

The Use Of Whatsapp As A Online Medium In Providing Higher Education Institutions With A Lifeline: During Covid-19

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Abstract

March 2020 saw South Africa go through its first 21-day lockdown, and fear gripped the country as a new virus identified as COVID-19 caused a devastating impact throughout the world. During this time, history played the devil's advocate by reminding society of the previous flu known as the 1919 Spanish flu, which saw millions of people succumb to its prowess. To a large extent, social media enabled a confused and saddened society to be connected. Besides essential services, all other sectors of the economy were instantly shut down. Social media became society's lifeline during COVID-19 as it abled them to remain connected. One could say that social media became society's life support in these uncertain times. A forwarded message does not declare the original sender nor restricts who the next receiver could be. Businesses were also able to function by using social media to the point that people could now buy everything virtually from a store without going to a store. Social media could not replace all essential functions, but it helped provide a sustainable bridge for post-lockdown. Certain sectors of the economy, which dealt with production etc., experienced the full brunt of the lockdown. Artisans and artists lost a platform to showcase their talent and display their trade, leading to a loss of income. Education Institutions had some forms of online platforms which were used; however, distance learning was implemented overnight through the use of online mediums. While Moodle is a required platform used by many higher education institutions, other online platforms are also used. This paper describes the use of WhatsApp as an online medium providing higher education institutions with a lifeline by keeping them connected during COVID-19. For this paper, the author uses the Shannon and Weaver Model of Communication which looks at the sender and receiver and the medium used to disseminate information. The senders and receivers are students, lecturers, administration staff, and management. Content analyses were used as part of the research methodology for this paper.

Keywords: WhatsApp, online medium, higher education institutions, teaching and learning

Introduction

March 2020 saw South Africa go through its first 21-day lockdown, and fear gripped the country as a new virus identified as COVID-19 caused a devastating impact throughout the world. During this time, history played the devil's advocate by reminding society of the

previous flu known as the 1919 Spanish flu, which saw millions of people succumb to its prowess. To a large degree, social media enabled a confused and saddened society to be connected. Besides essential services, all other companies were instantly shut down. Social media became society's lifeline during COVID-19 because it enables them to be connected. This became society's life support. A forwarded message does not declare the original sender nor restricts who the next receiver could be. Businesses were also able to function by using social media to the point that people could now buy everything virtually from a store without going to a store. Social media could not take over all functions which were needed, but it helped provide a sustainable bridge for post-lockdown. Certain sections within the country where production was needed, etc., experienced the full brunt of the lockdown. Artisans and artists lost a platform to showcase their talent and display their trade, leading to a loss of income. Higher education institutions had some forms of online platforms which were used; however, distance learning was implemented overnight through the use of online mediums. While Moodle is a required platform used by many higher education institutions, other online platforms are also used. This paper aims to describe how during COVID-19, WhatsApp can be an online medium by providing higher education institutions with a lifeline. The research question the author asks is how WhatsApp can be used as an online medium by providing higher education institutions with a lifeline.

Problem Statement

COVID-19 has changed the way education is conducted. Initially, institutions were closed during COVID-19 because the world had no idea what they were dealing with. News headlines were bombarded with the continuous rise in infections and fatalities, instilling a heightened sense of fear amongst citizens of the world. Like other countries, the South African president declared a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 after the first case of COVID-19 was identified in South Africa. To ensure there was a continuation of education, the education sector moved from face-to-face learning to a blend of face-to-face and online teaching and learning. "Even though educational institutions were forced to move to online education, the education system was not ready for such a shift and had adapted" (Muthuprasad, 2020:1).

Literature Review

For this section, the author will look at COVID-19, the impact of COVID-19 on education, the use of technology, social media, social media sites and education, WhatsApp Messenger, WhatsApp in education, WhatsApp and collaborative learning and devices provided for lecturers to engage with students' on WhatsApp. The author shows how WhatsApp can enhance teaching and learning.

