

COVID-19 and National University of Lesotho: Experiences and Challenges

BY

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ABSTRACT

The declaration of the Corona virus or COVID-19 as a global pandemic by the United Nations World Health Organisation in February, 2020 brought a sudden halt to education, interalia, especially institutions of higher learning which were forced to close down instantly all over the World. Consequently, since the 19th March, 2020 the National University of Lesotho (NUL) has been forced to close down the university and all its core business especially face to face teaching and learning and later switch suddenly to the use of online teaching and learning as the only mode. This study presents the experience of the National University of Lesotho with efforts to try to cope with its core business of teaching and learning within the constraints imposed by COVID-19; to this end its objective is to assess these coping strategies in order to inform the NUL, and other institutions of what its successes and challenges have been so as to make a better forward strategy mapping. The study used secondary data from the internet mainly and primary data collected from a sample of 50 NUL students identified through purposive and snowball sampling techniques A questionnaire was used and data analysed for making this paper. The paper is in six sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two is a global overview of the impacts of COVID-19 on higher education. Section three is a national glimpse of Lesotho and COVID-19. Section four is a descriptive experience of NUL with COVID-19. Section five presents the impacts of COVID-19 on delivering higher education by the NUL and an interrogation of strategies used to cope with it in terms of continuing with its core business.

Keywords: National University of Lesotho; COVID- 19; Higher Education; Lesotho.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused universities worldwide to close down their core business of teaching, research and community work in order to guarantee the safety of their students and staff from its infection. While in the beginning the world, countries and universities had thought that COVID- 19 would, like its preceding pandemics, dissipate shortly either by itself through self displacing diffusion and /or through scientific discovery of its medical cure; and they would resume business as before, the reality is that COVID- 19 has come to stay. This is so because it has been present for more than six months now since December, 2019 when it was first reported in Wuhan city in China. Since then it continues to have devastating impacts on the global and national economic, social and political governances. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to explore the impacts of COVID- 19 on the delivery of social services with specific focus on higher education. The National University of Lesotho (NUL) is used as a case study through the interrogation of its experiences which are highlighted to share with other institutions of higher education in the search for coping strategies with which to mitigate the impacts of COVID- 19 on their core business. This done through the use of mixed methodologies that involve the use of critical analysis, secondary data, qualitative interviews with the Deans of the seven NUL faculties, and quantitative analysis of interviews of 50 NUL Sample Students done in July, 2020 to give indicative trends in the perceptions of students on the NUL and COVID-19 interface.

2. COVID-19 and Higher Education: A Global Snapshot

The arrival of COVID-19 in China around December, 2019 and its rapid spread to the rest of the World within three months to become declared as a world pandemic by the WHO in February, 2020 has had tremendous impacts to contemporary life characterised by democracy and freedom of choices before then to one in which all the economic, social, political as well as technological shut and lockdowns had to be instituted spontaneously to avoid human tragedy and calamity. While there is much controversy about the origin and causes of the corona virus, the issue of direct relevance to this paper is its impacts with specific reference to higher education. There is emerging consensus that COVID-19 has caused higher education institutions to close down suddenly and institute online teaching to continue academic business with a lot of challenges that this mode is encountering especially in poorly resourced universities and countries due to lack of sufficient and efficient resources (Bao, 2020; Crawford et.al, 2020). Thus writing on this issue in the case of South Africa, Mhlanga and Moloji (2020: 9) conclude that:

“In reality, we are of the view that the COVID-19 has transformed the mode of teaching in the education sector. Tertiary institutions are now intensifying their offering towards providing learning on-line using YouTube, Microsoft teams, Zoom, Skype, WhatsApp, and DSTv. This study shows that COVID-19 has had great influence to the education sector to use various 4IR tools.”

Crawford et al. (2020: 2) conducted a study of 20 countries across the world from some developed countries, namely, The United States of America, Britain, Ireland, Germany, Italy and Australia on

the one hand; and some developing countries, namely, South Africa, Nigeria, Egypt, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Brazil, Chile, India, Indonesia, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, South Korea and Singapore on the other hand, in relation to how they responded to COVID-19 and made coping strategies for in their higher education institutions. They found that firstly, in both developed and developing countries some instituted national closures of all universities while others left the decision to close down to be taken and done by individual universities in the country. Secondly, they found that in developed countries there was an immediate switch from fact to face instruction to online instruction after closures. While in poor countries this switch took sometime before it was done in the few that did so. Thirdly, there was also the extension of short breaks in those universities which were on the break as a delay strategy while their management sought ways to cope with the sudden COVID-19 presence and its fatal impacts on health. However, for most universities this extension was not accompanied by immediate instructional support to students while on this extended breaks. Fourthly, the shift from face to face teaching to online teaching is faced with many challenges such as availability of digital infrastructure like ownership of computers among staff and students, network reception by staff and students and network capacity within the institutions which is glutted by the volume of users beyond its capacity thus affecting its efficiency. Fifthly is the quality of the online teaching itself in respect of pedagogical principles such as the expected interactions between teachers and students which is done face to face under blended teaching or traditional teaching; but has been replaced by use of remote control online interactions through Chat room, Chalkboard, and Moodle and so on. The issue is how effective are these in learning? The other challenge arises from the issue of online assessments and their effectiveness in assessing student performance within a context where the assessor cannot control the assessment environment of the assessed learners, thus unintentionally allowing for unintended group work, consultation of other digital aids, and so on? (Crawford et al., 2020: 9-11). In other cases research and conduct and dissemination of findings via conferences and symposia were also suspended in line with social distancing (Mena and Hilhorst, 2020; Vincent and Visser, 2020).

