

Impacts of Covid-19 Pandemic on Selected Rural University Students' Emotional Lives: A South African Perspective from a Global Study

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ABSTRACT

The emotional lives of students are paramount in that it influences their learning abilities as well as their academic performance. The COVID-19 pandemic seems to have affected the emotional lives of students, especially those in rural areas. This study explored the impact of COVID-19 on the emotional lives of students in a selected rural university in South Africa. A quantitative research approach was adopted whereby questionnaires were used to collect data from 274 undergraduate students who were selected through simple random sampling technique. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics and themes. The study findings indicate that many of the students are no longer as joyful and hopeful as they used to be because they are not in touch with their fellow students nor with their lecturers. Students are frustrated, with rising degrees of anger and anxiety. The study recommends, amongst other things, the need for the services of counsellors to be engaged at the rural university so that students can receive counselling regarding these problems.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic; emotional lives; rural university students; South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

Student academic success is dependent on various factors (Abaidoo, 2018; Uleanya, 2018). As pointed out by various authors like Abaidoo (2018), Uleanya (2018), Uleanya (2020), Uleanya, et al. (2020a), some of the factors giving rise to problems with student academic success are irregular studying, lack of self-motivation, lateness, and non-attendance of class activities, lack of interest in specific subjects, demography of student. Teacher factors, on the other hand, include non-completion of course content, lack of the use of Learning Teaching Support Materials (LTSMs), poor or lack of feedback to students, and poor lecturer-student relationships. Parent factors include poor or very little concern about students' academic pursuits, non-provision of academic needs, and poor children-parent relationships. Higher education institution (HEI) factors include non or limited availability of required books, non or limited Learning Teaching Support Materials (LTSMs) and unfavourable lecturer-student ratios.

The identified factors from the different categories tend to be peculiar to both urban and rural based HEIs. Additionally, rural environments are areas characterised by certain peculiar features such as high rate of unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, underdevelopment, untarred roads, etc (Uleanya & Yu, 2019; Uleanya et al., 2020b). Thus, following the peculiar nature of the rural environment, HEIs in such areas tend to be exposed to certain peculiar challenges due to the nature of their environment (Uleanya et al., 2020b).

Aristovnik et al., (2020) state that the COVID-19 pandemic has in different ways affected students both socially and in their learning experiences. Studies such as Cao, *et al*, (2020), Elmer et al. (2020), Praghlapati (2020), Zhai and Du (2020) are suggestive of how the lives of students have been affected by the occurrence of the pandemic referred to as COVID-19. For instance, issues regarding Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), quick response to transition from face-to-face teaching to online teaching, learning and assessment, amongst others are considered and explored. These are done without due consideration of the emotional state of mind of students at this point of COVID-19. Thus, studies regarding the issue of the emotional lives of students and how this is likely to affect the learning abilities of students during the period of COVID-19 are not very prolific. It is for this reason that a study on how emotional factors affect students' learning abilities and their academic performances, was conducted. This study attempted to investigate how the COVID-19 crisis affected the emotional lives of undergraduate students and, by extension, their learning abilities and academic performance. This was done by considering the perspectives of students from a selected rural HEI in South Africa.

Extant literatures such as Cao et al. (2020), Elmer et al. (2020), Praghlapati (2020) as well as Zhai and Du (2020) show that various emotions affect students' learning abilities and their academic performances. Furthermore, the submission of the International Board of Credentialing and Continuing Education Standards (IBCCES) (2020) suggests that depression, which can be an aftermath of lack of joy is traceable to one of the major hindrances affecting the learning abilities of students. Learning is expected to be fun (IBCCES, 2020). However, following students' lack of joy, fun learning does not happen. As shown by various authors like

Aristovnik et al. (2020), Praghlapati (2020), and Zhai and Du (2020), students' mental health is expected to be protected to ensure stability and to enhance their learning abilities. Some of the emotions that are contributory to the learning abilities and academic performances of students include hope, frustration, anger, anxiety, and shame (Aristovnik et al., 2020).

