Perceptions of the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on academics' teaching, and research key performance areas (KPAs)[1]

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic forced education systems and institutions to rethink how they operate. A new normal is emerging, where Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are reshaping how they teach, assess and interact. This exploratory research highlights the need for institutions to embrace the tenets of University 4.0 while raising a number of issues related to how academics' performance is measured, and thus consider if performance management systems are able to adapt in tandem. This paper presents the results of a study that set out to investigate perceptions of academics in a public higher educational institution in South Africa on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their teaching and research key performance areas (KPAs) used in their institution, as these are used to monitor and manage academics. This study adopted a qualitative research approach with purposeful sampling so that a range of views from academics and leadership at this institution were included. The results suggest that where implemented, performance management needs to be realigned to the new approaches to teaching and research adopted by academics since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: Key Performance Area (KPA), teaching, research, performance management

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This paper examines how the COVID-19 pandemic impacted two key performance areas (KPAs), namely the teaching and research KPAs, of academics at a public Higher Educational Institution (HEI) in South Africa. At this HEI, academics' key focus is to teach students and produce knowledge through research. It is understood that academics experienced turbulence brought about by the sudden changes to how they taught and performed research. But what may be lacking is an understanding of how these rapid changes impacted the specific KPAs of academics.

This institution has an Integrated Talent Management (ITM) policy that includes a performance management (PM) process designed to 'assess individual performance for the purposes of talent management' (UKZN, 2011: 5). Academics in the College under investigation, at this HEI, were expected to allocate 45% of their time to teaching [via a teaching workload (TWL) framework (2011)], 40% to research, 10% to community engagement, and 5% to administration. However, an individual's KPAs should also be aligned with the strategic priorities of the individual and department (Wilkinson, 2004). The researchers believe that having a one-size-fits-all approach, with a set of generic KPAs, as listed above, is inappropriate in a profession with such varied activities as academia, and this generic approach

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The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning - Volume 19(1) / 2024
Formerly *The Journal of Independent Teaching and Learning*

33

may not work in the best interests of all academics across disciplines. They also acknowledge that performance management in HEIs is a highly contested phenomenon worldwide.

This HEI's employees' performance is reviewed annually. Individual contracting occurs between the employee and line manager to set the criteria for a given year. A mid-year review should occur, followed by the final review. The HEI considers itself to be a research-led institution, where the productivity of each College academic should be rewarded. Different levels of productivity are expected from academics, dependent on their seniority.

Being a research-led institution (University, 2014), productivity units (PU) are adopted as a means of rating and comparing academics' research productivity. A PU is a 'weighted value of the AU [Author Unit, determined by the Department of HE & Training (DHET)] allocated to different categories of the institution's accredited research outputs' (University, 2014: 5). A lecturer is expected to produce a minimum of 60 PUs per annum. PUs produced determine the share of DHET research funding a researcher will receive into their research cost centre. However, it has been noted that researcher incentive schemes may create unintended consequences, such as predatory or poor-quality publications (Masinde & Coetzee, 2021).

Langa (2015: 92) states 'The academic core consists of the inputs available for the delivery of teaching and research, and the research and teaching outputs the university produces on the basis of those inpts'. In research-led HEIs, this core refers to the activities and deliverables of academics - similar to the KPAs outlined by the HEI under investigation – teaching, supervision of postgraduate students, research and dissemination, with the core outputs of these activities being postgraduates, research and publication of results. In South Africa, if published in an accredited journal or in peer reviewed conference proceedings or books, authors receive a percentage of the subsidy provided to the university by the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) for that research (Macleod, 2010). However, these monetary incentive schemes are absent in many other African countries. Muthama and McKenna (2020: 1) argue that there are ethical questions raised when 'knowledge dissemination is so explicitly linked to financial reward through the payment of commission to academics'.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of metrics to assess academics' performance and productivity has been highlighted as HEIs have become managed more like businesses (Sheikh et al., 2022). In addition, Sheikh et al. (2022) suggest that PM is not neutral and is uniquely experienced by each employee, based on the individual actors involved, the organisational culture, leadership, and the institutional PM process. In a South African context, PM is one aspect of the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) that was introduced to hold educational institutions, and their academics, accountable for the time spent on their responsibilities (Mosoge & Pilane, 2014). These responsibilities are seen as discrete areas of activity or key performance areas (KPAs) (Hull, 2006).