COVID-19

COVID-19 is a pandemic that has infected and affected many people globally. On 1 December 2019, the first case was reported. There are numerous variants of the virus, and a strain of

coronavirus identified in 2019 known as “SARS-CoV-2 has caused a pandemic of respiratory illness, called COVID-19” (John Hopkins University, 29 July 2022: para. 1). “SARS-CoV-2 may have originated in an animal and changed (mutated), so it could cause illness in humans” (John Hopkins University, 29 July 2022: para. 1). John Hopkins University (29 July 2022: para. 1) goes on further to state “In the past, several infectious disease outbreaks have been traced to viruses originating in birds, pigs, bats and other animals that mutated to become dangerous to humans. Research continues, and more studies may reveal how and why the coronavirus evolved to cause pandemic disease.”

“March 2020 (WHO, 2020), the Director-General of WHO declared COVID-19 as a pandemic after assessing the quick spread and seriousness of the dangerous virus worldwide with the additional declaration of social distancing to stop the spread of the virus” (Nihayathi and Indriani, 2021:44). World Health Organisation (9 August 2022) states that there are 585 950 080 confirmed cases and 6 425 422 deaths. World Health Organisation (9 August 2022) states that a total of 12,355,390,461 vaccine doses have been administered globally.

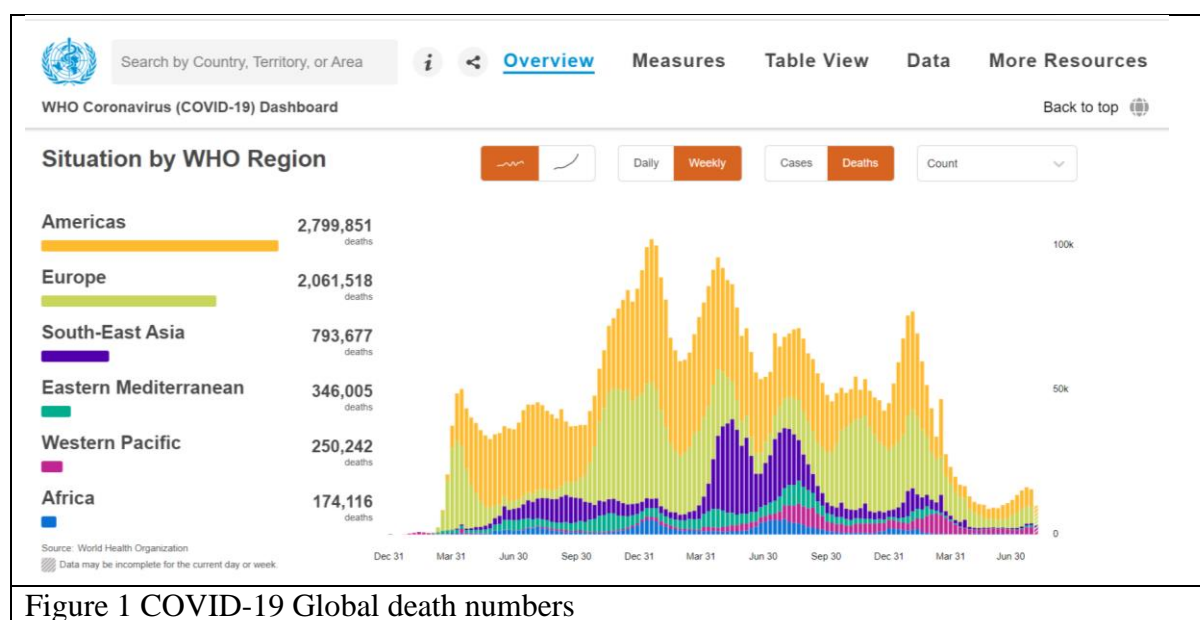


Figure 1 COVID-19 Global death numbers

World Health Organisation (2022)

The above graph shows how many people have died in different regions of the world. Africa has the lowest number from the above graph. An interesting observation made from the above graph is that the number of deaths experienced in first world countries is exponentially greater than that of third world countries, for example, Africa. A non-accusatory argument could be raised that with better health care facilities and greater access to medical care, the number of deaths in America should be far less than that of Africa. However, on the flip side of the spectrum, one could argue that the number of recorded deaths in Africa is skewed by debilitating diseases such as malaria, HIV-Aids and tuberculosis. The lack of medical infrastructure, testing kits and education on coronavirus probably prevented people from seeking medical attention and a proper diagnosis made. Furthermore, overflowing mortuaries

could have meant that proper autopsies were not done, thereby making the actual cause of death incorrect.