With specific reference to South Africa, Harding and Brodie (2020) argue that lack of some conducive learning environment and resources such as electricity connectivity, its reliable supply, digital network connectivity, devices like computers, smartphones, and data hinder access to online learning by some learners. Therefore in order to be effective and inclusive, the online teaching that universities have resorted to due to COVID-19 must ensure that all students, including those from highly economically disadvantaged groups which they call the “missing middle” are afforded access to connectivity, digital devices and data, interalia, to be able to take part in the online teaching and learning too. Otherwise in the absence of these, the online method has aggravated the class divide among learners as those without become forced to cancel their registrations from or fail courses in their university learning. These viewpoints are also corroborated as occurring in other countries as well (Sahu, 2020).

In the case of China, with specific reference to the experience of Peking University, Bao (2020) argues that this university closed and found itself forced to abandon the face to face mode and instantly resort to delivering online teaching and learning to continue its core business. Bao (2020: 114-115) further advises that since the online teaching mode faced many challenges, in order to improve online teaching effectiveness universities must use the experiences of the Peking University by adopting some of its coping strategies such as, interalia, first, to make contingency plans for the digital/ computer networks serving the university to expand the bandwidth and capacity to accommodate accelerated rate of users so as to avoid overload and malfunctions which would stall online educational delivery. The second strategy she advocates is that universities should encourage staff to break down their online teaching material into several lecture size pieces so as to ease the academic digestive systems of students instead of large chunks deliveries per topic. Thirdly, universities must ensure that the use of voice is factored by staff into their online lectures, and speak slowly and audibly in order to simulate face to face in class lecturing for easy understanding by students. Fourthly, in cases where there are teaching or students assistants, lecturers should make sure these are well trained and familiarised with the online teaching and learning methods in order for them to use them effectively in areas in which they may be expected to help the substantive lecturer. Fifthly, lecturers and departments must try to triangulate the learning and assessment materials in a manner that maximises students' off class learning via online to minimise the class fatigue and absenteeism syndromes because of excessive freedom to learn under this learning environment. Lastly, students must be submitted to pre-class self learning via being send reading materials to read and submit short notes on each reading to the lecturer before the online class which would then be adjusted to the level that the students have shown in their understanding of the re-class readings.

3. COVID-19 in Lesotho: A National Précis.

Lesotho is the last country in Africa that announced the first COVID-19 infection in the country on 13th May, 2020 of a person who was a Mosotho student from Saudi Arabia in the Middle East who had been repatriated back to Lesotho during the end of semester in his university of study there (Shaban, 2020). This person has been reported to have recovered already from those early symptoms of the infection after some isolation treatment. The second infected person was reported on 23rd May, 2020 as a Mosotho returning unofficially into Lesotho through informal cross border places in Quthing district bordering Lesotho and the Eastern Cape province of South Africa where he had been working. This was followed by the report of two more infected persons who entered through informal pints in Quthing and Qacha's nek, making a total of four infected persons so far (Lesotho TV, 2020). Lesotho first declared a nationwide call for the nation to heed the presence of COVID-19 in February shortly after the WHO declared it a global pandemic. Lesotho declared an emergency on COVID- 19 on 18th March, 2020. It followed this up with a call for a national closure of all schools including tertiary institutions from the 18th March, 2020 up to 17th April, 2020 when they would reopen depending on circumstances and an announcement that would be made by the

Government and Ministry of Education and training then. Then the Government announced a lockdown from 29th March, 2020 to 21st April, 2020 for three weeks, during which everybody was forced to be indoors, and all activities closed business except for selected businesses offering basic goods and services in accordance with a special COVID-19 law that was made to enforce compliance assisted by the police and the military deployed all over the country (Lesotho Government, 2020). The lockdown was extended up to the 5th May, 2020 after which it was relaxed to extend business hours, increase public transport hours, release movement for special reasons like funerals, basic public services and tertiary schools, inter alia. Since then there has been confusion on whether lockdown exists or not as the parliament and cabinet became over concerned with removing Prime Minister Tom Thabane and changing his government, all of which succeeded on 20th May, 2020 when a new government was sworn in by the King with Dr Moeketsi Majoro as the new Prime Minister. Since then there has been a lot of confusion on national governance issues as the new government tries to get settled, meanwhile COVID-19 has increased from 1 to 17 infected persons, 2 of whom are recoveries, 15 are being treated, while there are no fatalities yet. The overall management of COVID-19 issues is done by the Ministry of Health together with a cabinet subcommittee using a technically integrated team called the COVID-19 Command team whose national centre is located at the National Convention Centre in Maseru. This operates as the headquarters with decentralised units operating in each of the 10 districts to oversee and monitor COVID-19 issues in their respective districts.

Since the incoming of the new Government COVID-19 cases have tremendously increased nationwide to a high of 1,424 infected; of which 637 are active and 754 have recovered, while there have been 33 deaths reported officially. The management of COVID-19 has also changed to become known as the National COVID-19 Secretariat (NACOSEC) which releases reports weekly and Lesotho has been graded as first orange in June-July indicating high risk and increase; and gone down to a more optimistic purple colour in August, 2020 under which businesses and Higher education institutions allowed to resume business with WHO conditions observed..

4. The National University of Lesotho's Response to COVID-19: A Temporal Overview.

The National University of Lesotho (NUL) operates on an academic calendar in which the academic year starts in July and ends at the end of June in the following year. This system is a leftover from the British colonial system of education which has not been adjusted to run along the normal January to December calendar year system. Therefore the arrival of the call to heed COVID-19 as a global pandemic by the United Nations's World Health Organisation in the World, Lesotho included, in March, 2020 coincided with the period when the NUL students were on the short break of the second semester which started on the 16th March, 2020 and was due to end on the 20th March, 2020 after which lectures were scheduled to resume on 23rd March, 2020.