A workload allocation model (WAM) typifies academic work into distinct activities and includes some basis for comparison (Hull, 2006). Academic perceptions of WAMs will depend on whether they are presented as a *fait accompli* or if a degree of flexibility is allowed during implementation (Hull, 2006). TWL system generated values are often reported as seriously underestimating the time required for tasks, or totally omitting activities that are necessary for teaching (Kenny & Fluck, 2022). The researchers acknowledge that there exists a suite of literature which highlights the problems associated with the underestimating and assumptions of genericism of academic work within PM in universities worldwide (Taylor & Baines, 2012; Hughes & Solar, 1992). A review of international practices in PM in Higher Education (HE) indicates a variety of models being applied in managing performance in HE worldwide. As far back as 2008, Walwyn highlighted the significant price tag associated with PM in SA HE, as that

of 'the constraining impact on creativity' (2008: 2). Franzsen (2003) added the lack of academic freedom when being measured quantitatively. Mintz (2022) makes an appeal:

> Our colleges and universities may be impersonal and bureaucratic in the Weberian sense—with their rigid division of labour, clearly established hierarchies, functional specialization and comprehensive sets of formal rules and regulations. But it's essential that their faculty and staff struggle against bureaucratic rationality and infuse our institutions with creativity, empathy, caring and a sense of mission that goes well beyond bringing students to a degree.

Although research metrics for published work are a contested PM area in universities, the literature presents two main metrics, namely a productivity metric and publication impact metric (Carpenter et al., 2014). They have document-level metrics that represent the early stage of impact indicators of the published work (Camilleri, 2021). In addition, organisations and universities are using a Balanced Scorecard (BSC) approach which involves financial and non-financial measures linking the mission, the vision of the future of the organisation, and core values (Camilleri, 2021). Contrary to one-size-fits-all attempts, HEI management systems need to be viewed in relation to the public sector context in which they are located (Busetti and Dente, 2014).

In the area of teaching and learning (T&L), a 'standard unit of work', e.g. presenting a one-hour lecture, forms the basis of comparison for how long the variety of teaching tasks take. Corbera et al. (2020) stress that globally emergency remote teaching (ERT) as triggered by COVID-19 did not generally represent a well-constructed e-learning delivery but was rather an emergency remote mode of T&L as mediated by technology. The resultant delivery often reflected the lack of training for both academics and students, the absence of appropriate pedagogic devices and methodologies, and insufficient resources. It is assumed from the researchers' experience and interaction with colleagues that at the HEI under consideration, most academics felt the tasks required to mount the ERT were unclear and ill-defined. In addition, the assessment of the time needed to complete such tasks and hence an appropriate metric to evaluate their performance would not have been available at this HEI. At the implementation of lockdown restrictions in South Africa, the HEI drafted a Teaching and Learning Project Plan which aimed to prepare students and staff for their online academic engagement. However, practical challenges such as providing access to data and laptops, scheduled power outages (load shedding) and the challenges of implementing higher order, multi-modal assessments via online tools, meant approximately three months of teaching delays occurred. The university formalised principles underpinning the remote learning approach (University, 2022).

At the time of data collection, the Teaching-KPA was informed by an academic's Teaching File (TF) of evidence for the year's teaching. This file consists of the same range of metrics as a full Teaching Portfolio (TP) and bears evidence of the quality of teaching by academics (UKZN, 2016:1).

The experiences of academics during COVID-19 varied dramatically based on their personal circumstances, e.g. whether they lost their jobs (Corbera et al., 2020). Kenny and Fluck (2022) opine that other experiences of academics were challenging as they involved a dismissive view of academic workload allocation as a low-level operational issue, yet it is central to academic effectiveness and research plans. In SA, the number of academics on contract has increased rapidly, with more than 60% of SA academics now employed on contract (CHE Vital Stats, 2022). Acknowledgment of workload allocation at the level it deserves is also central to building trust and should be developed in consultation with academic staff to ensure its credibility and adoption.

During COVID-19, research practice required adjustment, specifically regarding the collection of primary data due to social distancing and lockdown protocols (Corbera et al., 2020). Research activity experiences during COVID-19 were quite individualistic: Like Hedding et al., (2020), some participants at this HEI claimed they could use the opportunity to return to data that were unpublished to complete an article, while others cited that the anxiety, stress, and additional care responsibilities, especially for

35

The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning - Volume 19(1) / 2024
Formerly *The Journal of Independent Teaching and Learning*

women, limited their ability to engage in research when working from home. Some academics indicated that homes were conducive to academic work, while others not. The gendered nature of many families meant that female academics often bore the brunt of homeschooling and such, more extensively than male academics. This varied across countries whereby women in France, Netherlands, and Switzerland experienced more challenges than men while gender differences were not noticed in Sweden and the United Kingdom. Batista et al., (2022) identified a gap in the literature regarding the scientific studies on research professionals and anxiety, depression, stress, fears, and coping strategies during COVID-19. This knowledge would be important in developing intervention plans in the future.