The referenced article states, “Africa’s low death count has baffled health experts and government officials, but growing data contrasts previous, widespread assertions over the last two years that COVID-19 spared the continent. A new study led by School of Public Health researchers suggests that the reported COVID-19 death toll in Africa is substantially higher than official records indicate” (Mckoy, 2022:n.p.).

Impact of COVID-19 on Higher Education

“Educational institutions have come to a functional standstill since they had to protect their students from viral exposures, which are likely in a highly socialising student community” (Muthuprasad, Aiswarya, Aditya & Jha, 2020:1). “As of 10 March, school and university closures globally due to the COVID-19 has left one in five students out of school challenges” (Muthuprasad, 2020:1). By the end of April 2020 there were 186 countries which implemented nationwide closures, and such closures affected 73.8% of the total enrolled learners (UNESCO, 2020). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention advised during COVID-19 on the importance of social distance; even educational institutions were closed, numerous applications were created, and WhatsApp became very famous (Nihayati and Indriani, 2021:44).

While many declare we live in a post-COVID-19 society, there are still cases of infection; however, many no longer see the need to get tested for COVID-19. With the flu season in the nation currently affecting many, many remain unsure whether they have Covid-19 or the seasonal flu.

Use of Technology

“Information and communication technology (ICT) has provided many opportunities for teachers to learn outside the formal classroom setting” (Mutanga, 2020:38). Science and technology are playing a major role within the South African educational system. Due to the realm of science and technology, the world is constantly changing (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014:157). Mutanga (2020:29) states, “Technologies associated with social media afford students with social autonomy, where they can choose to do what they want to do, when, as well as how to do it. Students are no longer passive consumers of teaching but participate in the design, development, and distribution of knowledge and products.”

Social Media

Since lockdown and social distancing laws were implemented, spending time online was the only way society could remain connected. There has been a rise in various online platforms, ranging from Social Networking Sites (SNSs), online shopping and movie apps, etc. Unable to leave homes due to lockdown restrictions, being on social media enabled one to stay in touch

with friends, family and colleagues. Social media provides information constantly. Online shopping enabled many to have reduced travelling and prevented the infection risk. Many also turned to movie apps such as Netflix, etc.

Social media has changed different aspects of people's lives (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014:158). With the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies, social media are considered for various relevant content and online creation. Social media platforms were designed so that family, strangers and friends could interact and discuss with each other (Yeboah & Ewur, 2014:159). Yeboah and Ewur (2014:159) posit that "Social Networking Sites (SNSs) allow students to express themselves, communicate, and collect profiles that highlight their talents and experience." There are many SNS currently.

The role of Social Media Sites in Education

Social media incorporation into online teaching and learning methods are not because it is easy but accessible to lecturers and students to interact and communicate (Mulyono & Suryoputro, 2020). "Tools such as WhatsApp, Twitter, LinkedIn Learning, and YouTube continue to impact teaching and learning" (Owusu-Boakye, 2022:65). COVID-19 brought about this shift in education. "Online learning is learning that supports the new era of 4.0 industries" (Harida 2020:25 as quoted by Munir, 2021:324).

Table 1: Active social media Monthly active users globally

1. Facebook	2.936 Billion
2. YouTube	2.476 Billion
3. WhatsApp	2 Billion
4. Instagram	1.440 Billion
5. WeChat (Including Weixin 微信)	1.288 billion
6. TikTok	1.02 billion
7. Facebook Messenger's	1 Billion
8. Telegram	700 Million
9. Snapchat	617 Million
10. Douyin (抖音)	613 Million

Table 1: Active social media Monthly users globally

Adapted from Datareportal (July 2022)

WhatsApp

"WhatsApp is one of the changes in technology that is commonly used on specific mobile phones and computers. Since Smartphones became popular, many messaging services were launched, but WhatsApp has become very popular among them" (Yeboah & Ewur 2014:158). "WhatsApp is one of the mobile phone applications and web-based social network that integrates various features used to communicate with other users, ranging from education, business, and entertainment developed this social networking site" (Nihayati & Indriani, 2012:44).