On the 18th March, 2020 the Ministry of Education in Lesotho issued a circular in which it directed all educational institutions at primary, secondary and tertiary levels to close immediately from the

19th March, 2020 until the 17th April, 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2020) in order to control the spread of COVID-19 in the country. In response to this directive the management of the NUL called a Senate Executive meeting on the morning of the 19th March, 2020 in which it resolved to close down the NUL with immediate effect from the 19th March, 2020 until the 17th April, 2020 so as to comply with the directive by the Ministry of Education and Training. The first circular released on the same date by the NUL management to this effect also asked students who were away and off campus to remain wherever they were until the 18th to 19th April, 2020 when they would be allowed to enter campus so as to resume lectures on the 20th April, 2020. Those who were on campus were asked to go home. It further directed teaching and support staff to continue to report on duty, and adhere to measures recommended for safety in the country. Moreover, it stated that the NUL was actively preparing a COVID-19 response strategy for adoption and use within all the five NUL campuses in the country. Postgraduate students were also alerted that they were to continue with their research and studies using online communications via the THUTO which is the NUL intranet learning management system (NUL, 2020a).

On the 26th March, 2020 the NUL management released a second circular to NUL staff and students that informed them that management was aware of an announcement of the 25th March, 2020 issued by the Government through the Prime Minister that informed all the nation that as a response to prevention of the COVID-19 outbreak with effect from the 29th March, 2020 the entire country would come under lockdown during which everybody had to stay indoors at home and hardly go out to get basic essentials like food, interalia. The circular said the NUL management had met to discuss the implications of this lockdown for NUL and agreed that NUL had to close down all operations in compliance for the specified period of from the 29th March, 2020 until the 21st April, 2020. Therefore the NUL would close at 3.00 pm on the 26th March, 2020 and both staff and students were to stay at home until the end of the national lockdown period (NUL, 2020b).

On the 10th April, 2020, the NUL management released the third circular which informed staff and students that management had met on the 7th April, 2020 to discuss the implications of the lockdown on NUL teaching and learning, and taken a decision that all undergraduate and postgraduate teaching and learning must resume under lockdown through online using the THUTO learning management system as from the 16th April, 2020 onwards. The circular then went on to assure all that NUL was working with the Ministry of Education and Training and other partners especially the communication service providers such as the Vodacom Lesotho (VCL) and Econet Telecom Lesotho (ETL) to help grant zero-rated access by NUL staff and students to learning via the internet through THUTO learning management system so that they could access learning materials free of charge from their smartphones, laptops, desktops and tablets. The circular further cautioned that laboratory based learning would not be possible to effect through this online THUTO learning management system Lecturers were instructed to start to communicate with and provide teaching to the students in their courses henceforth (NUL, 2020c).

On the 16th April, 2020 the NUL management released a fourth circular in which it stated that it was aware that although it had directed that teaching and learning must continue online during the lockdown this was dependent on free access to internet for this purpose, therefore it had urged the service providers who are VCL and ETL to speed up their promise of zero-rated access to which request they had responded this would be effective from the 17th April, 2020 to ease the challenge of poor access due to charges (NUL, 2020d).

On the 28th April, 2020 the NUL management released a fifth circular in which it asked students who wanted to come to NUL campus to collect their learning materials especially the laptops to enable access to online teaching and learning to come to campus and collect them from the 29th April, 2020 up to the 1st May, 2020. Students were made aware that they would be subjected to national and NUL COVID-19 control measures of social distancing, wearing masks, sanitisation of hands; they would be expected to abide by the national lockdown travel controls, and would not be allowed to stay on campus nor be allowed to spend more than a short time just to pick their staff on and go out of campus (NUL, 2020e).

On the same date of 28th April, 2020 the NUL management released the sixth circular to inform staff and students of the NUL that after some time of none start the zero-rated access to THUTO would eventually be effective from Econet Telecom service provider alone using their ETL SIM card from the 30th April, 2020 for all THUTO related teaching and learning plus access to the NUL library for some zero-rated educational websites (NUL, 2020f).

On the 3rd May, 2020 NUL management released the seventh circular in which it posted a list of zero-rated academic websites for access by staff and students to ease their online teaching and learning process through and approved by Econet Telecom using ETL SIM card only (NUL, 2020g).

On the 8th May, 2020 NUL management released an eighth circular in which it informed staff that following the easing of the second phase of the national lockdown on the 5th May, 2020 the NUL management had a meeting to study its implications for NUL, and noted that the Government had issued a directive that as of the 5th May, 2020 onwards tertiary institutions could resume classes to minimise negative impacts on education but must strictly adhere to national COVID-19 regulations and preventive practices. Therefore NUL management had decided and calling upon its entire staff to report to work as of the 11th May, 2020 with adherence to COVID-19 rules (NUL, 2020h). It advised that students would remain at home and continue with online learning, with the exception of special cases that shall be recommended by the Dean of Students to be allowed back onto campus from which they will effect their online studies better than from their homes where network access might have been a problem. Lecturers would continue with online teaching. It further instructed Deans of faculties and Directors of Institutes to decide upon and communicate to their students on how assessments would be done to complete the academic year. It ended by indicating that a revised almanac of NUL events would be released soon showing the way forward (NUL, 2020h).

On the 16th May, 2020 NUL management released the ninth circular which advised the staff and students of the revised almanac of events made by the Senate Executive in its meeting of the same date on how to complete the academic year after the shut down due to COVID-19. As it stands the online lectures end on 29th May, 2020; assessments which are not to be done through examinations due to challenges of lack of enough space to allow social distancing to have students to come to campus to write them, but other forms chosen by faculties ranging from assignments and tests done from the 1st to 14th June, 2020. While the NUL academic year is due to end with its major academic activities on 26th July, 2020 when supplementary examinations assessments would be completed. It is prudent to remark that this is normally the date around which first year students start their orientation process of the new academic year (NUL, 2020i).

Lastly on the 20th May, 2020 NUL management issued the 10th circular in which it advised staff and students that zero-rated access to THUTO learning management system materials and that on other academic websites was now available on the Vodacom Lesotho service network, and they could also use it to speed up the completion of online teaching and learning in the run up to its end on the 29th May, 2020 (NUL, 2020j).