The literature on the T&L and research experiences of academics during the pandemic provides a context to report this study's findings, which indicate that the impact of demanding workloads on academics is highly relevant. Academic work has become more pressured with greater pressure to publish, higher student: lecturer ratios, and greater bureaucratic monitoring requirements. It is suggested that this stress will inevitably impact academics' ability to deliver high-quality teaching and research (Kenny & Fluck, 2022). As in other studies, (McGaughey et al., 2021), academics in our study felt taken advantage of and exploited and complained of long work hours and feeling exhausted. If a university hopes to retain good academics, it needs to consider its working conditions, rewards, and ways to assist with balancing the ongoing dual pressures of ensuring quality teaching as well as research productivity (Sheikh et al., 2022). While a number of these issues were prevalent pre-pandemic, the pandemic has led to a re-evaluation of academic lives and livelihoods. In addition to the changes in academics' roles and responsibilities, it has stimulated academics to revisit their approach to work and their view of its place in their personal lives and a broader societal context. In crises, participants usually grapple with uncertainties. While the COVID-19 pandemic presented challenges, as is the case with other crises, the severity of the pandemic within the university context meant that academics and students had to find practical means to navigate their way through their academic responsibilities and other obligations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative research approach to understand the opinions and views of academics in the selected HEI on academic teaching, and research KPAs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study was exploratory in nature. Ethical clearance approval was obtained from the HEI. The study used purposive sampling where focus groups were held with academics and academic leaders in a selected college at the HEI. Focus groups were considered appropriate because of the ability to further probe responses provided and the potential for generating richer data based on the discussions which spontaneously develop between focus group participants (Kitzinger, 1995). It is important to note that the researchers assumed the role of facilitators in a sense, and not just interviewers.

A pilot study determined whether the questions were clear and whether there were any possible areas of confusion. All academics and the leadership in the selected college were invited to participate in the study.

Seven focus group sessions of 1 to 1.5 hours were conducted in October 2021. These included academics; academic leaders of research, teaching, and academic disciplines; and the senior leadership of the College. The specific HEI follows the College Model where each College is considered to be independent and has its own leadership structures and decision-making powers to enable more efficient operations.

The focus groups allowed the researchers to engage participants in an interactive manner aimed at facilitating dialogue. The questions used in the focus group schedule were developed by the researchers, centred on how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the key performance areas (teaching, research, supervision, administration, community engagement, etc.) of academics in the College. The academic leadership of the College was asked to share perspectives on how the pandemic affected the key

The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning - Volume 19(1) / 2024
Formerly *The Journal of Independent Teaching and Learning*

36

performance areas (teaching, research, supervision, admin, community engagement, etc.) of academics in the College. These produced, as summarised in Table 1, diverse perspectives from the multiple academic stakeholders, namely Academic leaders of research, Academic leaders of disciplines, Academics from the various Schools in the College, and College Leadership (College Deans and Head of School, College Dean of Research, and DVC of the College).

Table 1:
Multiple Academic Stakeholders

Focus groups	Group	No. of participants per group
1	Academic Leaders of Disciplines	3
2	Academic Leaders of Disciplines	4
3	Academics	4
4	Academics	3
5	Academics	4
6	Academic Leaders of Research	4
7	College Leadership	4

The focus group sessions were recorded and thereafter transcribed. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly adhered to. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo to inductively identify themes and sub-themes based on the constructs used in the research questions. The researchers wanted the views and opinions of the participants to emerge, and thus data production was not focused on a particular theoretical framework. The thematic results are presented below.

FINDINGS

The findings of data collected during the pandemic (2021), related to two key KPAs, and are presented in this paper. While the findings indicate that there were challenges relating to the measurement of KPAs and overall PM during the pandemic, participants indicated that they had experienced issues with the PM system before the COVID-19 pandemic. It is evident from this study that the COVID-19 context acted as a profound example of many of the inherent flaws of PM reported in the literature. With regards to PM issues experienced before COVID-19, Kanyangale and Chikandiwa (2022) postulate that there is a scarcity of scholarly work which compares PM before the pandemic to PM during COVID-19. The findings from this study are summarised in the Table 2.

Table 2:
Summary of the Findings

1. T&L KPA	
1.1 Teaching	Online teaching quality
	Online skills development
	Lack of student engagement
	Time consuming
	KPAs not adjusted for online

The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning - Volume 19(1) / 2024
Formerly *The Journal of Independent Teaching and Learning*

37

1.2 Learning	Physical feedback cues absent
	Students physically present, cognitively absent
1.3 Assessment	Reduced options for assessment
	Student outcomes vs actual learning
1.4 Operational challenges	Electricity "load shedding"
	Excessive amounts of admin
	Delays in student feedback on T&L
2. Research KPA	
Research	Research output decreased due to: • Delay in ethical clearance • Time on T&L • Admin • Reduced library access National audit of research programmes The pause in teaching created time for research Pipeline & desktop research continued Pandemic themed research was expedited Need to recognise a broader range of research artefacts for PM
Research supervision	Students dropped out Online meetings • Facilitated feedback • Provided recordings • Saved time and travel costs Greater flexibility for training and meeting times Connectivity challenges Delay in ethical clearance Missed deadlines due to pandemic-related stressors

