

# Students' Voice as a Source of Reflection and Growth in the Teaching and Learning Setting at a Post Secondary Institution – Lessons Learnt After Several Months in Pandemic Circumstances

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic changed the teaching and learning scenario in education. The authors of this paper, both lecturers at a post secondary institution in Malta, were determined to understand the students' lived experiences during remote learning. Rich data was generated in two studies through a mixed research method approach using questionnaires with several open-ended questions. One questionnaire explored the students' experiences during the initial three months of remote learning, and, in the second study, a follow-up questionnaire was sent to the same students a year later. This paper focuses on the second study. The students' response indicated a shift from initial chaos and uncertainty to uniformity and relative stability. Some students remained unscathed by this experience, but months of remote learning affected the learning and wellbeing of others. The students' voice confirmed the sensitivities of such a crucial age group, exposing typical personal, academic, familial and social vulnerabilities. Issues of diversity and equity exposed a diverse spectrum of emotional maturity, learning abilities and domestic backgrounds amongst students. Surprisingly, several students reflected on the effectiveness of learning methods in remote and physical classes. The findings in this paper call for valuable lessons to be learnt and applied in a versatile new normal.

**Keywords:** *Covid-19, Remote Learning, Vulnerabilities, Equity, Wellbeing, e-learning*

## Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic posed and still poses various threats; however, it also provided educators with unique opportunities resulting in a time of introspection and reflection. As educators, we became curious and preoccupied with the effectiveness of remote learning. Students were not left unperturbed and their concerns disrupted their focus and future plans. While trying to find ways to adapt and evolve in an unprecedented situation, the authors sought to listen to the students' voice. This

study, a follow-up to a previous one (Gatt, Rolé 2021) conducted after the first three months of emergency remote learning (ERL) period (March - May 2020), focuses on the students' experiences of fifteen months of remote learning. In June 2021, the students had completed an academic year in a pandemic situation, where they spent most of it following lectures remotely. There was a short period of time where the students were allowed to attend the institution in small groups; however, learning resumed remotely after cases spiked again in Malta during the month of January 2021.

The authors, still concerned about the students' learning and wellbeing, delved to explore the students' experiences to devise possible strategies for the future. The students who were surveyed in June 2020 (ERL period), then at the end of their first year, were nearing the end of their two-year course and about to sit for their MATSEC exams in June 2021. This study gave these students the opportunity to evaluate their experience with all its strengths and vulnerabilities, vent out and express their views as comprehensively as possible. In fact, it focuses on the challenges that the students faced and how they managed, or not, to overcome them. Surprisingly, the students gave us much more than we expected; they reflected quite deeply on their learning experience and gave us valuable insights, not only on teaching and learning during a pandemic but on what active learning should be all about. While the first study uncovered a myriad of fears of the unknown, this second study revealed how students' perspectives had evolved and how they became more aware of their learning needs. The students provided us with valuable information on how to continue supporting them while also improving our practices and focusing on growth in a new normal.

Several researchers embarked on similar studies, investigating the students' experiences and perceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic. In a case study of around 500 undergraduates, Al-Mawee et al. (2021) reported negative experiences such as lack of social interaction and positive experiences with respect to time-management and comfort. A large-scale study involving 34,000 higher education students from 62 countries, Aristovnik et al. (2020) found that although students talked of anxiety, boredom, lacking computer skills and higher workloads, they were satisfied with the support which was provided by the teaching staff. Similar student experiences were reported in the previous study by the authors of this paper (Gatt, Rolé 2021). In this work, the authors relate the students' experiences to benefits of remote learning, vulnerabilities and equity issues.

## **Methodology**

The authors thought it was opportune to approach the same cohort of students and investigate their lived experiences during their second year at the institution. As in

the first study, a questionnaire, with the same cohort of students, was chosen as the research tool; in the first study, the response rate was 25% and the students had given rich narrations in the open-ended questions. It was also an ideal communicative tool to reach all students remotely and allow them time to reflect and respond to the questions.

Thus, an anonymous questionnaire was sent to all second-year students in June 2021 and it consisted of 27 questions, organised in sections. It included multiple choice, Likert-scale and open-ended type of questions. The questions focused on the following themes: student support (IT and wellbeing), technological issues, learning related issues, the home learning environment and advantages and disadvantages of remote learning. The data generated in the multiple choice and Likert-scale questions was analysed in Google Forms and presented in charts and graphs. Nvivo 12 was used to analyse the open-ended questions where the data was reduced and categorised several times. As in the first study, these open-ended questions resulted in rich narrations comparable to interview responses.