Considering the emotional lives of students in South African HEIs during the pandemic, it is traceable that there was no participation in any comprehensive large-scale global surveys by South African HEIs. The focus of this study is on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the emotional lives of students in a selected rural South African HEI. The study focuses on how COVID-19 affected the students' learning abilities as well as their academic performances. Rural South Africa has been considered in this study because of the rate of underdevelopment in the rural areas and the bad effect the occurrence of COVID-19 has had on rural areas.

Research Question

The research question guiding this study is: What are the emotions of students in the selected South African rural HEIs towards studies since the COVID-19?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The COVID-19 pandemic affected different walks of life and different sectors (OECD, 2020), including the education sector, in various ways (Elmer et al. 2020). The work of Hove and Dube (2021) as well as Pellini, David, Jordan and Phillips (2020) show that COVID-19 affected students across the world and led to a lockdown of institutions of learning. This was regardless of the level. The effects of COVID-19 on students include the sudden transition from onsite teaching and learning to online teaching and learning (Butnaru et al., 2021), as well as issues revolving around their emotional state of mind (Aristovnik et al., 2020; Tarman, 2020). Emotions on the other hand, comprise a fundamental part of the lives of people and cultures (Ivanova & Dimova-Severinova, 2021). A review of the work of Johnson and Hinton (2019) shows that the emotions of students with regard to learning is a major concern as it can affect their level of success and or failure. For instance, Johnson and Hinton (2019) whilst explaining "affect" as one of the five (5) cultural features which contributes to forming the character-oriented actions and goals of individuals, states that "affect" places value on feelings and is most clearly illustrated in the explicit sharing of emotions in the classroom (Johnson & Hinton, 2019, 65)." According to Ivanova and Dimova-Severinova (2021, 366), "[...] emotions such as interest, joy, contentment, and awe have the capacity to broaden an individual's thought-action repertoires." These suggest the extent to which the emotions of students can affect and possibly determine happenings in class. Conversely, Mudiono (2019) holds the view that "Teachers are the pillars of any educational institute and emotional intelligence of the students really depends upon their attitude and teaching behavior." In other words, the emotions of lecturers and their abilities to control them are paramount. However, in the case of this study, the focus is on the emotions of students. Sequel to the foregoing, the emotional state of mind of students is considered

significant to the teaching and learning environment in any given situation. Thus, this study is targeted at exploring the impacts of COVID-19 on students, with regard to their emotional lives. Sequel to the foregoing, there is thus a need for rurality and emotional lives to be understood, especially as they apply to the context of this study, before proceeding to the section of theoretical framework. This leads to the following sub-heading: conceptualisation of terms.

Conceptualisation of Terms

Rurality

The concept rurality can be described and measured following different dimensions and/or approaches. This includes geographical positioning of a place and people in a given settlement. Following the work of Fandi (2019), rurality is usually characterised by high-rate settlements where the occupations of the people are predominantly related to local natural resources. Fandi (2019) further states that rurality entails settlements of ethnic group(s) of people in (forest) areas and along riverbanks. Rurality also entails issues revolving around small communities (Fandi, 2019), low population density, close contact with nature, limited social interactions, and strong adherence to customs and traditional beliefs (Economic Research Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 2021). According to the Rural Health Information Hub (2020), rural areas are considered as places with high poverty rates, unemployment and poor infrastructure, amongst others. In this study, rurality is used to mean areas that are characterised by less development, untarred roads, poor health facilities, and high illiteracy and unemployment rates.

Emotional lives

Emotional lives of people revolve around their feelings in relation to various subjects and social phenomena (Anthony, 2021). This includes feelings of sadness, feelings of being strong, motivation (Cherry, 2020), sympathy and empathy (Cherry, 2018). On the other hand, Donohue (2021) adds that the students' culture can influence their degree of motivation. According to Herbert (2020), the academic success of students can be ensured when a conducive classroom environment which supports their social and emotional well-being is provided. This implies that the emotional lives of students go a long way in determining their success or failure. In the context of this study, emotional lives imply the feelings of students regarding their academic performance and their ability to study during the crisis caused by COVID-19. The feelings comprise happiness, sadness, anger, joy, pride, hope, and hopelessness.