Theme 1: Teaching, learning, and assessment

The T&L KPAs were affected by seven subthemes that emerged during analysis, namely: the concerns of academics related to maintaining the quality of teaching, learning and assessment provided to students; the challenges of keeping students engaged in the content; concerns about the ability of online assessment to accurately reflect student performance against learning objectives; and the inability of the traditional KPAs to represent the performance of academics in an online space. In addition, operational challenges such as the availability of devices and connectivity, the disruptions caused by load shedding and the excessive amounts of administration required by ERT present severe challenges to staff achieving their performance contracts. and are summarised in Figure 1. While these issues are complex and interrelated, the findings are presented under four sub-headings namely teaching, learning, assessment and operational challenges. Academic staff at all levels saw the quality of teaching, learning, and assessment as the most important aspect of the KPAs within the PM System (University, 2016).

1.1 Teaching

1.2 Questioning the quality of teaching in a non-contact environment is one way in which academics flagged their own sense of the disconnect created by the pandemic. The majority of academics in this study were not familiar with the online environment required to deliver ERT. While they were provided with training and assistance in available online tools, they did not have the necessary time to experiment with and implement an appropriate online pedagogy. Empowering productive teaching staff with technology skills aimed at reducing stress and anxiety related to technology use is important, especially during the implementation of ERT. However, attending this training enforced an additional responsibility when academics were already inundated with changes on multiple fronts due to pandemic-related stressors.

The PM system did not seem to measure new online methods of teaching required in a disrupted environment. The fact is online teaching in its most stripped down ERT form, involves more processes as opposed to the majority of physical teaching methods. The components of online pedagogies used in instructional design may be specific to an academic discipline, the academic level of the student and the nature of the module learning objectives. This form of deliberate transitioning of teaching to an online space differs vastly from ERT which largely focused on video recordings of standard lectures, Zoom- or MSTeam-based discussions and use of Moodle-based assessment tools. While academics may not have articulated these concerns using educational theory terminology, as experts in their disciplines they intrinsically felt they were being forced into a position they would not normally face:

> I don't think I am able to teach as effectively as I could previously. I struggle with how I can get the message across during a consultation which is different from a lecture.

The pandemic required adjustments to how academics approached their teaching which meant their traditional ways of judging the quality of their teaching e.g. observing student reactions, were not available. They mentioned that it was difficult to know if students were grasping the lecture.

> … I think I was affected because the level of engagement from students was very minimal, very, very minimal … for example, some of the students were attending classes, while they were driving. (FG2, R1)

Supporting this:

> *… the teaching philosophy (implemented, and outcomes) achieved in contact sessions was significantly lost to the virtual platform. Without translating information in a contact session the traditional way, I had to learn new ways to interact and keep students engaged. (FG3, R4)

It seemed that quality assurance procedures were not adapted in the sudden move to the online space. There were concerns about whether the KPAs suggested could measure the quality of online teaching, learning and assessment, specifically as they failed to account for the technology-related challenges or the problems of ensuring engagement from students during COVID-19 ERT. Another academic suggested that the virtual mode of delivery was challenging and time-consuming.

> … the technology-related challenges … just getting acclimatized to the new setup you know … convincing the class that this is the new direction that we are taking … the assessment type … trying to learn the new way of doing things. (FG1, R2)

Coupled with the increased investment in online teaching, another academic added that

> … the teaching load has significantly increased. Initially it was due to the creation of content. Now, however, it is mainly due to setting more and more assessments and responding to student grievances. (FG6, R3)

39

The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning - Volume 19(1) / 2024
Formerly *The Journal of Independent Teaching and Learning*

PM processes should not be divorced from personnel development. Academics become conditioned to perform according to the metrics of the PM system. Achieving an "excellent" rating for T&L is complex and the metrics are highly specified, along numerous dimensions of Scholarship of T&L (SoTL). Developing a file or portfolio of evidence is thus in itself time consuming. Mosoge and Pilane (2014), show that COVID-19 unveiled a tension between the measurement of performance and a commitment to developing human capacity and skills where the former took precedence over the latter.

1.2 Learning
Academics were forced to face the possibility that their major aim of supporting learning might not have occurred:

> Most likely the student was technologically in class, physically elsewhere, so learning never happened. (FG3, R2)

Another academic attributed lack of engagement from students to the mode of delivery i.e. they could access recorded content:

> I strongly feel that the quality of teaching and learning has significantly dropped. Students no longer want to engage effectively as recorded lectures are made available to them regardless of class attendance. (FG4, R3)

Resources to support online teaching like laptops and network connectivity during ERT add less value when there are no adequate monitoring systems to assist with tracking and stimulating student engagement in a virtual environment. Subirats et al. (2023) propose the use of gamification strategies to motivate students to engage with the content while enjoying the experience. This would assist academics to monitor time spent on a learning task, which provides evidence in support of a KPA focused on monitoring continuous student progress. However, during ERT academics were forced into crisis management in their teaching and expecting them to deliver nuanced lectures that optimised the use of virtual environments was unrealistic.