5. The Experiences of the National University of Lesotho on COVID-19: An Interrogation of Some Impacts and Challenges.

In this section critical analysis results are presented together with the views of the Deans and those of the interviewed NUL Sample Students which are flagged at relevant points in the discussion to give indicative pointers to students' views on the issues discussed in this section. The brief demographic profile of these interviewees was as presented in Figures 1, 2, and 3.

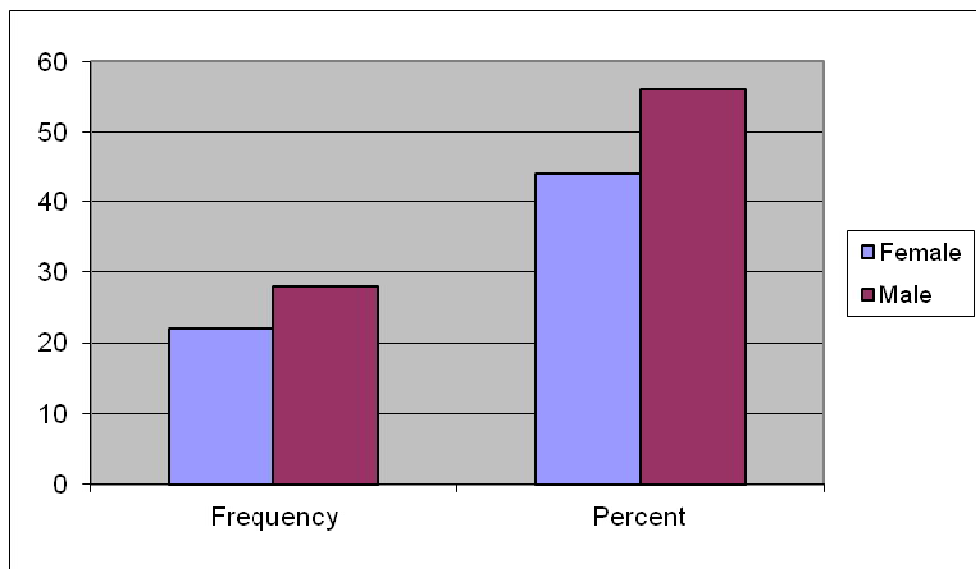


Figure 1: Gender Profile of the NUL Sample Students Interviewed

The first demographic characteristic is that Figure 1 shows that, 56 percent of the interviewees were male students; while 44 percent were female students.

The second demographic characteristic which is year of study of the interviewees is presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Year of Study of the NUL Sample Students Interviewed

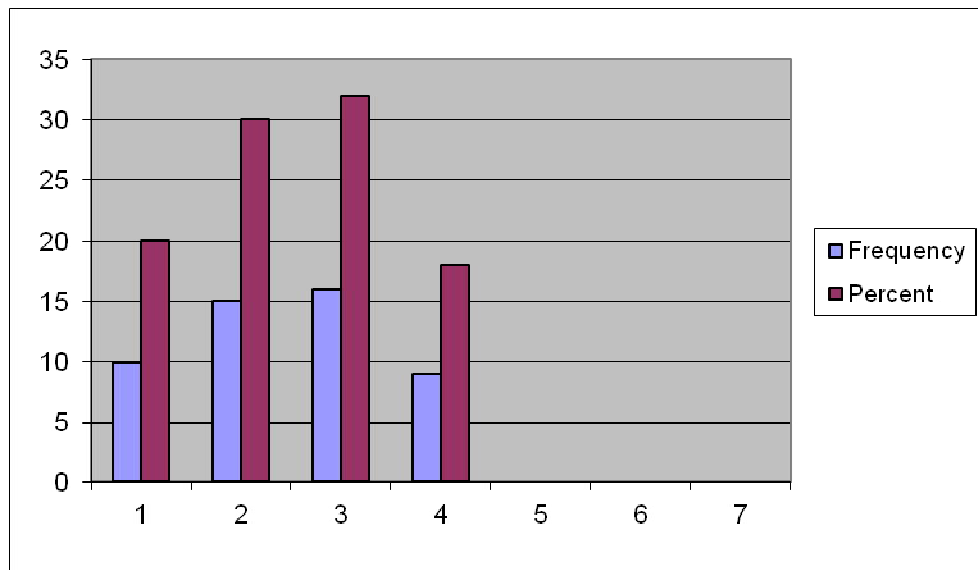


Figure 2 shows that the majority, 32 percent, of the students were in the third year followed by 30 percent in the second year of study.

The last demographic characteristic is in relation to programme of study as depicted in Figure 3.

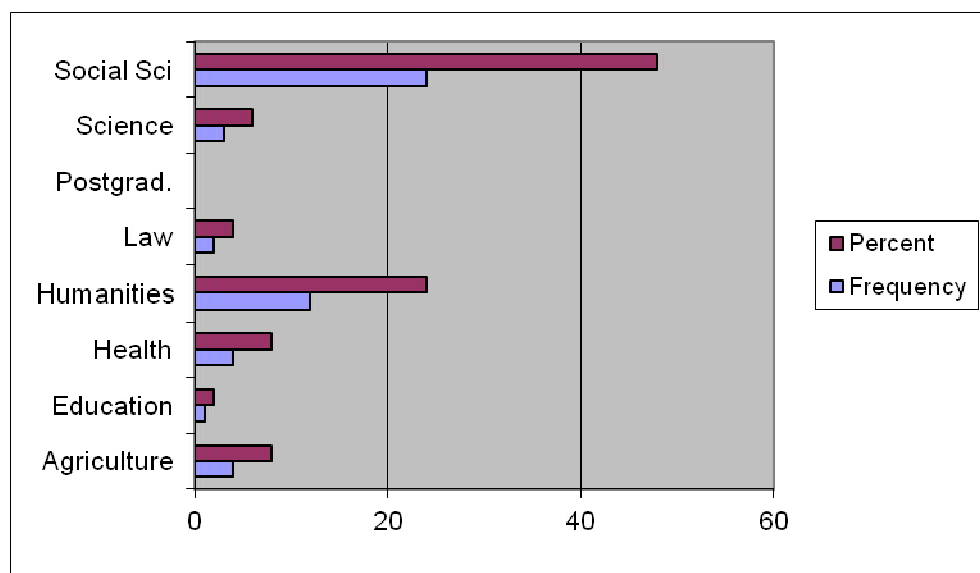


Figure 3: Interviewees' Degree Programme of Study

Figure 3 shows that the majority, 48 percent, of the NUL Sample Students interviewed were in Social Science, followed by those in the Humanities at 24 percent.