Emotional Intelligence Theory

The key to success in life has been attributed to emotional intelligence, which is commonly known as "EQ" (Craig, 2021). Success in this regard includes career, academics, business and health. However, for the purpose of this study, the success under consideration includes students' academic success. According to Mayer et al. (2008, cited in Craig 2021), intelligence means the distinctive mental ability of a person to handle and reason about information. In order words, intelligence entails how individuals deal with information. Mayer et al. (2008, cited

in Craig 2021) further state that EQ entails the ability of an individual to carry out precise and perfect mental cognition about emotions. In other words, EQ can be viewed from involving the ability(ies) of a person to enhance thought(s) by putting emotional knowledge and emotions to use. For the purpose of this study, EQ suggests how students' emotions can influence and affect their learning abilities and their academic success. Cherry (2018) holds the view that there are five (5) components of EQ identified as self-awareness, social skills, self-regulation, motivation, and empathy. These components influence the students in this study. The authors have attempted to explain the identified components of EQ and how they relate with the present study.

Self-awareness

This refers to a student's ability to identify and comprehend how their attitudes and actions take effect. It entails keeping track of emotions and taking note of different reactions to emotions and being able to correctly ascertain them. It is linked to being exposed to diverse experiences and learning from social interactions (Cherry, 2018). In relation to this study, students are expected to identify and understand their emotions and to have an idea of how their attitudes, actions and the emotions of others take effect while faced with COVID-19 crisis. Students are supposed to keep record of emotions and different reactions to them. This helps them to understand that how they feel and what they do are related, hence, they are to ensure that the right emotions are displayed.

Social skills

This explains how a person interrelates with others in society. It encompasses understanding one's emotions as well as those of other people in order to interrelate well with them (Cherry, 2018). In other words, a student's inability to understand their emotions and those of others would affect their ability to interrelate well with them. According to Cherry (2018), active listening, leadership, and the development of rapport, verbal and non-verbal communication skills are examples of social skills. All these influences how people interrelate with others in society. This implies that students who lack good social skills may have trouble relating with other students, considering the tense and unrelaxed situations in which people and society find themselves.

Self-regulation

This is a component of EQ which entails a person expressing emotions appropriately. It involves being flexible, ensuring coping with changes, as well as managing conflicts, regardless of the situation. Self-regulation also comprises a person's ability to diffuse difficult or tense situations and, at the same time, be aware that one's actions have an effect on others. Hence, people are to take ownership of their actions (Cherry, 2018). In this study, students are expected to be flexible by adapting to the learning environment in which they find themselves during the time of COVID-19. Students are also expected to understand that their actions have an effect on other people and it has consequences.

Motivation

This can be viewed from two perspectives known as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Cherry, 2020). However, Cherry (2018) views motivation as a component of EQ from an intrinsic perspective. This implies a person who is determined to meet personal goals needs to set goals, instead of being moved by the desire for external rewards like money, recognition, and fame. According to Cherry (2018), a person who is motivated intrinsically tends to flow continuously with whatever activity they are involved with. This implies that external forces or circumstances do not hinder the person from achieving the set goals and from meeting the desired needs. In the context of this study, the implication is that if students are intrinsically motivated, learning can still occur, and good academic performances can be achieved regardless of the occurrence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the rural HEI where such students are studying.

Empathy

This denotes a person's ability to recognise and comprehend the feelings of other people. This component of EQ permits an individual to recognise the emotions of others and respond aptly. It makes people to sense different dynamics that come to play in various social interrelationships (Cherry, 2018). In this study, empathy would denote a student's ability to understand how other students feel during the occurrence of the COVID-19 crisis and how to relate to them.