WhatsApp uses data. WhatsApp is a free messenger service (Gon & Rawekar, 2017:19). However, within the context of South Africa, data is expensive, and though it is cheaper means of communication, not everyone can make use of all its options as some are more expensive than others, like video calling. To be connected, one must have data. WhatsApp offers its users many services: voice calls, video calls, texting, sending voice notes, video and picture sharing, group chats, and location sending. Munir et al. (2021:324) posit that the “use of WhatsApp in teaching activities is based on several reasons: (1) easy to use; (2) consume less of package data; and (3) has many useful features such as group, audio message, video call, and voice note.” Texting on WhatsApp Messenger is cheaper than messaging through SMS (Mutanga, 2020:31). However, video calling uses much more data than voice calls.

Barhoumi (2016), as quoted by Mutanga (2020), stated the following benefits of WhatsApp as follows:

- Instant messaging facilitates online interaction and collaboration;
- It is a free application that is not difficult to use;
- It has group functions that allow easy sharing of information; and
- It has end-to-end encryption that allows only users who have approved members of a particular group to view and share group information.

WhatsApp in Education

To use WhatsApp in education, both the lecturers and students need to download WhatsApp messenger on their phones. The app is free to download; however, data costs are incurred once the app is used as a mode of communication.

“Most adult learners use it to stay connected with their peers as well as their teachers” (Mutanga, 2020:33). “In addition to facilitating online communication between teachers and students, WhatsApp messenger also enhances communication among the teachers themselves. Through WhatsApp messenger groups, teachers can become part of online communities of practice where they can discuss their teaching experiences” (Mutanga, 2020:34-35). “The use of social media can generate contexts that include collaborative and cooperative based on horizontality along with more traditional teaching practices” (Jude, 2019:10). In recent years, a social media site known as WhatsApp messenger received significant usage in the learning environment (Devi et al., 2019; Jadhav et al., 2013 and Owusu-Boakye 65). Susilo (2014) posits that the incorporation of WhatsApp messenger in teaching can greatly enhance the value of learning.

Munir et al. (2021:324) “WhatsApp is one of the applications which lecturers usually used for teaching in this Covid-19 pandemic.” Students work smarter and more effectively when using WhatsApp. (Munir et al., 2021:324). Regarding WhatsApp, students can communicate instantly with their peers on any issues that may arise compared to face-to-face learning when they have to wait for the next time to meet the lecturer in class, through consultation, or with certain students’ contact numbers they have on their mobile devices. Using WhatsApp, students

can engage in discussions with fellow students and lecturers. “WA (WhatsApp) can be used for sharing learning material because WA has a feature that can save documents in the form of pdf, Microsoft word, excel, and PowerPoint. The availability of the option to share lecture materials can increase learning and discussion opportunities for students wherever and whenever” (Munir et al., 2021:326). The class can be divided into groups, and each group is allocated a leader and an assistant leader; this is attributed to the group chat feature. They can communicate within their groups when they are working on group work. The lecturers can send information in the class WhatsApp group, and students can forward these messages to their respective groups. There could also be a group with all the group leaders and the lecturers, in which lecturers can engage with the respective group leaders on the challenges they are encountering, and identify learners at risk, etc.

“WhatsApp is viewed as a tool that can encourage critical discussion, information sharing among students and teachers, improve students’ manipulative abilities, encourage the learning procedure and cultivate assessment process” (Barhoumi, 2015; Lauricella & Kay, 2013) as quoted in (Owusu-Boakye, 2022:65). Smith (2015) states that WhatsApp Messenger has been employed as a tool to complement other instructional delivery media. During COVID-19, when students were learning online due to higher educational institutions’ closure, WhatsApp was a commonly used social media site.

Lecturers created WhatsApp groups for the modules taught at most institutions during their closure of institutions. WhatsApp and emails have become among the most common means of communication. Universities had online platforms through which students submitted assessments and wrote assessments. “With the current popularity in online classes, WhatsApp grants both the teacher and students diverse ways to engage each other through direct communication” (Owusu-Boakye, 2022:71).

WhatsApp and Collaborative Learning

Working together gets students to take responsibility not just for their work but for their peers also. Group work makes students work together so that they can meet the deadline when tasks and activities are due.

Aburezeq (2012), as quoted by La Hanisi (2018:31), states that WhatsApp messenger has the following collaborative features:

- **Multimedia:** It allows the user to exchange videos, text messages, images, and voice notes.
- **Group Chat:** It supports the interaction of up to 50 group members.
- **Unlimited Messaging:** The number of messages you can share on WhatsApp is unlimited. The application uses 3G/EDGE internet data plan or Wi-Fi to ensure continuous data transmission across platforms.