Like other universities in the world, COVID-19 has had and continues to have tremendous positive and negative impacts on the National University of Lesotho up to date and possibly into the future. In the interviewed NUL sample students, 48 percent said it had positive impacts while 52 percent said it had only negative impacts.

51. Administrative Impacts

Positive impacts of COVID-19 on administrative aspects of the National University of Lesotho are many. Firstly, it fostered the university to test its timeous rapid response to administrative and governance challenges that require innovative governance. To this extent, the university management set up a COVID-19 Response and Management Team composed of top officers of the administrative units, deans of faculties and the staff members of the Faculty of Health Sciences to provide health expertise and advice to the team to develop, implement and monitor all COVID-19 response measures by the university in line with those stipulated by the World Health Organisation and adopted by the Government of Lesotho.

Secondly the management together with the NUL COVID-19 Response and Management Team developed a COVID-19 Response and Management Strategy laying out specific measures to be followed by the university to operationalise the WHO and national strategies. As a result of this in its implementation, among others, sanitisation points with sanitation sprays and/ or ointments have been mounted at all strategic points throughout the campuses from the entry points at all the gates,

ablution facilities, corridors of offices, entry points to lecture halls, library, and halls of residences for students and so on. Lecture rooms and common use spaces have been fumigated, sterilised and sanitised as well.

Thirdly, management has directed that the use of face masks is compulsory at all times on entry into and throughout all stay on campuses doing work and other chores; While the use of hand gloves is highly encouraged it is not very mandatory. However, the frequent washing of hands is recommended and sanitisation liquid soap placed in bathrooms near hand washing places.

Fourthly, COVID-19 has fostered the use of electronic communications by management, so that both senate executive, senate board and senior management team meetings are since, its advent, currently mostly held online as part of both social distancing and also to foster administrative efficiency of management communications during the lockdown which forbid physical movement and interaction of people.

There have also been administrative challenges at the National University of Lesotho presented by COVID-19. Firstly the full deployment of the COVID-19 Response and Management Team encounters technical challenges that would require close cooperation with the National COVID-19 team which is based in Maseru with a poor link to and coordination with lower units. Secondly the NUL COVID-19 Response and Management Strategy requires financial and resources capacity which are very scarce at NUL to become fully implemented. Thirdly the specific resources such as sanitizers and masks are scarce at NUL. However, the NUL itself is not taking full advantage in self provisioning on these resources because it has capacity. For instance NUL has a Department of Consumer Science which should have been mandated by management to produce face masks for sale to both staff and students when they return to campus; and to sell to the external markets within the communities in which its campuses are located like Roma, Maseru, Mophale's Hoek, Leribe and Thaba-Tseka. But this has not been done yet, and it should be done. Moreover there is the NUL Innovation Hub which could be given a bulk order to produce these masks. Equally the NUL has the Department of Chemistry which should be mandated to produce sanitizers for use by NUL and individual members for extra caution and also sale to external markets. However, this is not yet done. It is time NUL looked inwards into itself to promote its capacity to cope with COVID-19 resources challenges where it can.

Fourthly, the use of online meetings might be ideal to use in the case of small groups of people who constitute its membership. However, for a large body like full senate or faculty boards where membership exceeds 50 people it is not workable because first all members should be in possession of smartphones and/ or lap tops or desktops to be able to participate. At NUL many members did not have these gadgets when online meetings were made. Moreover, even those who have gadgets must be located where there is internet access, and they must have data or units to be connected to the meeting. Again some were not in such locations or had such data or units to last the length of a meeting. This was aggravated by the fact that the technical link that was supposed to enable those

using computers to access the meetings and take part in them experienced technical failure in some cases while many did not have microphones to enable them to do full participation in the meetings and decisions taken. This means they were left out of critical decision-making arrived at in and by the meetings by technical default. This issue raises concerns about participatory and democratic institutional management and governance. This needs to be urgently revisited in future.

5.2. Teaching and Learning Impacts

COVID-19 has so far had a lot of positive and negative impacts on teaching and learning at the National University of Lesotho. In the case of positive impacts it has, firstly, forced the university to endorse the use of online teaching and learning as the policy during the lockdown (NUL, 2020c & d). While the intention to promote online and distance learning (ODL) is identified as a necessity under the NUL Strategic Plan's strategic goal 1 which states that the NUL shall be "a medium-sized dual mode university in the service of the country and Africa" and particularly its objective 1.2 which is "to introduce and implement dual mode" (NUL Strategic Plan, 2015:: 13), using the online mode alongside the face to face mode was practised very insignificantly before the arrival of COVID-19 (Mokenela, 2015; Mashinini, 2019: 75; Mphatsi, 2017). However, COVID-19 made it mandatory to use it because of the closure of educational institutions and later the complete national lockdown in Lesotho. This implies that by default COVID-19 has enabled the University to implement better the strategic goal 1 of its Strategic Plan. Therefore the National University of Lesotho should from now and in the future never look back anymore but, instead, ride on this momentum to fully become a dual mode university using online and face to face teaching and learning.

The views of the sampled NUL students on the decision to close down the NUL for COVID-19 in line with the government directive to education institutions indicate that 50 percent of them felt that it was a wise and strategic move to protect the lives of staff and students.