Following the different components that have been identified in the EQ theory and the envisaged experiences of students in this study, a study of this nature is important. The focus of this study is on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the emotional lives of students in a selected rural South African HEI. The study focuses on how the COVID-19 crisis affected the students' learning abilities as well as their academic performances.

METHOD

A quantitative research method was used. This study's target population was all undergraduate students. The researchers employed a random sampling technique to select respondents for the study from all the faculties of the chosen rural university in this study. Random sampling gave the researchers the opportunity to avoid bias by availing the opportunity to participate in the study to all qualifying respondents. This is in alignment with the work of Kumar (2019) and Creswell (2014). 274 undergraduate students were randomly selected.

Data collection and data analysis

Data was collected using an online questionnaire with a 5-point Likert rating scale ranging from 1 (lowest value) to 5 (highest value) which was sent to students to complete anonymously. The questionnaire composed of two sections. Section A was targeted at collecting information on the demography of respondents. Section B was used to gather information on the emotional life of the respondents in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The researchers did not coerce any student to complete the questionnaire but for those that were initially reluctant to respond

to the online voluntary questionnaire, a follow up was made. The collected data was analysed using descriptive statistics and themes which are discussed in the following section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

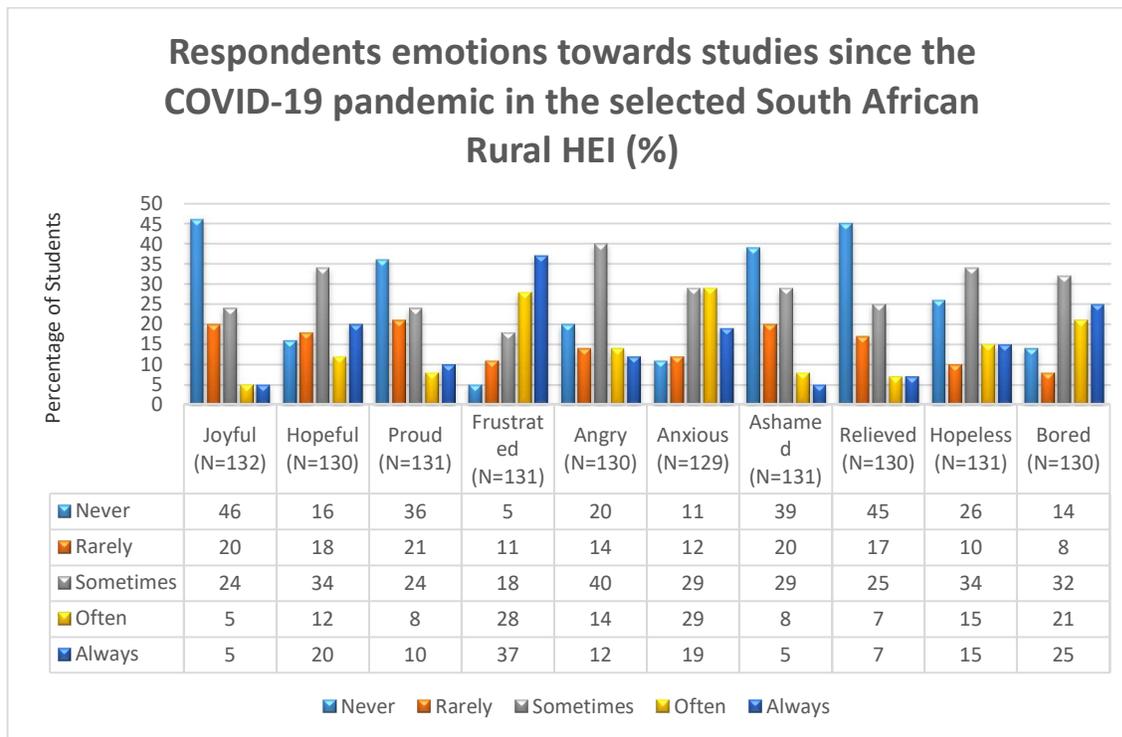
Since no respondent was obliged to supply answers to all the items of the online questionnaire, this affected and led to a disparity in the number of responses in each identified questionnaire item. It is necessary to state that rural areas experience challenges when dealing with internet connectivity as well as electricity. This was envisaged to affect students in the completion of all included questionnaire items. The collected data was coded and analysed using descriptive statistics and themes. Table 1 presents the study's demographic information of respondents.