If a student does not pay attention in class their ability to grasp the work and succeed in a submission are reduced. It was difficult for academics to realise that students could be virtually present but cognitively absent:

> I had expected that the learning should have been the main activity. So, I was having a wrong impression of reality … there are also other students who were not in class, they would just log in and do other things. But for the purpose of technology and all that they were in your class. And that affected the quality of their submission … (FG6, R1)

1.3 Assessment
The assessment of student learning is considered to provide some insight into the T&L opportunities to which they were exposed. In this ERT context academics were hesitant about the assumptions that could be made based on student performance:

> … even if my students managed to pass the module that I taught, the quality of the marks that they got was questionable … they stated the content and so forth …(but) it was not that interesting. So, generally … I can say this KPA …, did not improve, it was drastically reduced. (FG4, R2)

This suggests the nature of assessment online may not have allowed academics to interrogate student learning in the way they wanted to, and as a result any assumptions being made in terms of the achievement of 'quality teaching' may be flawed.

This created a conundrum for academics: In most cases they did not have the time or skills to transition to online teaching in pedagogically nuanced ways but from a PM perspective they would either be rated according to in-person teaching KPAs or advanced online transitioned practices; neither of which could accurately accommodate their experience.

1.4 Operational challenges

To add to the challenges academics, faced there were operational issues over which they had no control. The disruptions caused by loadshedding, i.e. the scheduled limiting of electricity supply at preset times affected teaching and supervision. PM is effectively implemented if supported by reasonable access to necessary resources, e.g. ERT online systems depended on availability of electricity. The ability to manage ERT demands while academics and students could be offline at different times and for different lengths of times, added an additional challenge to an already demanding environment:

> … loadshedding was very hectic and I was teaching in that load shedding … this week also there's load shedding … it's kind of disrupting the lectures… So, … we have to be tolerant to people. The second thing is like at six o'clock you know when you start teaching and when there is load shedding at six/seven o'clock some are gone and you can't continue the lecture because it would be unfair to the others. (FG6, R3)

This was not accommodated for in the PM system. Essentially, the PM KPAs failed to allow for the complex realities of ERT in the context of load shedding and unequal access to the Internet. While it can be argued that online lectures were recorded for distribution, this required additional administration and management. It also robbed students of the opportunity to be active participants in classroom learning. These additional demands which are unanticipated and usually require immediate attention are not factored into the TWL nor are they sufficiently accommodated for in the 5% administration KPA routinely assigned to academics.

High levels of administration became the 'new work norm' for academic staff and was not quantified in the PM system. There was a significant amount of administration involved in preparing electronic lecture content, coordinating meetings, planning assessments, online quizzes, and dealing with emails and queries among many other related administrative tasks, which ultimately affected the quality of T&L and assessment. While the data suggest dissatisfaction with PM prior to COVID-19 it is unclear whether or not academics felt more positive about their KPAs and PM prior to the pandemic. Overwhelmingly data for this period however illustrate how teaching behaviour is adjusted to suit the metrics of the T&L KPA and the dissatisfaction with how T&L tasks are delimited and the metrics assigned. There are numerous indications that significant amounts of work were not credited in the PM system during the pandemic.

The overwhelming administration load was repeatedly emphasised:

> a huge increase in administration (FG2, R2)

> an increase in teaching not because we're doing more of it, but because we had to now record all our lectures. Administration, which is a key KPA…had to shoot up and when teaching showed up, meeting it, achieving it, it was difficult because of a lot of work. (FG5, R1)

Another academic highlighted,

> I would say, I went above and beyond, and I'm pairing teaching and admin together and coordination because they all kind of interweaved. (FG6, R4)

One of the metrics used to evaluate teaching is student feedback. *Delays in receiving student evaluation feedback*, impacted T&L KPA scores negatively:

The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning - Volume 19(1) / 2024
Formerly *The Journal of Independent Teaching and Learning*

41

I wanted to upload the evaluation. But then when I went to Moodle, the questionnaire was not there. … I raised the question with the Academic Leader for Teaching and Learning … That was also raised … in our board meeting, school board meeting … I approached the QPA... So, students never evaluated the teaching because, by the time the questionnaire was made available students were busy with another module … (FG4, R2)

Theme 2: Research

The general feedback from participants was that their individual research output decreased. The responses from eight academics provided insights into how they felt that their research slowed down. There were delays in obtaining ethical clearance:

> … the ethical clearance office was not attending to those issues as timeously as we would want, so no approvals. (FG6, R1)

Research students also experienced the frustration of ethical clearance that took a very long time, which delayed students' research.:

> … it was terrible because ethical clearance took too long. (FG5, R3)