## **Findings and Discussion**

In this second study, the number of respondents was 194 (23% response rate). Similar to the first study, the ratio between female and male participants remained at 3:1. Since the ratio at the institution is 3 females: 2 males, the belief that females are more open to talk about their concerns than males is reinforced. This trend has been observed in other studies (Smith 2008, Curtin 2002). Students from all five subject areas at the institution answered the questionnaire and the percentages were representative of the number of students registered in each area.

The extreme variations in perceptions of the remote learning experience were less evident in the second pandemic period than in the first. In June 2020, 95% of the students had claimed that remote learning posed several challenges. In June 2021 this percentage, though still high, decreased to 80% while 15% of the students stated that they preferred remote learning to face-to-face learning. Yet, the number of students experiencing stress in the second phase was as high as in the first phase (70%). The responses confirmed the authors' perception that although the situation had changed and improved, the majority of the students were still uncomfortable and yearning to return to face-to-face learning. The reduction of data resulted in three main categories, reflecting the students' responses and rich narrations. Thus, three main concepts emerged; these are (1) an appreciation of the strengths and benefits of the experience, (2) a disclosure of vulnerabilities and stressors and (3) insights on what active learning should be about. This gave the authors an impetus to use these responses as a catalyst for reflection and a learning experience directed towards the growth and evolution of professional practice.

## *Strengths and Benefits*

### *From uncertainty to uniformity*

The findings in this research have shown that during the pandemic, most students experienced an academic journey of unpredicted and unexpected circumstances. The students remarked that they moved from a period of somewhat chaos and uncertainty in the ERL period to relative stability in the second academic year. The constant evolving adaptations, and strategies devised by the institution administration resulted in greater structure and uniformity.

The immediate ERL guidelines in the first period, by the administration involved the launching of online IT and Counselling services. These services intensified as the remote learning phases were extended. An increased awareness of these services was reported by several students in the second research phase. Frequent guidelines and updates via email from the a post-secondary institution administration to students and lecturers provided a process of regular communication. This ensured a sense of security among students, and was instrumental to gradually re-build the students' trust in the institution and their motivation to learn.

The sudden closure of the post-secondary institution in March 2020 and the launching of remote learning terrified several students and lecturers alike. The major role of educators is to facilitate and support the students' learning; they are role-models encouraging students to build confidence and self-esteem. During the ERL period, however, some students became aware of their tutors' struggles to cope with technology and the circumstances. On the other hand, most lecturers were setting several learning assignments and provided additional recordings to ensure full academic support to students. Consequently, data showed that this amount of extra work had inadvertently added to insecurities amongst students, and in certain cases aggravating their stress and anxiety. Moreover, during the first three months of the ERL period lecturers used different delivery methods. These had included simple voice recordings and/or the use of different video-conferencing applications such as Skype, Zoom, Hangout and Meet. This had contributed to the chaos which existed in the ERL period.

*'It was confusing, even to know where to find everything. One hour would be Skype and the next was Zoom. Some teachers sent us long voice recordings. The work tripled...we had no time for all of this.'*

In the second study, 83% of the students commented on greater organisation due to the fact that most lectures were delivered according to a timetable and most lecturers were using the same lecture delivery methods (Zoom). 40% of the students mentioned an observable increase in the lecturers' confidence in remote teaching and familiarity with technology.

*'It was more organised and I feel like everyone got used to it more, including the teachers.'*

*'We were kept updated on everything and not many things were uncertain. Everything seemed to get a bit more natural albeit the current circumstances.'*

In the second period, greater co-ordination and understanding prevailed mainly because educators used consistent lecture delivery method. The institution's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE - Moodle 3.5.6-12) was used as a platform to support learning, and provided access for video-conferencing (Zoom) and recordings (Panopto and Zoom). Tools such as asynchronous discussions, wikis and quizzes were available in the VLE. Class tests were regularly carried out via the quizzes tool, and assignments could be posted in the VLE for marking. This adjustment, in the second period, contributed to a uniformity and stability that was greatly appreciated by students.