The second positive impact is that the THUTO learning management system which has since its launch in 2010 operated very negligibly, and picked up slightly since 2014, has finally become fully active to aid teaching and learning at the National University of Lesotho. It has also meant that the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) in charge of administering this system has become more directly contributory to teaching, learning and assessment by staff and to the students (Mphatsi, 2017; Tlali, 2019). Therefore by default COVID-19 has helped the University to implement fully its strategic goal 2 which states that the NUL shall be "a university of choice providing high quality educational experience and relevant scholarship" especially under this goal's objective 2.4 which is "to increase students' technological competences" (NUL Strategic Plan, 2015: 14). Similarly, COVID-19 has inadvertently helped the university to promote strategic goal 5 under its objective 5.4 whose aim is "to improve ICT governance and planning" (NUL Strategic Plan, 2015: 16).

In the survey, the interviewed NUL Sample Students themselves said that some of the positive impacts were as in Table 1.

Table 1: Types of Positive Impacts of COVID-19 Reported

<u>Positive Impact</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Driving 4th Industrial Revolution by fostering doing things digitally	7	23
Easy passing due to group work on assessments by students	7	23
Improves health science and practices	2	6
Easy access to non allowed materials during assessments	4	13
Promotes online and distance learning which is affordable	4	13
Facilitates self-paced learning instead of pressure under classes	6	19
<u>Enables government financial assistance to students for data</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>31</u>	<u>100</u>

The third positive impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning is that it has provided a lesson to lecturers and students alike that time waits for no one. Once the semester starts a lecturer must start teaching and do so very hard just in case the unexpected happens while there is still along syllabus to cover ahead to the completion. The NUL second semester was 27 days away from the end of lectures when lockdown started; and, in principle, lecturers ought to have started to wind down their courses at that time. Yet many seem to have been far from that and lament the lost teaching time. Equally COVID-19 has taught students that they should start to study hard from the onset just in case the unexpected happens. Students complained that it had robbed them of study time with only 27 days left before the end of lectures. Therefore, on the whole, strategic planning is the positive impact on both staff and students alike.

The fourth positive gain from COVID-19 is that it has impelled the university to seek and strengthen collaboration and partnership with external stakeholders especially the Econet Telecom Lesotho and the Vodacom Lesotho communications service providers to assist it to cope with costs of access to online learning through providing the free access to THUTO for online teaching and learning. Thus in so doing the COVID-19 has promoted and helped the university to achieve its Strategic Plan's strategic goal 7 especially objective 7.3 which is "to broaden the scope of partnerships" (NUL Strategic Plan, 2015: 17).

The fifth positive impact is that COVID-19 has prompted some members of staff of the Faculty of Science and Technology to team up and launch research into finding remedies for curing COVID-19 especially using local medicinal plants (The NUL Research and Innovations, 2020). In this way it has helped the university to implement strategic goal 3 of its Strategic Plan which states that the NUL shall be "a research driven institution contributing to humankind's advancement" especially under its objective 3.1 which is "to increase research output" (NUL Strategic Plan, 2015: 14-15).

As far as negative impacts are concerned COVID-19 has presented a lot of challenges as well. Critical analysis on these impacts is presented together with Table 2 which shows the views of the sample students about which some of these negative impacts are.

Table 2: Views of NUL Sample Students on Negative Impacts of COVID-19 on Studies

<u>Negative Impact</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Difficult online learning due to lack of enough computer literacy	7	20
Online learning access data is expensive for some people	4	11
Online learning does not allow for face to face consultation for explanations	5	14
COVID-19 makes access to and delivery of our education difficult	5	14
It interrupts face to face teaching and learning which make us study easily	5	14
COVID-19 kills many people	1	3
It makes students with no network and electricity connection suffer studies	3	9
Online assessment allows students to copy which is bad for their education	1	3
Sometimes there is no access to online reading materials	1	3
<u>COVID-19 hinders students group work learning due to social distancing</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>9</u>
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>35</u>	<u>100</u>

Firstly, COVID-19 has disrupted the smooth progression of the academic calendar 2019-2020 in which face to face lectures were originally scheduled to end on 24th April, 2020 to the new date in which online lectures ended on 29th May, 2020. This is a derailment of five weeks on lectures alone. The entire academic business of the 2019-2020 academic year was scheduled to end on the 24th April, 2020, but it was delayed to end on 29th July, 2020 under the revised almanac of events (NUL, 2020i). Since this is the time when the university would normally be starting the new academic year activities with 1st year students' orientation, this implies that the schedules to start these activities have been delayed to some later dates as well, with negative impacts on the commencement of the new academic year calendar 2020-2021.

The second negative impact of COVID-19 under teaching and learning relates to the disruption of the face to face mode of teaching and learning itself. The NUL is basically a face to face teaching institution in which class attendance and presentation of lectures by academic staff in person is the norm. The arrival of COVID-19 brought a disruption of this mode and left a lucernae from the 19th March, 2020 to the 16th April, 2020 when the management directed that the online teaching and learning must start. This means nearly a solid month was lost in between these dates.

Thirdly the online teaching and learning did not start on scheduled time because students had left their computers in the halls of residence when they left for the short break from which they were no longer able to return due to schools closure and lockdown. Therefore students could not access THUTO learning management system from their homes. They were not allowed back to campus to pick them up until the 30th April, 2020 to 1st May, 2020 when this was made possible by management (NUL, 2020e). This added a loss of two more weeks from the 16th April, 2020 when online studies should have begun.

Fourthly, in some cases students were located in places where there was no internet network and therefore had no access to the online teaching provided through the THUTO learning management system. In response to solving this problem the NUL management allowed some students affected

by lack of access to internet to come back into campus residence from where they could be able to do so. However, this took place much later from the week of 11th May, 2020 because the screening process of who qualified for this prerogative was laborious.

Fifthly, in other cases even where the network was available students could not access the online teaching and learning due to lack of capacity to afford the requisite units to do so effectively.