- **Cross-Platform Engagements:** Interactions with different devices (personal digital assistants, Smartphones, and Galaxy tablets) can message one another through various media (text messages, pictures, videos, voice notes).
- **Offline Messaging:** Messages are saved automatically when the device is off or outside the coverage area.
- **No Charges involved:** there are no charges involved in using WhatsApp as it uses the same internet data plan, which is used for email or web browsing.
- **Pins and Users Name:** WhatsApp, the user, need not remember passwords or usernames as it works via phone numbers and integrates with users' address books.

“The teacher invites students to have a group or private chats with him and encourages the students to help each other. The teacher should praise students, initiate discussion, and use WhatsApp to confirm whether students do understand the topics or not” (La Hanisi, 2018:33).

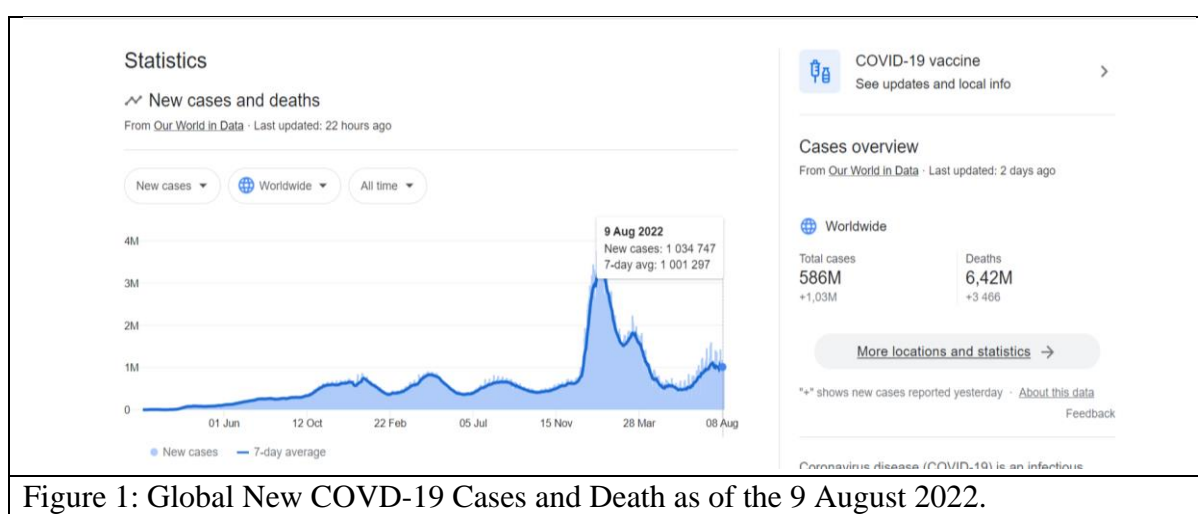


Figure 1: Global New COVID-19 Cases and Death as of the 9 August 2022.

According to Statistics (2022)

According to Figure 1, there are still cases of COVID-19 in the world currently. New cases are 1 034 747, and the daily average is 1 001 292. However, even though the number is so high. It seems as if life has returned to normal and masks are no longer used in most countries. In South Africa, the use of masks is no longer practised.

Devices Provided for Lecturers to Engage With Students on WhatsApp

Before COVID-19, students mostly had contact with their lecturers via landline office numbers and work emails. During COVID-19 and with online learning, personal mobile numbers were given to students to remain in contact. Lecturers communicated with students through the WhatsApp group created on their mobile devices. This presents a challenge because students can send you messages at any time, especially when they find their lecturer online. Despite boundaries being set, students still message their lecturer because everything is considered important to them. One suggestion is for institutions to provide devices so that they could be used to interact with students, and students do not have lecturers' mobile numbers.

Theoretical Framework

For this study, the author used the Shannon and Weaver Model of communication. This theory has a sender, encoder, message, medium, noise, decoder, receiver (audience), and feedback. In 1949 Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver developed the most well-known formal model of communication (Oxford Reference, 2022).