*'All lecturers were using the same methods to teach us and give us notes. As opposed to last year where everyone was doing their own thing.'*

In the second period, students observed an increase in the lecturers' familiarity with technology and were grateful for the efforts shown by the majority of the lecturers. A timetable of 45-minute lectures, with a 15-minute break between lectures was followed, allowing students enough time to log on for the next lecture without rushing to make it on time. Voice recordings or Panopto recorded lectures were rarely used and if available, they were shorter than the two to six-hour recordings in the ERL period. The mandatory use of a webcam by students and lecturers also brought stability as some of the student distractions were reduced and more students felt that they were part of the class than in the first period.

*'I feel that having the camera on keeps me more alert to what is happening during the lesson.'*

The students' responses also indicated that, in general, the home environment became more conducive to learning in the second phase. During the ERL phase, several students were continually engaged in house-keeping tasks, distracting them from following all their lectures and even disturbing them during lectures. The guidelines provided by the administration after the first period, emphasised that students were to be allocated a safe, quiet and undisturbed learning space at home to enhance their learning.

The questionnaire responses also showed a general increase in the availability of basic technological devices at home, such as computers or tablets, printers and

webcams. The first study had indicated that computers were either not available in some homes or else other members of the family were sharing the only available device. In these cases, students either missed lectures or resorted to watching recordings. Very often students who intended to watch or listen to recordings, did not eventually find the time or motivation to do so. In the second phase, the administration and lecturers were more on the alert and ready to solve issues. Student attendance lists for every remote class were kept, a webcam was used and individual technological problems were immediately identified and solved.

### *The benefits of remote learning*

The students' responses showed that remote learning turned out to be beneficial to students in several aspects. Moreover, the remote learning experience exposed some of the daily problems that students usually encounter in non-pandemic times. Students identified no need for travel (69%), home comfort (32%) and availability of recorded sessions and teachers' notes for revision (22%) as the top benefits of remote learning.

Transport issues were associated with traffic jams and the helplessness of waiting for buses, resulting in fears of arriving late for class and missing lectures. Learning from home resolved these issues as students did not have to wake up early to be in class on time, they could rest more and have more time for leisure or study.

*'Waking up later than usual, having the opportunity to spend more time with loved ones and above all not taking the bus to school, fearing that I'll be late for the class.'*

*'Free sessions were used productively rather than wasted settling down at the a post-secondary institution, trying to figure out where to sit or with whom to spend my free time.'*

Some students (4%) said that they did not spend money on transport, on new clothes, at the canteen or in nearby shops, and considered 'having no such expenses' as a benefit. Several students mentioned other elements of comfort arising from learning at home. These included not worrying about what to wear, not carrying heavy school bags and their minds were put at rest regarding forgetting assignments at home. At home, students were in a familiar environment, surrounded by books and their daily needs. They could freely and responsibly plan and follow their own schedules, including play and study. They were

*Being able to set up your own personal classroom and stay comfortable at home. Having everything such as notes and homework by your side at any time. Also staying in your pjs'*

*'Learning in the comfort of your home can be better, such as playing music in the background of particular lessons, which help with concentration'*

Another benefit of remote learning was the availability of digital notes and recordings for revision purposes. Some students preferred to write and present assigned work and take class notes digitally to using pen and paper as in pre-Covid times.

*'Doing tests from home was more comfortable as I could use Word for essay writing rather than use pen and paper, where my work ends up being unpresentable.'*

Remote learning resulted in vast amounts of peripheral learning in the use of technology namely, use of digital devices, editing and writing applications and communication software. This study showed that remote learning provided students with opportunities to change and cope with the circumstances. In particular, these were the students who (1) suffered from cyberphobia, (2) considered computers as a barrier to their learning, and (3) insisted on using the Internet for leisure only and not study work. Some of the students also mentioned that they appreciated learning from home to reduce risks of the Covid-19 contagion.

Fourteen percent of students did not answer the open-ended question on the benefits of remote learning and 3 % of the students said that they did not enjoy any benefits. In general, the responses indicated that in the second period, more students were settled to learn from home, when compared to the ERL period. The students eventually realised that the institution was showing genuine care for their learning. They understood that learning during a pandemic was still possible, Matsec and other examinations were still available and that the educational sector in the country continued to function.