Table 1. Biographical information of students from the rural HEI

| Gender | Percentages (%) |
|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Male | 42 |
| Female | 57 |
| Gender not disclosed | 1 |
| Field of study | 11 |
| Arts and Humanities | 67 |
| Social Sciences | 10 |
| Applied Sciences | 12 |
| Natural and Life Sciences | |

The results presented in Figure 1 show how the emotions of respondents have been affected negatively in various ways due to COVID-19. The emotions of students considered in this study are joy, hope, pride, frustration, anger, anxiety, shame, relief, hopelessness, and boredom. The results of each of the identified emotions are presented and interpreted hereunder.

Figure 1. Respondents' emotions towards studies since the COVID-19 pandemic at a selected South African Rural HEI



Theme 1: Emotion of Joy

The analysed data in figure 1 shows that 46% of the respondents were never joyful compared to how they used to be prior to COVID-19, 20% were rarely joyful, 24% sometimes joyful, 5% often and 5% always joyful. This shows that most respondents were affected emotionally by COVID-19. The results from figure 1 suggest that the learning abilities of students are likely to be affected. This coincides with the work of Cherry (2018) who, considering the components of EQ, explains how people in this instance feel and what they do are related. In other words, joyful students are likely to perform better academically compared to those who are sad. The IBCCES (2020) also states that depression which can be caused by lack of joy ranks amongst the most common hindrances hampering the learning abilities of students. Learning is expected to be fun, however, following students' lack of joy, such becomes impossible (IBCCES, 2020).

Views by various authors Aristovnik et al. (2020), Praghlapati (2020) and Zhai and Du (2020) show the need for different stakeholders in education to collectively ensure that facilities are put in place to enhance students' well-being which is corroborative of their joy. This implies that students who are emotionally down and sad can become depressed and this will in turn affect their learning abilities, consequently affecting their academic performances negatively.

Theme 2: Emotion of Hope

Results from figure 1 show that 16% of the respondents were never hopeful compared to how they used to be prior to COVID-19, 18% were rarely hopeful, 34% sometimes, 12% often and 20% always. This finding suggests that most respondents were hopeful. The finding agrees with Aristovnik et al. (2020) which shows how students are hopeful about teaching and learning regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, Elmer et al. (2020), Praghlapati (2020) as well as Zhai and Du (2020) suggest that being hopeful contributes to protecting the emotional lives of students. Thus, the need arises for students to be assured following their emotions of hope despite the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, following the work of Händel et al. (2020), the lack of a sense of hope in students can hamper their learning abilities and academic performances. Hence, hope is vital for students' learning.

Theme 3: Emotion of Pride

Figure 1 shows that 36% of the respondents never displayed the emotion of pride, 21% rarely, 24% sometimes, 8% often and 10% always. This finding shows that most respondents never exhibited pride. This could be because pride is not one of the emotional responses expected to be exhibited in a teaching and learning environment. This finding suggests the extent to which learning can occur amongst students without pride, thus corroborating the work of Etherington (2019) who holds the view that pride does not rank as one of the significant emotional responses to be promoted in the classroom. In other words, the emotion of pride does not promote teaching and learning activities.

