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UCT survey reveals remote learning highs and lows amongst students

Results from a survey conducted among University of Cape Town (UCT) students in July 2020, about their experiences of emergency remote teaching, reveal the highs and lows of remote learning and offer valuable guidelines for teaching online in the third and fourth terms.

Challenges include finding a quiet space at home to study, carving out uninterrupted time in between caring for children or other family members, and technology and internet access issues. Interrupted electricity supply also looms large, with some areas suffering intermittent power cuts even before load-shedding resumed countrywide.

While students overwhelmingly missed in-person contact, many also valued the much greater flexibility provided by online learning and the freedom to learn at their own pace in a way that suited them, without being locked into a lecture timetable or the overhead of daily travel to and from campus. Students also reported deeper engagement with material and appreciated open-book assessments, which were less stressful than traditional sit-down written exams.

In an earlier announcement to students about having to take courses online, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Teaching and Learning Associate Professor Lis Lange said: "we are facing not only COVID-19, but also the Fourth Industrial Revolution, where technology will play a more central role in everybody's life. We recognise that there will be challenges for all of us in working this way," she said. "Your input now and feedback during Term 2 will be valuable in helping UCT to improve our approach to online teaching and learning."

The student survey provided valuable feedback for the improvement of course content, structure, support and assessment and found that:

- Student mental health was the most common issue amongst students;
- There was sometimes course content overload;
- There were big differences in design and ease of use of course sites;

- Students experienced difficulty completing assessments at home;
- Social connectedness amongst students is not strong;
- There is insufficient data for remote learning;
- Sometimes videos can be too long and aids such as subtitles and transcripts are very useful;
- The use of synchronous tools such as Zoom or Microsoft Teams was not always useful;
- The majority of students who responded felt that course convenors communicated well with them about what to expect, that they were able to access academic support when needed and they received appropriate support when they ran into issues with remote assessments.

[In the document](#) released by the UCT Centre for Innovation in Teaching and Learning (CILT) – who conducted the survey – each of these nine insights is also accompanied by a list of practical action points that lecturers can implement to help improve students’ experiences of online learning.

These include establishing a peer buddy system where students can check on each other and offer moral support where necessary; having a class WhatsApp group; only using synchronous tools when absolutely necessary and these shouldn’t exceed two hours; recordings should be made available to students who are unable to attend; and keep video content short – not exceeding 10 minutes.

ENDS

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