### *Vulnerabilities and Stressors*

Various issues made the students feel vulnerable and consequently stressed. Four types of vulnerabilities were identified: personal, social, familial and academic. Altogether, the stressors perpetrated by these vulnerabilities appeared as one huge hurdle in the students' progression, both as individuals and as learners.

### *Personal Stressors*

The students in this study identified personal issues that emerged either for the first time in their life or were accentuated by the pandemic situation. At the foremost

was the concern with personal appearance, now exposed online, for all to see. Exposing their face on a screen was an issue (62%), either because they were aware that others were looking at them or because they felt uncomfortable looking at themselves. This shows that at this particular age, adolescents are more prone to be self-conscious of their appearance and might not feel comfortable with how they look. Somerville et al. (2013) emphasise that students become more aware of how their peers and society in general evaluates their image.

*'I feel very self-conscious with the camera on, there is a sense of insecurity. People can scroll to look at me specifically and take screen shots.'*

*'I was paying more attention to how I looked on screen than to the lesson.'*

Self-consciousness also manifested itself when the students felt that through live online sessions, they were exposing their home environment. Some students did not have an adequate private space for learning, and others had families that did not support their need for privacy and focus during lectures.

An issue of diversity and equity emerged; students who lived in cramped small houses/apartments could not avail of the holistic educational experience of online learning, while those who had their own room or space had the opportunity to exploit the advantages that the online experience had to offer. *'I could feel some students snickering at what I had behind me.'*

Some students (12%) felt particularly vulnerable also health wise. The most common vulnerability was the effect of the pandemic on their mental health. Some students experienced mental health problems for the first time in their life (5%), while for others it was a case of exacerbation of prior conditions. Obsessive compulsive disorders, anxiety attacks and depression were the most common conditions. Students also complained on the effect of online learning on their physical health, mentioning deteriorating eye sight and back and neck pain as the main ailments resulting from spending excessive time in front of a computer.

*'I had constant panic/anxiety attacks, a newly developed depression.'*

*'I suffered from the revival of a previous eating disorder.'*

Many students were in constant fear of contagion and most were also anxious about the safety of vulnerable relatives. They were afraid of catching the virus themselves and not surviving, but mostly they were concerned that they would expose their vulnerable family members to the virus. This responsibility weighed on their conscience and affected their psychological and emotional wellbeing.

Another main personal stressor was loneliness and consequently also isolation. They missed human contact, not only at the institution but also in extra-curricular activities. Most missed the daily interaction with their friends and their lecturers. Rather than missing the actual activities, they missed the people they used to meet in those activities. Some were not even feeling 'human' anymore, but rather more like robots. The feeling of detachment from society instilled in them a fear of abandonment; a feeling that they were not being thought of or valued. Some felt that even the education system was failing them due to the remoteness of the whole pandemic situation.

*'I miss seeing people, being outside and learning in a classroom without a mask to hide our faces and smiles. It might seem it's nothing but in reality, it's everything.'*

*'No human interaction made me feel more like a learning machine that absorbs information and less of a student.'*

Even technology became a means of stress for some students. They were anxious every time they had a lecture and particularly about connectivity issues (51%) and adapting to different modes of technology (46%). Quite a number (45%) felt uneasy due to the lecturers' discomfort or lack of familiarity with the required technology. Lack of access to hardware such as printers and scanners affected 26% of the students.

Another cohort of students (40%) could not come to grips with the reality that their leisure gadgets/Internet were now their learning resources.

*'I had never really used it (technology) for educational purposes; the idea was completely alien to me.'*

Some students felt that the use of technology for learning invaded their private lives and interfered with their recreational time.

### *Familial Stressors*

Familial Stressors added to all the above vulnerabilities and worsened the situation at home. Crowded houses, often including extended family members were definitely not conducive to learning. The amount and volume of background noises interrupted the students' learning.

*'Sometimes I would be answering a question and think that the lecturer was hearing my dad and not me.'*

Interruptions and noise from other family members was a major issue for many students (59%). The usual family activity, that at other times felt normal, became a

distraction. Arguments between family members were more irritating than usual as these became more frequent due to the family being at home all the time.

