
Deconstructing the Challenges of COVID-19 on First-Year Rural University Students in South Africa

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Abstract

Assumptions and facts exist about the various challenges rural learners face when transitioning into university education in South Africa due to the pedagogical differences between secondary and university education. However, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic compounded the transitioning challenges of students because most of the universities, especially the selected university, utilise online learning, which is alien to first-year students who are transitioning from rural high schools to the university. This study explores the challenges and solutions associated with first-year students transitioning to a new level of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. An asset-based approach was used to theorise the study within the Transformative Paradigm (TP), while Participatory Research (PR) was used to design the study. These are relevant because both TP and PR are targeted towards transforming people's predicaments. The participants consisted of ten first-year students selected using a convenient sampling technique. Data was collected using electronic interviews such as email, WhatsApp messages, and phone calls. The data were analysed using thematic analysis. The study revealed that first-year rural university students' inability to use online learning tools effectively and unstable internet connections in the rural community are major challenges. The study, therefore, concludes that the provision of internet access and students' readiness for adaptability are the possible solutions.

Keywords: COVID-19; first-year students; rural communities; rural university

Introduction

In South Africa, just like other countries of the world, students transitioning from, for example, primary to secondary education, secondary education to higher education is always challenging. This challenge is not just limited to the anxiety of moving from a lower academic level to a higher level. This is inevitable because students need to adapt to the demand of the higher level, such as having to create new social experiences and a new academic life (Ajani and Gamede, 2020). According to Salami (2011), part of this demand includes social networking, coping with changes, and higher socialisation. Specifically, part of the requirements is time and language acquisition (Beyers and Goossens, 2003) and the quest to recognise and cope with diversities in the country. Though transitioning problems exist not only in university education alone, but this study only focusses on the transitioning of secondary school learners into university education, most importantly during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is expedient because learners are full of stressful expectations and aspirations to be at a higher level of their studies. This is supported by Ajani and Gamede's (2020) argument that first-year students, who are transiting from secondary education into the university system, find it difficult to adapt to the new demand and environment, which leads to emotional maladjustment and a stressful lifestyle.

A concern emanating from classroom observations and experiences among first-year students admitted in 2021, is worrisome. Naturally, students find it challenging to cope with a new level of education. Unfortunately, the situation among first-year students in 2021 is not limited to the generic challenges but the issues of the COVID-19 pandemic in the university system. The advent of the COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 threw upheavals into the world. The aftermath is met not only in the social and economic life of the world but also affects education to some extent (Omodan, 2020a; Omodan, 2020b). The virus, called COVID-19, adjudged by the World Health Organisation as a pandemic, spreads quickly, is deadly, and is easily transmittable (WHO, 2020a; WHO, 2020b). In order to contain this virus, various countries were shut down with a keen interest in mandating social distancing among people, the use of face masks, restriction of people from meeting, and limiting large social congregations (WHO, 2020a; WHO, 2020b; Onyema et al., 2020). Several governments also foisted measures such as making people adhere to a lockdown (movement restriction), social distancing, and stay-at-home rules (Jimola and Ofodu, 2021; Jinadu, Oyaremi and Rufai, 2021). Implementing the several measures as discussed above, education institutions devised various means to ensure that teaching and learning was not totally disrupted due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities in South Africa adopted online learning and, in some cases, opted for blended learning.

Rural learners transitioning into the university system during this period have more challenges because South African rural schools suffer from a lack of adequate resources, including the internet and its usage, among several other social inequality issues (Dube, 2020). The rural learners transitioning into rural universities, lack the needed acumen to cope with the online learning approach adopted by the universities to contain the spread of COVID-19 in the country. This assumption is supported by Spaul (2013) who stated that most students admitted into South African rural universities are from previously disadvantaged communities and high schools with little or no opportunities for learners' development.

The lack of adequate resources in the rural secondary school has affected the knowledge and usage of sophisticated academic resources by students from rural backgrounds (Nghambi, 2014; Okongo, Ngao, Rop, and Nyongesa, 2015). The majority of rurally located universities also operate with limited resources as a result of limited funding. A lack or limited funding has been linked to students' inability to adjust to the new system of higher learning (Kahlenberg, 2001), which is a threat to the acquisition of the skills, knowledge, and competence of first-year students in the higher-level education systems (Badat, 2010). The challenges affecting rural universities, even before the 'new normal' due to COVID-19, are not limited to classroom infrastructures, inadequate laboratories and library facilities, inadequate computer laboratories, and in some cases, lack of enough and well-trained human capital (Danso, 2014; Chetty and Sue, 2016; Tjønneland, 2017; Mbulaheni, 2020). Combining the challenges of rural universities (Spaul, 2013; Dube, 2020), the challenges of first-year students transitioning into a higher level of learning (Beyers and Goossens, 2003; Ajani and Gamede, 2020), the challenges of the 'new normal', all students, including first-year students, are left with no other option than to engage with an online teaching and learning system. At most times, this is strange to the majority of the students whose academic performance could be described as unsatisfactory.

