and the ongoing requirement to produce research output. Many lecturers felt that the substantial shift in time and effort towards teaching and learning effectively robbed them of the time and focus to achieve the latter, which, as mentioned, tends to carry more weight when success is evaluated.

As discussed, the perceived elevation of research (usually implicit), has resulted in quite specific conceptions and notions of HE success for institutions and agents. Unfortunately, this has often come at the cost of developing and/or striving for high quality learning and teaching practices and curricula, and assessment innovation. Moreover, the skewing in notions and conceptions of one form of success has often inhibited both career progression for many learning and teaching professionals, as well as their ability to enact agency in professional spaces. The shift to ERTL however, reversed the status quo, at least temporarily. This resulted in high degrees of discomfort and dissonance for many, with tension between doing what was best for students and doing what

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[6] This in itself was not "new knowledge" and can be traced back nearly 20 years, but for those not versed or experienced in online learning, this was a stark realisation.

was best for their own careers. The extent to which this tension manifested during ERTL highlighted the need to rethink the status quo, thereby opening up the possibility for longer term shifts in notions of success and evaluative metrics, and attitudes towards teaching and student learning in general. Participant 6 described her growing awareness of changed perceptions of colleagues "who used to walk in and lecture and walk out and say: 'who the students are and what they do with my stuff has got nothing to do with me. I'm a lecturer and I produce research and that's all I'm interested in'". She continued to explain that: "[t]hose people have had to shift significantly, even if it is just to say that their Voiceover PowerPoint has to be understandable [sic]. So I think that there has been a shift and I think that maybe that is a plus that we can really talk about". Thus, ERTL seems to have sensitised some lecturers to students' realities, increasing lecturer awareness of the broader set of contextual issues that impact student learning and the need to take greater cognizance of these issues (Boughey & McKenna, 2016).

Therefore, the key questions that emerged during the CoP, were how to identify evidence sources to determine the quality of teaching and learning, and perhaps more critically, the real extent of student learning, to understand the processes through which students come to know, think and attain graduate-ness at university. The existence of a marks-driven culture was also noted, and while there was acknowledgement of the need to engage with and interrogate issues of throughput and retention, there was also a clear desire expressed to understand the significant variations in affordances and effectiveness of ERTL within institutions, and between previously advantaged and previously disadvantaged institutions (with the former commencing with ERTL months ahead of the latter in some cases). Within institutions, inequalities were brought into stark relief. Students from more affluent backgrounds generally adapted to the new mode of teaching and learning with ease, while those from disadvantaged backgrounds often experienced difficulties with living circumstances and a lack of access to stable Internet, electronic devices and reliable electricity supply (Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), 2020; Sifunda, Mokhele, Manyaapelo, Dukhi, Sewpaul, Parker…, 2021). A few participants reflected on their role in helping academics to find alternative methods of eliciting students' experiences of successful teaching and learning. Participant 1 observed that "trying to understand success is to find those spaces and places, often in corners, unexpected, where students can tell us what's going on. For example, the odd email that I pick up. When a student applies for a deferred exam, and explains why they have not engaged with the course". She continues to explain that it is in these non-formal spaces that more nuanced insights about success emerge.

The pandemic also disrupted long-held notions about the role of the lecturer in the teaching and learning process, and firmly held beliefs about the value of contact/in-person lecturing as the most effective mode for teaching and learning[7]. The move to ERTL confronted many academics with the sudden realization that simply providing students with content was insufficient, and that their knowledge of the university learning management system (LMS) was too limited to implement effective online learning. Despite extensive training available, many had for years used course sites on the LMS as little more than document repositories and, as Participant 7 pointed out, "some lecturers focused on recreating the [contact/in-person] lecture experience online by using Teams or Zoom". More importantly, even fewer academics were able to start the transition to ERTL equipped with sufficient knowledge of effective online pedagogies and online course design. In response, teaching and learning support units had to quickly adapt existing training and support materials or develop then from scratch, to offer 'crash courses' that would cater for these knowledge and skills gaps. The level of uptake of these training opportunities and resources offered by academic development professionals to academics, was significantly higher than had been seen before under pre-Covid-19 circumstances. As Participant 7 observes:

> this has changed the way that many people consider how learning happens and for lecturers to question some of the underlying assumptions of teaching and learning and this has brought to the fore the importance of student interaction and engagement, and the actual learning activities that students undertake as part of their learning.

There was consensus that the group's discussions about teaching and learning activities during ERTL had to be linked to broader conceptions of success in the long term. Caution was voiced against viewing the new normal, brought by the pandemic, as an all-round success story. That being said, there was agreement that ERTL has brought opportunities (a proverbial opening) for fundamental change and to question deep-held assumptions and beliefs about teaching and learning. The group also agreed that the shift to ERTL has required lecturers to re-think their courses (i.e. curriculum design and assessment) and the nature of institutional support for innovative teaching and learning, beyond merely coping (Flaherty, 2020) or even reverting to problematic and inequitable pre-Covid-19 systems and processes (Czerniewicz et al, 2020).

Openness to course design and teaching Innovation and a 'different higher education future'

The CoP discussion revealed observations about a new eagerness among some staff to pay attention to alternative strategies for understanding key issues like student alienation and dis-engagement,

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[7] Although, arguably, in-person/contact teaching may remain the preferred mode in some circumstances.

especially in the context of remote learning. Also evident in the reflections on Covid-19 experiences was the surfacing of assumptions about the nature of student engagement and learning, conscious that the choices made concerning curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are also influenced by our notions of success and quality. There was also an indication of possibilities for implementing a learning-focused approach to course design, teaching and assessment under the conditions in which we found ourselves.