*'Sometimes my parents would break into fights, thus the tense environment with no distance between me and them, made me unable to focus.'*

Parents and siblings, even in the second period, at times showed indifference to the students' need for privacy and silence. Some students felt that their family members were still insensitive to their needs as learners; they were expected to run errands and do housework when the need arose. At the same time some of these students felt that they had to contribute to the increased amount of housework due to the family being at home. The presence and needs of dependent relatives also weighed on students' conscience and they felt obliged to take care of family members who needed constant care.

*'My mother suffers from chronic pain and being at home with her I felt I had to help out as I felt more responsible.'*

*'Even my pets were a distraction, asking for food and attention and making unnecessary noise.'*

The pressures on the students were numerous in the ERL period; however, they persisted to a lesser degree in the second period. Some families were still interfering with the students' learning rather than offering support. The students felt bewildered that their natural home support system was alienating them from their studies.

### *Academic stressors*

The academic stressors in the second period were similar to those that existed in the ERL period, albeit not as harsh and less students were affected by them. Although some students (26%) seemed unscathed by the experience, others struggled and found it difficult to cope with the extended remote learning period. A short break where students were allowed to attend lectures in small numbers was literally a breath of fresh air, but unfortunately, this lasted only for a few weeks in January 2021.

Several students remarked that it was likely to become distracted during class when learning from home. They sat for long hours in front of a computer; a fifteen-minute break between lectures was too short. In some cases, this break was used as an extended lecture time. In fact, tiredness (72%), a lack of motivation to learn (81%) and a lack of focus due to distractions (85%) were the most common academic stressors.

*'I felt trapped in my room. There is no change of scenery or environment. It is difficult for one to not only concentrate on their lectures and focus on completing homework, but also to have a motivation to complete the school year.'*

The first study had indicated that students experienced three types of distractions – (1) outside the house (70%), (2) in the house (67%) and (3) social media (64%). Noise distractions from neighbours and construction works outside the house persisted to the same extent during both periods of this research, while social media distractions increased during the second phase (80%).

Although distractions related to housekeeping and care of relatives were reported to a smaller extent in the second period, a new distraction surfaced. The mandatory use of the webcam definitely had its huge benefits, but the webcam was also instrumental to divert the students' attention away from class learning; it added to the students' stress and concerns. As previously mentioned, several students spent the lecture time worrying about their appearance and constantly looked at the screen to check themselves. Other students were known to be scrolling, looking at classmates and taking screen shots. This made the former students anxious and stressed. On the other hand, some students were not affected by webcam distractions; they kept the speaker's (lecturer's) view on and were not concerned about appearances. These students showed a sense of responsibility for their learning and the learning of others.

Some students felt that remote learning forced them into passive learning; they felt a lack of interaction with their teachers, especially when lecturers read notes without any discussion. This was also observed in a study with Higher Education students by Radmehr and Goodchild (2021) in Norway. As students became bored and lost focus and motivation, it was easy to use the computer screen or an additional device to look at social media.

*'Maybe after every lesson the lecturer could have a set of questions which could be used as a mini test to see if the students have understood what was discussed.'*

Some students felt a lack of academic support. The lack of physical face-to-face contact made these students feel uncomfortable to ask questions in the online class or to ask for individual help from the tutors. It was also difficult to discuss with classmates in lecture time. The students who did not have privacy to learn at home resisted asking and were uncomfortable to answer questions because they did not want their family to listen to what they would be saying.

*'I could not participate in class or answer questions with my mother always in the same room'*

Tiredness, anxiety, boredom, concerns, ease of distractedness and passive learning were challenges faced by students on a daily basis. Consequently, some students lost the motivation to learn.

### *Social Stressors*

#### *Isolation*

Wheeler (2020) described remote learning as being together face-to-face at a distance; however, students felt isolated from their a post-secondary institution crowd. In pre-Covid times, the institution, besides supporting curriculum learning, also offered extra-curricular opportunities for learning and socialising with peers of the same age. Enrichment courses, sports activities, social events, concerts, communities, clubs and societies provided a relaxed and welcoming atmosphere with opportunities for students to increase their circle of their friends. Most students formed vibrant groups. They studied together and socialised in the classrooms, library, study areas, canteen, common room, gymnasium and in outdoor garden areas. In the first year of the pandemic, the students had the opportunity to be with their peers for five months before the onset of the lockdown. They had already savored school life and this contrasted greatly with their home learning. Many students (52%) believed that lack of socialisation was the greatest disadvantage of remote learning. Loneliness affected these post-secondary young adults more than any other adult age groups (Luchetti et al. 2020). As Lee, Cadigan et al. (2020) argue, loneliness has an even greater impact on students who had more social connectedness prior to the pandemic or who had relational or social concerns.