The decrease in research output was attributed to the additional effort and time academics had to put into embracing the new 'teaching methods' in the online space, coupled with the extra work in handling the transition to the online space and increased administration load. Consistent feedback from academics included that the pandemic '*has slowed down my research activities'.* This is illustrated by:

> … any time previously dedicated to research was taken up by the continually increasing demands of remote working. Continuous keeping up to date with the frequently changing information, training on the various online teaching methods and systems, communicating with my staff and the extended university community, led to increased dedicated time to administration … (rather than research) ... (FG3, R3)

And:

> … inability to focus on research – spending more time on admin, … my research has significantly dropped due to the effects of the pandemic. (FG4, R1)

This concern around deprofessionalising the role of the academic resonates with García-Gallego, Georgantzís, Martín-Montaner, and Pérez-Amaral (2015) who argue that university teachers should not be given administrative duties.

COVID-19 social distancing restrictions limited the number of people in one space; hence libraries were closed. Lack of ready access to physical and virtual library resources also contributed to less research being completed:

> I enjoy working in the library when doing research but now … it has often been closed and the fact that we are not able to search the shelves for ourselves. I have had to rely on what is available online which is not sufficient. (FG6, R3)

Library services had to be accessed online with several challenges experienced related to network, device and data access. This finding is echoed by Dube and Jacobs (2023) who also stress that while chatbots can assist with online library use their ability to assist users is limited. At the HEI under investigation Libguides were developed to help users but did not provide the same range of assistance as the traditional in-person experience.

As the institution has research targets mandated by the DHET, research had to continue, even in the midst of other detractors such as an audit of current research programmes. This put a lot of pressure on

academics who wanted to publish their research, but had to undertake the entire audit process even amidst the pandemic, as described by one academic:

> … the University has requirements with the CHE and DHET in terms of these audits and things so, for example, middle of pandemic last year we had to have the … review of our doctoral programs. That puts the higher degrees colleagues and Schools under huge pressure … we had to provide documentation… The process admittedly had been initiated the year before, during 2019. But the audit still happened during the course of 2020, amidst all of the chaos that we were all experiencing, and we had to do it, it was one of those things where, yes, we know that you're struggling, but it has to be done, and so we did it. (FG5, R1)

The combination of national quality assurance processes and internal PM processes result in great pressure on academics in terms of compliance – and leaves little space for creative engagement with research for knowledge creation and dissemination.

However, another academic suggested transitioning research online was relatively seamless it was finding focused time for research that was difficult:

> … I have found it relatively easy to transition researching fully online as most of my work is desktop based. The frustration has been that other demands on my time (teaching, admin, and the additional household burdens like home-schooling) have made it very hard to find enough time to work on my own research. (FG2, R3)

A few respondents indicated no change in their research output, as 'work was in the pipeline' while three academics increased their research output. One academic stated:

> I was able to focus on my research during the initial stages as the university was closed for a prolonged period of time while we were deciding how to approach the pandemic. (FG3, R4)

These findings reveal that the delays in establishing new ways of addressing T&L methods provided an opportunity that some academics could use to their research advantage.

Another opportunity capitalised on was the ability to research themes related to the pandemic which were topical and thus expedited by publishers:

> … as I shift focus and published on themes that relate to the pandemic. Publishers were quick to provide feedback as they sought to release work of relevance. (FG4, R3)

This suggests that because research has been so wholly commodified by the PM system to entail measurable outputs, rather than knowledge dissemination, academics were quick to 'play the game'.

The DHET does not consider other, less formal forms of research output directed at the general population. Their funding model is based on peer reviewed output such as peer reviewed journal publications which is the internationally accepted gold standard for quality research scholarship. Other forms of respected research artefacts in the public domain are not credited: 'The Conversation' or NGO research reports.

> ...if … they've contributed to things like 'The Conversation' or sent in a few newspaper articles or produced some reports for an NGO. They're probably (a) being read by 10 times more people and (b) making much more difference … particularly in a kind of developing context; and yet there is no recognition for that whatsoever. You can put it in your comments in the performance management thing, but it all boils down to those numbers. Again, a 'one size fits all'. (FG5, R3)

43

While these broader-based publications can be converted into peer-reviewed works it is not clear why a metric is not created for PM purposes to recognise these artefacts as progress towards formally recognised publications.

Research supervision was affected by lower engagement levels by students for the majority of the sample. Physical meetings were no longer an option, which led to a 'lack of meetings with students'. There is difficulty in reading the moods and attitudes of students using remote or virtual platforms. Online supervision may compromise the compassion, empathy, and understanding of the student by the supervisor when there is distant separation (Hendrickse, 2022). Some students had to suspend their studies or drop out. This was supported by another academic who also faced difficulties with 'students who just disappeared – for the first time my output of student supervision will sharply decline'.