Theme 4: Emotion of Frustration

Figure 1 shows that 5% of the respondents were never frustrated compared to how they used to be prior to COVID-19, 11% were rarely frustrated, 18% sometimes frustrated, 28% often frustrated and 37% always frustrated. This shows that many of the students were experiencing frustration. This finding corresponds with Aristovnik et al. (2020) which shows that COVID-19 has brought about frustrations for students. This is likely to affect students' learning abilities. This concurs with the works of Brooks et al. (2020), Cao et al. (2020), Liu, Liu and Zhong (2020), Ma and Miller (2020) as well as Perz and Lang (2020) who aver that frustration is one of the factors affecting their emotional health and consequently also students' learning abilities and academic performances. This suggests that when students feel frustrated, their emotional state of mind together with their learning abilities are negatively affected.

Theme 5: Emotion of Anger

Figure 1 shows that 20% of the respondents never displayed emotions of anger due to COVID-19, 14% were rarely angry, 40% sometimes, 14% often and 12% always. This finding shows that the emotion of anger tends to be common amongst students as most of the respondents agreed that they sometimes get angry. This result is in alignment with Elmer et al. (2020) who opine that anger is one of the emotions displayed by students under lockdown. In this regard, the learning abilities of students are likely to be affected. This is in alignment with the findings of

the works of Aristovnik et al. (2020), Cao et al. (2020), Liu, Liu and Zhong (2020), Ma and Miller (2020) as well as Perz and Lang (2020) who state that anger is considered as one of the factors affecting the emotional health, consequently also the learning abilities and academic performances of students. The finding implies that during lockdown based on the COVID-19 pandemic, anger is one of the emotions that is envisaged to be expressed by students and is likely to have a negative impact on their learning abilities as well as their academic performances.

Theme 6: Emotion of Anxiety

The emotion of anxiety during the COVID-19 pandemic as presented in the results shown in figure 1 is a common emotion often displayed amongst the respondents. For instance, the result shows that 11% of the respondents were never anxious, 12% were rarely anxious, 29% of the respondents were sometimes anxious, 29% of the respondents were often anxious and 19% of the respondents were always anxious. This result shows that anxiety is one of the emotions affecting students to some extent during the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that students' learning abilities and academic performances are at risk of being negatively affected due to anxiety. This agrees with the submission of the IBCCES (2020), which shows that anxiety is one of the most common obstacles hampering the learning abilities of students. The IBCCES (2020) further opines that anxiety hinders learning from taking place, thereby making students perform poorly academically and otherwise. This finding therefore suggests that if nothing is done with regard to stabilising the emotion of anxiety in students, their learning abilities and academic performances may be adversely affected.

Theme 7: Emotion of Shame

Figure 1 shows that 39% of the respondents never displayed the emotion of shame during COVID-19, 20% rarely displayed shame, 29% sometimes displayed shame, 8% often displayed the emotion of shame and 5% always displayed the emotion of shame. This finding shows that shame is not a commonly displayed emotion amongst respondents. This finding agrees with Aristovnik et al. (2020) who hold the view that shame is not a commonly displayed emotion for students during the time of COVID-19. Meanwhile, efforts need to be made to ensure that shame is not inclusive of the emotions experienced by students during the period of COVID-19. This is due to the effect that such may have on the students following Walker's (2017) findings which state that shame is capable of preventing students from taking part in educational programmes, thereby hampering their learning abilities.

Theme 8: Emotion of Relief

Figure 1 shows that 45% of the respondents never displayed the emotion of relief during the period of COVID-19, 17% rarely displayed relief, 25% sometimes displayed relief, 7% often displayed the emotion of relief and 7% always displayed relief. This finding suggests that the respondents were mostly in tense situations as most of them agreed that they never displayed relief. This finding agrees with the work of Aristovnik et al. (2020) who opine that relief was not

commonly displayed amongst students for the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests that students are likely to be affected in their learning and academic performances due to the lack of feelings of relief. This concurs with the review of the submissions of the American Psychological Association (2014), and Agolla and Ongori (2009) which suggest that students tend to be more stressed than adults, and such academic stress affects their learning abilities as well as their academic performances. This finding also concurs with the submission of the Accredited Schools Online (2021), which states that students who are in tense situations and who never experience some form of relief are likely to perform poorly academically as their learning abilities would have been negatively affected. This finding implies that the selected rural university students' academic performances are likely to be poor.