This observed tragedy can be seen in their lamentation to lecturers, tutors, and academic facilitators allocated to them. Part of their lamentation is that they find it challenging to navigate various learning platforms such as blackboard facilities, emails, and other online community platforms such as Blackboard Collaborate, Zoom, and the Microsoft team. Not only that, but there are many complaints about attempting online tests and meeting up with the submission of assignments and other tasks. Most of the students do not even know which university department is available to respond to their various issues. Access to an online library is also a challenge, and many of them rely on the

educational materials shared with them by their lecturers and colleagues. In this case, many lecturers face the dilemma of accommodating these students in their teaching and learning. When they have not submitted their tasks within the stipulated timeframe, lecturers are given countless excuses such as lack of internet electricity, hardship in coping with online teaching, and lack of sophisticated phones. To respond to these challenges faced by first-year students, the asset-based approach (ABA) encourages the use of all available and hidden resources within the university to the advantage and emancipation of students.

Theoretical Framework

The problem identified above needs an all-inclusive approach to emancipate first-year students in rurally located universities. As a result of this, the asset-based approach (ABA) was adopted to unravel the problem. This approach combines efforts to emancipate the marginalised people and communities by exploring their potential, strength, limited resources, and beauties of self-development (Syarifuddin and Amir, 2017). ABA accommodates the strength of peoples' diversities, thoughts, cultures, and traits in the process of finding solutions to the problem (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2018). In universities, this means that lecturers, students, and the university administrations are uniquely recognised and valued for what they can offer, most specifically in ameliorating the challenges of first-year students. Therefore, ABA is suitable for this study because it aims to point rural communities and their people to their hidden strength, power, and resources. Doing this will enhance their unity towards building social networking in their community by getting to know the domicile of their assets (Coleman, Minor, Seed and Wakeman, 2020). This corroborates the argument of Kobayashi, Cloutier, Khan and Fitzgerald (2020) that ABA is predominant in the idea to emancipate the vulnerable rural communities, with the idea that they can leverage their resourcefulness, residences, and knowledge to emancipate themselves. In this study, the university system is viewed as a community comprised of students, lecturers, administrators, and other stakeholders who possess the necessary acumen to assist first-year students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

When university communities, most especially the rural universities, bank and rely on their assets, it develops human capital and enables them to discover talents and gifts alongside the ability to maximise their assets (Shiggins, Soskolne, Olenik, Pearl, Haaland-Johansen, Isaksen, Jagoe, McMenamin, and Horton, 2020). ABA also enables social groups to focus more on their opportunities than their weaknesses (Coleman et al., 2020). This is also in line with the argument of Reardon (2014), that people's assets include human capital, environmental, political, and cultural assets are available for their own development. This could also be viewed as giving voices to the voiceless within the principles of equality and equal opportunities. The asset-based approach allows students, lecturers, and other relevant stakeholders to be collaboratively involved in their sustainability (De Andrade and Angelova, 2020). This is to say that all hands must be on deck to ensure that first-year students are assisted in their new life and environment with new ways of doing things. In this, the assets include the lecturers, administrators, knowledge, and other physical resources. When these physical and human resources are galvanised together, the limited available resources could be transformed to cater to the assumed marginalised rural students. Owing to the assumption of ABA, all communities if it comprises people, are asset rich. Therefore, this becomes a call for the rural universities to explore their rich assets for the purpose of students, most especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. The major research question and objectives below further give direction to the study.

Research Question and Objectives

To respond to the problem faced by the first-year students transitioning from a high school level to a university one during the COVID-19 pandemic, the following research question was raised:

- How can the academic challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic on students transitioning from rural schools to rural universities be ameliorated?

To answer the above research question, the following research objectives were formulated to pilot the study, that is, the study:

- Investigates the challenges faced by the first-year students transitioning from rural schools to rural universities during the COVID-19 'new normal'.
- Explores the possible solutions to the identified challenges.

Methodology

This session discusses the research process adopted to find solutions to the challenges of first-year students during the COVID-19 pandemic. The adopted process includes the research paradigm and design, participants' selection, instrumentation and data analysis, and ethical consideration. The study was conducted under the Transformative Paradigm (TP). This was considered the most appropriate because the situation the first-year students found themselves in during the COVID-19 pandemic needed to be changed for the better. The transformative paradigm is appropriate because it allows collaboration between the researcher and the researched to transform social and historical predicaments (Chilisa, 2012). According to Frey (2018), this paradigm plays an emancipative role by alleviating the social and socioeconomic marginalisation of the people. In this study, the students, who are the major receivers of the challenges associated with the COVID-19 'new normal', are perceived to be socially and economically underprivileged because of their rural background coupled with the inadequacy in the rural universities. Therefore, the study is stationed to transform their existing status quo for the better.