Sixthly, it was in view of the affordability problem that the NUL management negotiated zero-rated access from its partners, the Vodacom Lesotho and Econet Telecom Lesotho. However, the actual zero-rated access took a long time to become effective. For instance zero-rated access to Econet Telecom Lesotho site was only effective from 28th April, 2020 onwards (NUL, 2020f); while that from the Vodacom Lesotho became effective at a much later date of the 20th May, 2020 onwards (NUL,2020j). This means that while management had directed online teaching and learning to commence from the 16th April, 2020 the actual commencement and effective access to the envisaged online teaching and learning was much delayed resulting in further loss of teaching and learning time.

When asked to assess the effectiveness of zero - rated access to online materials the NUL sample students responded as presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Views of the NUL Sample Students on Zero – rated Access to Online Materials

<u>Comment</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
It did not work mostly, we had to buy our own data	32	64
It worked well for me	10	20
This was limited to some few websites only	2	4
It was just fair	2	4
It was not accessible to some cell phones	3	6
<u>I have no comment</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>50</u>	<u>100</u>

Seventhly, some of the lecturers were not conversant with the use of the THUTO learning management system to start to deliver lectures online through using it immediately. This prompted the management to direct the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) to start training lectures on the use of the THUTO facility during the week of 7th May, 2020 to 13th May, 2020. Given the online teaching and learning commencement date of 16th April, 2020, this was a positive but belated critical solution.

The eighth problem was that even despite these efforts to empower them; some lecturers became nihilist towards the whole idea of online teaching, and thus never or very belatedly posted notes on THUTO for students to access for learning. What could have happened was that management, through Deans of Faculties and their Heads of Departments, should have asked the Centre for Teaching and Learning to monitor who was or had posted notes on THUTO and then sent a weekly

report to them to take disciplinary action on culprit lecturers to comply with the directive to teach online.

The ninth challenge presented was that the THUTO learning management system does not offer the actual teaching facilities like blackboard and so on for live online teaching and learning. Instead, it allows lecturers to mostly post their lecture notes, feedback, and students to access the materials and post their academic work back to lecturers for assessment via mostly resources, announcements, assignments, gradebook, tests and quizzes facilities, interalia. Both lecturers and students can discuss in sessions or groups using the chat room facility as the nearest proxy to the live classroom sessions. The biggest challenge was that most students did not participate or come into chat room sessions where they were organised and this cut the necessary academic communications between the lecturers and students in their courses.

The tenth problem was that the THUTO facility itself suffered sphincteric closures due to traffic jam caused by its limited bandwidth in relation to the high demand for its use. This interfered with the smooth access to online teaching and learning particularly at the critical time towards the end when tests and assignments were being given online by lecturers to wind up their course work assessments. There is a high need to expand the THUTO capacity for online academic work in the future in order to cope with prolonged prevalence of COVID-19.

The views of the NUL sampled students on the above issues are highlighted in their responses presented in Table 4 to the question they were asked to assess the effectiveness of the online teaching and learning strategy used by the NUL.

Table 4: Views of the NUL Sample Students on the Effectiveness of Online Learning System

<u>Views</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
It is good for the continuation of learning	23	37
Bad because students copy on online tests	1	2
Bad because THUTO system fails a lot	19	30
Bad because there are no teachers to explain concepts	7	11
Bad because the network is either not there or is poor	2	3
Some students lack enough computer literacy	5	8
THUTO system does marking, students fail a lot	1	2
Lecturers give work at same time, there is overload	1	2
Bad because students buy data to access materials	1	2
Some lecturers never or belatedly posted materials	1	2
<u>It is good because we copy and pass easily</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>62</u>	<u>101</u>

The eleventh and perhaps the biggest challenge encountered is that due to the need for social distancing, while the lockdown has been relaxed to allow commencement of educational activities in tertiary institutions from the 5th May, 2020 onwards, the NUL management advised itself that because of limited space this would be too risky to the health of the students and therefore decided

not to reopen the university for full time face to face academic activities including the writing of the final examinations usually written in May to end the NUL academic year. As a result it has allowed faculties to decide on their preferred mode of final assessment among the use of tests, extended and special assignments, and course work as proxies for the final examination and communicate their decisions to their respective students (NUL, 2020h). This has introduced variance on assessment which has raised mixed reactions from both lecturers and students. There is a need for a standardised adoption of the examinations proxy by management in future, while an examination software is being sought for purchase, installation and training of staff and students on its use.

The views of the NUL Sample Students when asked to comment on online final assessment mode were as presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Comments of the NUL Sample Students on Online Final Assessment Mode.

<u>Comments</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Unfair because some students copy	5	10
Unfamiliar and tricky so pass mark must be 40%	4	8
I have no comments	3	6
It is good because we do team work to pass well	7	13
Not fair some write examinations others do not	2	4
Not good syllabi were not finished yet tests were set	1	2
THUTO crashed before we submitted sometimes	3	6
This should have been based on course work only	1	2
There was initially no time table to avoid clashes	1	2
Must have been done through assignments only	1	2
THUTO did not allow us to go back to early questions	7	13
Not good but acceptable under this situation	4	8
More time must be given for doing assessments	5	10
Those with bad coursework will fail without exams	4	8
Online tests unfair on those with poor computer skills	3	6
<u>Unfair because computer marking has no leniency</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>52</u>	<u>102</u>

The twelfth challenge is that modern universities have a triple mandate of teaching, research and community/ business service towards society. Not only did COVID-19 impact negatively on teaching, but it did so on research and business mandates of the university as well. In the case of research, research is people centred in relation to most social Science and humanities methodologies. However, the need for social distancing to minimise physical contact to contain COVID-19 has brought research to a halt for those in these disciplines. This means that staff and students, especially postgraduates, who were doing research, have become abruptly interrupted and the university research output halted too. This implies that they have to find alternative ways to reach their research communities via remote control research strategies to avoid a complete derailment of their studies and stifling of the university research output and its contribution to society. Similarly research findings are presented, interalia, in conferences. However, the hosting of

conferences was disrupted all over the World and NUL staff could not attend any to present their finished research papers and findings to colleagues. Again this has had a negative impact on NUL's increased participation in research stated in its Strategic Goal 3 of the NUL Strategic Plan 2015-2020.