However, there were some benefits of online supervision as 'the online space has allowed for ease of meeting and feedback, and so that is a pro that may help in future times too'. Another advantage of online supervision is that supervision meetings on Zoom or Microsoft Teams are recorded which assists students to revisit the content and make sure they have engaged with all points of discussion. The online sessions saved time and money students would have spent travelling to meet supervisors.

Additionally, some supervisors experienced an improved ability to arrange to meet and train research students because they (and their students) were not limited by formal work hours. There may be reduced engagement with supervisors due to fewer informal meetings such as during coffee break meetings (Pyhältö, Tikkanen & Anttila, 2023).

> ... time could be dedicated to supervision, the related supervision training, and following up with students. Setting up times to meet improved as it was no longer dependent on availability solely based on work hours. (FG7, R3)

However, the quality of the virtual supervision experience was very variable due to connectivity issues:

> Technology is a bit of a problem, the connectivity, especially, even if you're using a router, it says it's not connected. Load shedding is something and the router is also something. (FG6, R2)

Another academic added that

> ...you really don't get to meet your student face to face…at times when the technology's down, they can't connect on [the] Zoom ... then you have to reschedule the meeting. (FG3, R1)

It was argued that students were *unable to meet deadlines* due to social isolation, financial pressure, anxiety and overall pandemic strain. Participants empathised with students saying:

> ... the pandemic has put significant strain on my students who are struggling to meet deadlines. (FG4, R1)

One participant shared that

> their [students'] loss of connection to peers and support systems like the library and stress from financial pressure, illness and worry have had a HUGE impact on their ability to focus and engage critically with difficult subjects. Many of my students report loss of motivation from depression and high anxiety. Many are missing deadlines. (FG1, R3)

The mental health impacts on academics and students alike were enormous and the inability of the institution to recognise this and remove the PM pressure from staff had senior academics reeling with the senselessness of the situation:

The lack of empathy, … was crystallized by the insistence that performance management was still done in exactly the same way as it had been previously … and the other aspect of that is that we were being told verbally what a great job we'd been doing, … Yet on the other hand, they're slapping us on the back of the head with poor performance management scores, … I was flabbergasted when they didn't ditch PM for 2020. Just like, "forget it guys let's just regroup in 2021" but no, no, no, they had to carry on. (FG2, R3)

DISCUSSION

The aspects related to teaching, learning and assessment were grouped into a single theme, as they are all interrelated. The study results of Kulikowski, Przytula and Sulkowski (2021) indicate that 'pandemic-forced e-learning' may have led to unintended consequences for academic teachers. There was great concern about the quality of the teaching and assessment processes, especially since quality assurance procedures were not adapted in the sudden move to the online space. It was critical for HEIs to strengthen monitoring of quality teaching and learning as suggested by Gamage et al. (2020) and Barrot et al. (2021) because the adjustment to the teaching and learning methods had to change due to the introduction of ERT during COVID-19. Student learning was difficult to measure, with minimal student engagement while online, and the move to remote assessment without proctoring, coupled with continuous assessment. The lack of boundaries and designated working hours while working virtually caused academics to experience burnout and fatigue. Filho et al. (2021) argue for the need for support mechanisms to help academics to meet the demands of their teaching, as well as home-schooling demands that may exist. Coupled with this, was the additional administrative burden that most participants felt was 'dumped' onto them. In the South African context, in addition to home factors, social context, and the stress of a global pandemic, the negative impact of load shedding and load reduction made teaching and learning difficult.

The research KPA was impacted firstly by a general decrease in research output attributed to higher teaching and administration, as well as the social effects of the pandemic as suggested by Masinde and Coetzee (2021). Filho et al. (2021) point to the various tasks academics had to focus on, including administration and research. Postgraduate supervision was also hindered, as student engagement levels were far lower than in the face-to-face environment. Additionally, administrative processes, like obtaining ethical clearance, had long delays; hence students were unable to progress further. The overall quality of the supervision and research experience decreased in the online space. Access to institutional resources through virtual spaces was challenging. Not all academics were able to convert their research focus to include research on the pandemic, and this resulted in them being left behind regarding the necessary internal and external support as argued by Gamage et al. (2020). It was not easy for institutions to provide support remotely to students and academics during COVID-19 because of the physical and virtual distance created by social isolation that prevented teachers and supervisors from observing other behaviours and emotions. Publication timelines with journals were also impacted by the pandemic. According to Sevryugina and Dicks (2022: 565) 'medians for peer-review and production stage delays were 66 and 15 days, respectively, and the entire conversion process from a preprint to its peer-reviewed journal article version took 109.5 days'. The 'one-size-fits-all' way of measuring research output, as explained earlier, was also criticized.