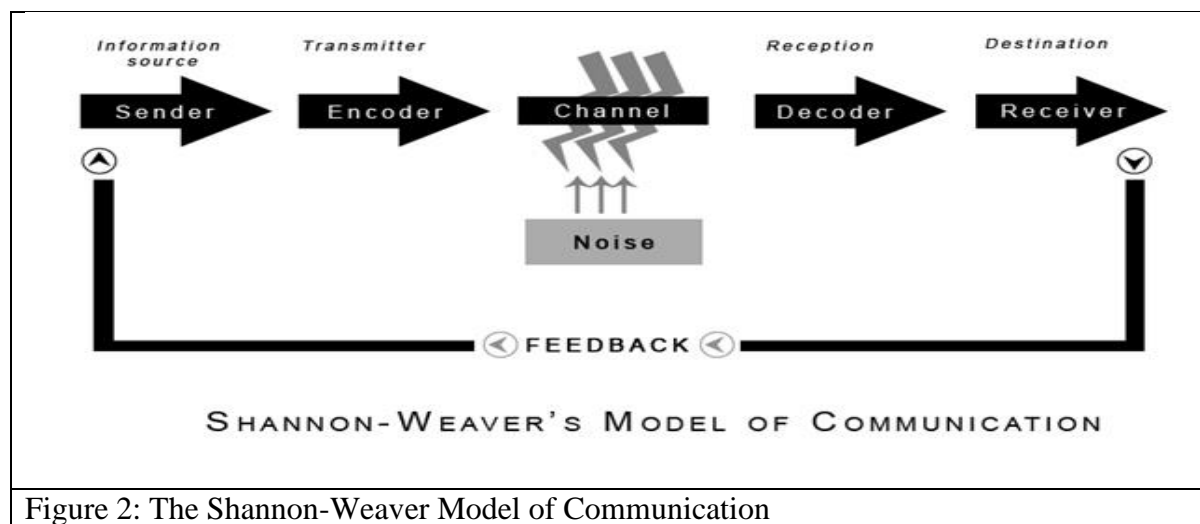


Figure 2: The Shannon-Weaver Model of Communication

Communication Theory (n.d.).

The sender is the one who wants to send a message, and they hope that the receiver will receive the intended message. However, the sender needs first to encode the message before they can send it. The sender needs to know the message they want to send to their intended audience. The author also regards noise as a barrier. These things affect the smooth delivery of the message to the receiver. The medium is how one communicates, or the channel one uses. The decoder is the process used by the receiver so that the message is understood. The receiver is the individual the message is intended for. The feedback is to response the sender receives from the receiver. At higher education institutions, the students and lecturers will sometimes be both senders and receivers. Other forms of communication may be used as mediums or channels of communication and through various electronic communication used as a channel. For this paper, the channel is WhatsApp to engage with both parties. Various barriers affect the communication flow. High data cost, load shedding, and some students not having smartphones hinder them from communicating on WhatsApp, and therefore they cannot read messages posted on the WhatsApp class groups. At times other students do not read all their messages or do not go back to the old messages and therefore miss messages. And therefore, do not know about the task which is due, and at times they misunderstand messages. Through feedback, only then will the sender be aware if the receiver understood the sent message. It would be advisable for the sender to always ask for feedback immediately so that they would know if they are if the message is understood or not.

Research Methodology

The author used secondary sources as part of the research methodology. Searches were done on Google Scholar; however, where information cannot be found on Google Scholar, the

general Search on Google will be conducted. Search words like ‘social media, ‘COVID-19’, ‘WhatsApp’, ‘higher education institutions, and ‘teaching and learning.’

Conclusion

COVID-19, just like the Spanish flu, has seen millions of people succumb to these pandemics. Since the start of lockdown restrictions imposed due to Covid-19, higher education institutions have used online platforms to ensure the continuation of teaching and learning. One could only wonder what would have seen the outcome of education had educational institutions not turned to social media and seen WhatsApp as a lifeline. “Blended learning is a revolution in the field of internet technology-based education that can be used for both distance education and learning support” (Susilawati and Supriyatno, 2020:853). Future research should look at the challenges faced by students using WhatsApp messenger as a teaching and learning tool.

Recommendation

1. Blended education will remain, and the use of social media and electronic communication should be integrated into present and future teaching and learning.
2. Devices needed by lecturers to engage with students should be provided by their institutions.
3. Separate devices should be used for social media, so students do not infringe on lecturers’ time.
4. It is advisable to get a student to share what you require as a lecturer in the language of the student so that they can better understand the intended message.

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