*'Lectures were more fun when with friends, especially when you have a big group of friends which you loved to hang out with on a daily basis.'*

*'I lacked social interaction with people of my age and stayed in the house 5 days a week so life got boring and at the end I started losing motivation and the will to study and join lessons more often.'*

Several students blamed their lack of motivation to learn, on their isolation and the lack of interaction with lecturers and peers. This isolation also led to fears of lost opportunities to build future friendships. As some of them argued, the number of infections and restrictions were increasing and they could not visualise an end to their distressing experience. Studies show that during the pandemic, tertiary level students have experienced the greatest increase in psychological distress (McGinty et al. 2020, Graupensperger et al. 2021). Some students in this study argued that the lack of face to face interaction, made them feel that their lecturers and classmates

were unapproachable because they had no more opportunities to learn about each other. In fact, some students provided suggestions for improving the quality of their remote education.

*'Do fun activities and not only lectures as it could get quite repetitive after several weeks'*

*'If the pandemic goes on, please allow clubs to meet online.'*

Wherever it was possible, the institution's students' clubs kept contact with students and organised online activities. The Youth Hub is one example of such initiatives during the remote learning period.

### *Students' Insights on Active Learning*

One unexpected response from students, in general, was their deep insight on learning. During both pandemic periods, students had the opportunity to reflect on their learning experiences. Remote learning induced them to appreciate the merits of face-to-face learning, while evaluating what works more for them. Most students realised that active learning, whether face-to-face or online, is an effective learning methodology which should be encouraged. It was evident that the students are aware of best practices for learning and show satisfaction when active learning occurs (Hyun et al. 2017). According to some of the students' responses, the remote learning experience limited the extent to which active learning was practised.

*'Some lecturers went too fast and did not give us enough time to process, suggest answers and evaluate our own work.'*

*'Reading notes without any debate and further questions is not effective.'*

Nevertheless, students praised and were appreciative of lecturers who did their utmost to overcome the circumstances and keep the learning as active as possible. Remote learning provided the opportunity for the use of learning tools, such as quizzes, polls and breakout rooms in class. Some students' responses show that in certain cases, breakout rooms (in Zoom) were not always used appropriately for effective learning. The students expected educators to be more aware of the efficiency and effectiveness of tools and of applying various teaching methods. Some also said that there is need for educators to evaluate the use of tools in the teaching of different subjects. Maybe such an insight would not have occurred to students if they had not stopped to think and reflect on their learning and diverse methodologies.

*'Most teachers encouraged student participation and motivated students to learn...'*

*'Some teachers would just present worked examples and then these are discussed – this was not effective as everything was ready. We need to work them out ourselves.'*

Students also appreciated the role of discipline in active learning. During online lectures it was easier for students to distract others and misbehave; thus students appreciated the fact that no nonsense was allowed and that lecturers kept order. They were aware that the institution's administration was taking steps to stop any form of online misbehaviour and they felt secure. Most students started appreciating the role of discipline in effective teaching and learning, both online and in person. Interaction with lecturers during class and individual attention were another two issues brought up by the students. They felt that when students are not asked questions or are not given the time to articulate their ideas and to contribute to the lectures, they lose focus and motivation. If lecturers do not address students individually and give particular attention, students feel disengaged and on the receiving end of a tedious process.

*'With lack of interaction my only motivation was fear of low assessment marks...not to learn.'*

Awareness of equity and diversity issues in teaching and learning was also evident amongst many students. They showed a high degree of empathy towards students who were at a disadvantage due to pandemic conditions. The pandemic accentuated learning, financial, emotional and psychological difficulties. Students experiencing these difficulties could not focus and keep up with the increased amount of work. Those students who did not experience any of these difficulties felt that more should be done to support those students who struggled all year round, pandemic or not. Reference to differentiated teaching was also made, requesting adaptation of teaching methods to students' various needs. Students did appreciate the fact that most lecturers were very demanding, tried to keep high standards and promoted autonomous learning, however they were also sensitive towards those students who could not keep up with the work.