The learning environment at home and the learning resources accessed by students had a significant impact on the quality of learning during the pandemic, particularly for those from developing regions (Barrot, Llenares & Del Rosario, 2021). In terms of internal and external support to academics and students in HEIs, Gamage et al. (2020: 8) focus on the importance of Quality Assurance of supervision, and T&L. They define internal quality assurance (QA) as 'internal processes that an institution has developed in order to monitor and improve the quality of their student's learning experience and ensure

achievement of established goals, objectives and standards'. In agreement with Barrot et al. (2021), they reiterate that important parts of QA, such as monitoring of learning and the student experience; and provision of feedback, was compromised. Internal quality assurance is supported by periodic external reviews. It is important that the two processes be harmonized to maximise the benefits to HEIs. The changes to remote working also challenged the traditional methods of external reviews conducted by most Quality Assurance Agencies (QAA) (Hou, Lu & Hill (202). Factors which were considered include adherence to integrity, ensuring equity and access, enhancing the role of partnerships and sharing good practices, and the agility to adapt to unprecedented crises (Hou, Lu & Hill (202).

Research produced through COVID-19 experiences came as a wake-up call to other research institutions to widen their research scope to other disasters like earthquakes and the looming Climate Change disaster. These similarities could include loss of teaching and learning time due to 'school disruptions, inequitable impacts among low-income and minority families, resource scarcity, declines in mental health, and vast economic impacts, to name a few' (Newsome, Newsome & Miller 2023: 20).

Filho et al. (2021: 14) opine:

> … there is a new normal emerging, where teaching, learning, and knowledge creation are unfolding in the context of social interactions (itself being reshaped) rather than in organisational contexts. As these new ways of working persist, civic society, policymakers, and HE practitioners need to reimagine how educational strategies might better support equality, the creation of knowledge, and the search for innovative ways of democratising work patterns and modes of learning, without the social cost of isolation. These seemingly divergent demands call for a broader integration of the university's role within society, in turn requiring substantial changes to the existing HE ecosystem.

The measurement of research output as determined by DHET for all publicly funded South African universities is used to develop a generic metric on the research management system. As outlined earlier KPAs are being driven by what is funded in public universities in the national system and not by the valuing of knowledge, the desire for impactful knowledge, or other aspects of the academic project.

In the context of this study, the emphasis of PM during ERT triggered by COVID-19 should have been on the facilitation of 'temporary' organisational change. There are six types of organisational change, namely, strategic-, people-centred-, structural-, technological-, unplanned-, and remedial change. This context required a temporary organisational change with a focus on an unplanned and remedial change to urgently plan for and support high levels of administration, in addition to navigating the new mode of teaching and assessment. This should include a process whereby KPAs are 'temporarily' amended, and academics supported by resources that makes it possible to be productive in a disrupted teaching and learning space. The comments by academics show this did not occur. However, Nyamunda (2021) opines that there is a lack of clarity on whether organisations must consider these changes to be temporary or permanent, which provides a different perspective to the changes experienced.

CONCLUSION

Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021: 133) argue that 'The COVID-19 pandemic has created the largest disruption of education systems in human history'. The unprecedented disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic affected many academic processes beginning with the T&L methods which needed to be aligned to the lockdown restrictions. Research methods, supervision approaches, and QA processes had to change when introducing online learning and virtual supervision of research. These processes influenced PM with respect to academic workload and research production. They also affected the concentration of students during lecture times thus affecting their performance which subsequently impacted the T&L metrics used in PM.

The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning - Volume 19(1) / 2024
Formerly *The Journal of Independent Teaching and Learning*

46

As discussed in the findings, Hou, Lu & Hill (202) outline eight principles of QA as an attempt to streamline QA to cover essential elements of quality education. The QA would include components that inform the PM of academic workers and influence student outcomes. Future studies must improve these processes after reviewing the impact of these principles because COVID-19 processes prevented the conducting of site visits which is one of the essentials of QA. COVID-19 may not be the last disaster, hence, Nyamunda (2021) suggests that the adoption of online learning, improvements in academic PM, and quality QA could be permanently used by HEIs. Given the likelihood of the COVID-19 problems coming back as a result of climate change related extreme events, there is a need to update teaching and learning methods and consider making online learning the future method in readiness for climate change disasters (Newsome, Newsome & Miller, 2023).

The researchers acknowledge that the results of the study are limited to the views of a few academics and leadership at the selected institution; thus, they cannot be generalised to other Colleges within the institution or other HEIs in general. Furthermore, to develop a holistic understanding, the perspectives of other stakeholders, academics, leadership, administrators, and students should be explored in future research. Another focus of interest in future research could be on how academics perceive their work and KPAs in a post-pandemic world, especially given that most HEIs are returning to face-to-face teaching and working.

In conclusion, this paper highlights the perceptions of academics regarding the inability of the PM system at the selected HEI to suitably address the challenges and embrace the opportunities for positive change brought about by the pandemic. This echoes many of the concerns in the literature arguing that rigid PM systems are not appropriate for dynamic work environments like academia.

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47

The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning - Volume 19(1) / 2024
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48

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49

The Independent Journal of Teaching and Learning - Volume 19(1) / 2024
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