5.3. Social Impacts

COVID-19 has also had negative impacts on social aspects of NUL staff and students. In the case of students not only has their academic participation in lectures and examinations been disturbed due to the need to observe social distancing, but so has been their interaction amongst both themselves as well as that with other students in other universities. For instance during the short break between the 16th March, 2020 to 20th March, 2020 NUL students should have travelled to the University of Eswatini for their usual inter university sports games with that university, the university of Botswana and them. However, these were cancelled at the eleventh hour due to COVID-19. This hampered the social relations that have gone on as an annual tradition among the three universities since their old days when they were one university. Moreover, construction activities of sports fields and accommodation facilities in preparation of the Africa Region 5 sports which were planned for later this year have also been interrupted indefinitely at the main campus of the National University of Lesotho. Yet another negative social impact was on the negative relations that ensued between NUL campus accommodation management, private accommodation owners and students in relation to what happens to the rent that students paid for April and May during which months they completely did not use their rooms. As it were this became the lost rent value to students because of the argument that their particulars and belongings continued to fully occupy their rooms in their absence as "stored" property.

The views of the NUL Sample Students interviewed on social impacts of COVID-19 on them were as presented in Table 6.

Table 6: Views of the NUL Sample Students on Social Impacts of COVID- 19

<u>Type of Social Impact</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
Social distancing hinders socialising with friends	15	20
No more dating among the youth	9	12
Restricted movement due to lockdown	8	11
Increase in boredom and stress	2	3
No drinking freedom is allowed	8	11
Social conflicts among squatting friends	1	1
Recreation and sports forbidden	6	8
Could not bury relatives due to restricted numbers =50	4	5
Limited numbers of people at weddings	2	3
No church services	1	1
Limited public transport, times and passengers	1	1
Shopping closes early	4	5
No time to socialise due to online learning	1	1
Non shaking of hands is anti- social behaviour	1	1
I cannot visit home due to lockdown	1	1
I cannot open my spaza on campus	1	1
<u>Do not know</u>	<u>11</u>	<u>14</u>
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>76</u>	<u>99</u>

5.4. Financial Impacts

Finally COVID-19 has had tremendous negative impacts on the finances of the NUL. Management reports that a lot of money has had to be suddenly diverted from the already very little budget under the current NUL Strategic Plan. Out of this limited budget the management has had to put aside some finances to pay for COVID-19 prevention and control measures such as sanitizers and fumigation materials, interalia. This has happened at a high opportunity cost to other activities which had already been budgeted for by the University.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper has presented and discussed the experiences of the National University of Lesotho with regard to some positive as well as negative impacts brought about by COVID-19 to its mission. The paper concludes that in the case of positive impacts COVID-19 inadvertently helped the NUL to increase the implementation of its Strategic Plan 2015-2020 in the areas of online teaching and learning as the second part of its intended dual mode structure; improved enabling of students to acquire technological skills; increased research output and contribution to solving problems of society; partnerships with external stakeholders; and the exercise of flexible and innovative institutional governance, interalia.

With regards to negative impacts of COVID- 19 on NUL, the paper has highlighted, interalia, that on finance it created diversion of budget to finance COVID-19 combat measures. In administration it promoted institutional governance challenge related to timely response in terms of when online

teaching and learning resumed, the manner of holding consensus building meetings, and manner of assessment modes, among others. On academic aspects NUL closed abruptly, face to face teaching and learning was disrupted and had to be replaced with digital learning for which the university was ill prepared and the THUTO network system therefore experienced overloads, some lecturers had to be trained on its use, some students could not access it due to lack of connection at their homes, others could not afford data for access since even after partnerships with some service providers to zero rate access. Smooth progression of research by undergraduate and postgraduate students and lecturers was also discontinued.

The NUL Sample Students interviewed made the recommendations presented in Table 7 for the future.

Table 7: Recommendations Made by the NUL Sample Students Interviewed for the Future.

<u>Recommendations</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u>Percent</u>
NUL must improve the THUTO efficiency	12	20
Reopen and enforce use of PPE	12	20
Reduce congestion on residences	1	1
NUL must provide data to students for online learning	7	11
Reopen and use online teaching	2	3
Increase online websites and content of courses	3	5
Staff must use WhatsApp, Blackboard, Moodle too	5	8
Use video lecturing to simulate classroom teaching	4	7
Open & let faculties alternate class delivery per week	4	7
Let programmes with laboratories to go to class	3	5
More training on THUTO for staff and students	6	10
Allow students to point way forward	1	2
<u>I do not know what must be done</u>	<u>1</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>61</u>	<u>101</u>

In line with the students' views presented above, the paper recommends that since it appears that COVID-19 will stay for sometime into the future, in order to cope with reopening its doors for teaching and learning to continue, the NUL must consider more inclination towards the use of digital learning. In order for this digital mode to be effective more financial support is required to increase the capacity of the Centre for Teaching and Learning with regard to increase of staff for more effective handling of the THUTO learning management system to cope with the demand and traffic that will be generated by switching to full scale online teaching and learning. Secondly, the THUTO learning management system has to be upgraded to entail additional facilities such as voice and other systems like moodle and/ or blackboard as instruments of teaching and learning in the online classroom mode; staff and students must be trained to use these new additional instruments effectively too. Thirdly, NUL must purchase, install and train staff and students on an examination software to use under the full online academic assessment which would be needed when the traditional examination method is not possible due to continued presence of COVID-19. Fourthly,

the NUL management, staff and students must desist from the perception of COVID-19 purely as a menace. Rather, they must turn its challenges into an opportunity for innovations and progress in administrative, intellectual and technological capacity building for now and the future in line with its Strategic Plan to better its quality of higher education.

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