*'We would like to see some change regarding the teaching methods used towards distressed students.'*

Another teaching quality that students appreciated is when lecturers have clear expectations. In normal face-to-face school circumstances issues of unclear expectations do occur but usually these are tackled immediately in class or during contact hours. In pandemic times, whenever this was the case, the students felt lost as it was difficult to ask the lecturers directly in class and by the time they got an answer through emails, it was often too late to reinforce the learning within a context. Students claimed that when they are sure of what is required from them, they feel confident and do better in their tasks.

*'Unclear instructions on length and level of detail expected from us confused us even more.'*

These insights emphasise the importance of students' voice and its role in the continuous evaluation of teaching and learning. Students are cognisant of how they learn best and their perception of their own learning should continuously be tapped for a more effective education research methodology (Lechner 2001).

### **The outcomes of the research**

The personal and academic stressors, revealed in this research, point towards the need of empowering students to become self-directed learners. This entails the development of self-regulatory strategies in the learning process such as being flexible, responsible, and resilient active learners (Rolé 2020). Thus, the focus on teaching and learning is not only on learning subject content. It also involves the development of resource management strategies which include managing time, managing study environments, monitoring effort, effective focusing, and being determined to learn (Pintrich, DeGroot 1990). The students who were self-directed learners with the above self-regulatory characteristics coped better than the vulnerable others during the pandemic remote learning. Some of the latter displaced the responsibility to learn, claimed that lectures were boring, said that they felt too distant from lecturers and class mates and were inclined to become distracted.

The institution's community has gained insights which could be used in strategic planning. Grajec (2021) discusses the possibility of three main scenarios for a post-pandemic era; institutions may focus on either (1) restoration, i.e., working towards reverting to the old normal, or (2) evolution, i.e., adapting to a new normal or (3) transformation, i.e., focusing on creating an innovative future. Educational institutions must be pushed beyond restoring traditional practices (Gatt, Rolé 2021). Pandemic education, although initially disordered and continuously of great concern, provided valuable opportunities for institutions to evolve and transform. Little (2021) proposes the creation of a plan to identify the institutions' needs and students' needs, the provision of the required digital tools at the institution and at home and the guarantee of equal access to education for all students. Little (2021) argues that a transformative route needs to be based on pedagogy, culture, technological infrastructure and governance.

### **Conclusion**

The students' voices in this research have influenced some of the post-secondary institution's decisions during the remote learning period. Morse and Allensworth

(2015) noted that giving students a voice and placing them at the centre when devising strategies and making decisions is of benefit to the students and also improves the outcomes for the entire institution. Several students highlighted the importance of structure and uniformity at school and shared their visualisation of effective learning. In addition, this research has exposed the personal, social, academic and familial stressors which affected the students' educational journey in the one and a half years of remote learning.

The institution's strategies and direction based on the continuous evaluation of the educational circumstances and above all focusing on students radiated an attitude of genuine care for the students' wellbeing and learning. Latent benefits which are often overlooked when discussing remote learning were revealed. These included transport issues which resulted in more time available for students to schedule their days and less stress regarding fears of arriving in class late or forgetting work at home. Furthermore, the availability of recorded lectures proved useful for revision and studying purposes.

The major stressors impeded the students' learning and also revealed issues of diversity and equity amongst the students. This has provided the institution with a lens on the diverse spectrum of emotional maturity, learning abilities and domestic backgrounds of the students. Moreover, in pandemic times, weaknesses and strengths of institutions were either exposed or accentuated.

The major elements which affect students and highlighted in this study are digital education, active learning and equity matters. Several students considered the video-conferencing in remote learning as an example of an online traditional passive lecture. A shift from passive learning to active learning across all subjects and the design of curricula and assessment methods that support active learning is essential. Although digital education depends on an extensive technical infrastructure, it is of great importance that educators have the appropriate digital pedagogical skills and digital readiness. A transformation may involve aligning curricula and educational structures to digital skills, technology enhanced learning in classrooms across all subjects and professional development for educators in terms of active learning and digital education. An institutional culture of transformation would provide a vision with rigid foundations for the future, keeping pace with eventual change. The results from this study support the need for a transformation whereby the institution fosters a culture for resilience, embraces change, accepts innovations and assertively moves forward providing a holistic educational experience to students and equity access to education.

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