Theme 9: Emotion of Hopelessness

Figure 1 shows that 26% of the respondents never displayed hopelessness during COVID-19, 10% rarely displayed hopelessness, 34% sometimes displayed the emotion of hopelessness, 15% often displayed emotion of hopelessness and 15% always displayed hopelessness. This finding suggests that some of the respondents were somewhat hopeless, while others were hopeful. The display of hopelessness is likely to affect the learning abilities of those students who seem to have fallen victim of such. This finding supports Aristovnik et al. (2020) who hold the view that some students remain hopeful despite the circumstances presented by COVID-19. However, the works of Cao et al. (2020), Elmer et al. (2020), Praghlapati (2020) as well as Zhai and Du (2020) suggest that any display of hopelessness by students can affect their emotional lives, consequently their learning abilities and their academic achievements. This implies that because of COVID-19, the learning abilities and academic achievements of hopeless students who do not receive help are likely to be hampered.

Theme 10: Emotion of Boredom

Figure 1 shows that 14% of the respondents never experienced boredom compared to how they used to be prior to COVID-19, 8% rarely experienced boredom, 32% sometimes experienced boredom, 21% often experienced boredom and 25% always experienced boredom. This finding coincides with Aristovnik et al. (2020), which reveals how students experienced boredom during the COVID-19 pandemic. The finding shows that boredom is a relatively major emotion experienced by students following their response to the questionnaire. According to the findings of the works of Aristovnik et al. (2020), Cao et al. (2020), Elmer et al. (2020), Praghlapati (2020) as well as Zhai and Du (2020) boredom can affect the emotional health as well as the learning capabilities of students negatively.

In brief, due to COVID-19, students have experienced various forms of emotions which tend to have impacted their learning abilities as well as academic performances. Following the submission of EQ theorists as explained by Craig (2021) and Chery (2018), students can still afford to learn and have their academic performances boosted. However, such would be

dependent on how they would be able to identify and understand the different components of EQ and how they relate to them, especially with the case of intrinsic motivation.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study explored how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the emotional lives of undergraduate students. This was done using a selected rural university in South Africa. A quantitative research approach was adopted where a closed-ended questionnaire was used for data collection. The collected data was analysed and presented using descriptive statistics and themes. The findings of the study amongst others showed that COVID-19 had impacted the emotional lives of students in various ways. For instance, most of the respondents were no longer as joyful and hopeful as they used to be. In the same vein, many of the students were frustrated, their anger levels were high, and anxiety had set in, all of which are bound to affect their learning abilities negatively and consequently, also their academic performances. Following the findings of the study, it is apparent that if nothing is done to assist students with regard to stabilising their emotional lives through the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and learning which have already been affected, would be even more adversely affected. Consequently, the learning abilities as well as academic performances of students are also likely to be affected negatively.

Sequel to the outcome of the research, the identified recommendations are made:

- The services of counsellors should be engaged in rural universities. This can be done through the Student Affairs Department (SAD) in order to help boost the morale of students and motivate them to come alive again in their studies. This would help to encourage students and make them believe in themselves again, regardless of the negative effect that COVID-19 might have had on them.
- Lecturers should be orientated on how to assist students in being motivated towards wanting to learn and succeed. This can be done through seminars and workshops. In this regard, lecturers would know the right approach to adopt in order to assist students in rural universities, especially considering their peculiarity.
- Orientation programmes on ways of coping amidst the COVID-19 pandemic and adjusting regardless of the challenges posed by the pandemic should be organised for students in rural universities. This would help in orienting them on ways of aligning their minds towards learning and wanting to succeed.
- Students should be exposed to the different components of EQ and be made to allow such find expression in them. This can be done by organising various sections where the components of EQ are discussed with students and they are assisted to imbibe the notions of such. For instance, students can be taught to motivate themselves based on the idea of intrinsic motivation.

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