The challenges with administering fair, valid and reliable assessments under ERTL conditions, highlights a contention emergent from claiming achievement of success (i.e. saving the academic year) based on pass rates alone, and the inability of lecturers to determine whether real deep learning had occurred[8]. Online assessment was and continues to be a major challenge for lecturers, with many forms of assessment believed to have worked well during contact/in-person modalities (e.g. invigilated sit-down assessments in venues on campus) being rendered nearly impossible during ERTL and hard lockdowns[9]. Nevertheless, assessment innovation has been identified by lecturers across faculties as a key feature that emerged from ERTL, as they were necessitated to explore different ways of working with authentic assessment and assessing students cumulatively in online spaces, while aiming to develop their higher order and critical thinking capacities. Participant 2 observed the following:

> [t]his [experience] has changed the way I approach my work as a university lecturer and has encouraged me to think of ways in which I can change my teaching and assessments to help students see past marks, and rather help them see how the subject I teach could play an enriching role in their own intellectual lives. This does not mean we can escape from evaluating student learning and assigning marks [sic], but could help us see marks in their proper place and level of importance.

Participant 4 in turn emphasised the need to think about how we prepare students for the "uncertain future world of work, where we expect them to probably have multiple careers, where we acknowledge that some of the careers that that may define their lives may not exist yet". He questioned whether we are thinking sufficiently about success beyond the university, as our students become life-long critical learners or citizens in a rapid (and radically) transforming world.

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[8] Arguably though, lecturers had no way of determining whether real deep learning was taking place pre-Covid-19 during contact/in-person teaching and learning.
[9] Although this too beckons the question whether some of those modes were as effective as many would once have believed they were.

Cross-faculty communities

Apart from success in terms of institutional sustainability, individual success and impact of teaching on student learning and achievement, the CoP revealed that real, meaningful changes in institutional culture and prevailing notions about teaching and learning requires dialogic engagements. Only when people who have a vested interest in these matters have focused conversations about them will there be the possibility of meaningful change. Participant 5 highlights this point when she observes: "[i]f we have communities talking about success and exploring it and interrogating it, there is a greater chance of being able to shift the narrative around success and shift the culture around success". One way of stimulating these conversations is through cross-faculty collaboration and CoPs, which the authors experienced first-hand through their own CoP. At the authors' institution, teaching and learning support is structurally divided into a university-level centre, and faculty-specific units within each faculty. The faculty-specific units provide specialized support and training for academics in their faculties, not provided by the central entity, which focuses on more holistic staff development and related matters. During ERTL, staff from faculty-units (usually quite autonomous in their doing and being) reached out and collaborated more intentionally across faculty divides. This occurred quite organically, without any central planning, resulting in cross-faculty collaborations on a range of support materials and training interventions, through the exercising of individual agency in response to structural changes necessitate by ERTL. This has led to a shift in emphasis from the unique needs and characteristics of teaching in each faculty, to focusing on commonalities and shared realities. Academics now routinely find themselves in webinars with colleagues from other faculties, where it becomes evident that there are many similar problems and challenges, with shared solutions a real possibility. Equally, it became clear that when experiences and challenges were shared, and solutions found together, the realization of success was somehow more tangible and long lasting, perhaps because it fulfils the view of success as belonging to a community. There have thus been small but notable signs of a shift in institutional culture, with greater collaboration and focus on the enhancement of teaching and learning. However, a sustained paradigm shift will depend, to a large extent, on stakeholders' willingness to embrace changes without reverting to traditional, pre-Covid-19 siloes. In addition, long term change will also depend on the institutional response and the provision of structural changes to support this.

Conclusion

Conceptions of success within SA's highly complex and diverse HE sector remain contested and were exaggerated during ERTL. In this paper, the authors highlight possibilities emergent from their cross-faculty CoP for thinking critically about some of the notions and conceptions of SA HE success and for finding alternative ways of measuring (or even defining) success. We have identified several challenges that came to the fore during ERTL, as differences in institutional and individual conceptions of success were exaggerated and long-standing 'implicit' tensions became more explicit. We have discussed the challenges this may present for lecturers wanting to strike a better balance between success as wellness (for student and self), success as personal progression, and success as institutional sustainability. Furthermore, we note the distinct sense of resistance emerging among lecturers as they begin to realise the potential impact of conforming to institutional notions and conceptions of success, without critical interrogation. Whether this shift in agency amongst some staff is sufficient to trigger longer-term shifts in culturally embedded conceptions of success and/or institutional structures governing the metrics of success, remains to be seen.

We have also recognised the value of building a repertoire of conceptual and pedagogical tools for addressing challenges in the future, and to use them against a considered conceptual framework. In our discussions we were careful to guard against formulating short-term solutions that do not take into account the critical debates and reflections of scholarly and experienced teaching and learning specialists during this period. We wish to be prepared to make sound judgments and decisions about a range of possible emergent dilemmas and conundrums. These include issues of academic integrity and contract cheating, which has taken on new dimensions during ERTL (both locally and globally), and grappling with the adaptation of standards for evaluating models of blended learning to local contexts. Moreover, critical explorations of new ways of measuring pedagogical choices have also been foregrounded, with our CoP looking to focus more intently on some of these dilemmas and conundrums as we move forward. In conclusion, our contention is that it is premature to accept the experiences emanating from ERTL as an affirmation of a new normal, especially without understanding and critiquing the broader implications for individuals, institutions and society as large. As Essop (forthcoming) argues, although we have saved at least one academic year, it is essential to have ongoing conversations about what constitutes success in the context of ERTL, and to consider quite carefully the lessons our experiences hold for shaping notions of success beyond ERTL.

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