To achieve this, the study adopted Participatory Research (PR) as a research design. This design was considered relevant because it implements the collaborative assumption of TP towards providing a collaborative solution to the people's problem by themselves (Banks et al., 2013). The Transformative Paradigm, according to Kivunja and Kuyini (2017: 35), "assumes a transactional epistemology, in which the researcher interacts with the participants". PR appreciates the coming together of the researched and the researcher(s) to learn from their experiences, actions, and inactions towards finding solutions to issues. This agrees with Kleine, Pearson and Holloway's (2016) argument that PR values and recognises local knowledge and the experiences of local people (people facing the problem) to be involved in generating solutions. In this study, the researcher has relied on the knowledge, experiences, actions, and inactions of the first-year students at the selected university and make them the primary participants of the study.

The participants for this study are first-year students at a selected rural university in South Africa. First-year students were selected because they face various challenges in the wake of the COVID-19 'new normal' in the university system. Not only that, but they were assumed to come from previously disadvantaged rural secondary schools, which has limited exposure to the use of possession of the Internet. On the other hand, their university is located within a rural and previously deprived location with limited educational resources. Therefore, ten first-year students were selected for this study using a convenient sampling technique focusing on those who attended rural secondary schools. The sample size is considered enough because it falls within the prescribed minimum of 8 and the

maximum of 15 participants required in qualitative studies (Lopez and Whitehead, 2013). The use of a convenient sampling technique was appropriate because students were learning from home at the time of this study. Only a minute percentage of them were accommodated in the campus residence. Therefore, it becomes expedient to use only those who are available and possess the needed characteristics and convenience to be reached (Farrokhi and Mahmoudi-Hamidabad, 2012).

An online interview was used to collect data from the participants. This strategy became expedient because the students were working from home at the time of the study. Even those admitted into the university's residence mostly walked from the library to their various rooms. This made it difficult for the researcher to meet them face-to-face, necessitating email communication, WhatsApp, and phone calls. The researcher contacted some of those who were easily available via their previous communication with the researcher (one of their lecturers). The data collected was analysed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis was used to enable the researcher to study the collected data and break it down into reasonable themes based on the research objectives that were already in two themes. The six steps of thematic analysis propounded by Braun and Clarke (2006) was adopted. These six steps were for the researcher to familiarise themselves with the data, code the data, formulate relevant themes, review the themes, give the themes appropriate names, and make sense of the data by interpreting them. This was followed based on the objectives of the study.

Ethical consideration in research is fundamental and must be observed to protect the researcher and the participants from potential harm by ensuring that all the parties consented to the research process (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011; Fleming, 2018). There must be a mutual agreement between the researcher and researched, where the participants will be given the freedom to participate voluntarily. In this case, the participants were informed adequately about the research, their participation was not made compulsory, and their freedom to withdraw at any time, should they wish to do so, was granted to them. They were made to sign a consent form to justify their willingness to participate in the study. Their names and identity were protected from the beginning to the presentation stage. Pseudonyms were used to represent participants' statements during the data presentation stage. The ten students were given codes as: S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, S6, S7, S8, S9, S10.

Data Analysis and Presentation of Findings

In this section, the data collected with a transformative paradigm and participatory research lens is presented. The data is presented in line with the objectives of the study. Each objective was analysed in themes. The two themes were derived from each objective. The generation of themes was done based on the principles of thematic analysis as discussed above. The table below gives a clear understanding of the data presented.

Table 1: *Thematic representation of data based on the research question and objectives*

Research Question: How can the academic challenges brought by the COVID-19 pandemic on students transitioning from rural schools to rural universities be ameliorated?	
Objectives	Analysis of Sub-themes
Investigation of the challenges faced by the first-year students transitioning from rural schools to rural universities during the COVID-19 new normal.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Inadequate knowledge of the Internet. 2. Unreliable and bad internet connection.
Explores possible solutions to the challenges.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Provision of internet data and access to University Wi-Fi. 2. Students' readiness to learn and adaptability need.

Objective 1, theme 1: Inadequate knowledge of the Internet of things

The evidence from the data collected confirms that first-year students, in the selected university, are behind in using the Internet. They have little knowledge that could assist them in navigating various online platforms used by the institution during the COVID-19 pandemic. This may not be unconnected because most students are from rural communities, adjudged to be previously disadvantaged communities (Spaull, 2013). The statements below are the responses of the students:

S1: *"I encountered problems with online learning because I was not familiar with it before; as a result, I was left behind on some modules that put so much pressure on me."*

S2: *"I found it hard to adapt and become familiar with the online platform because of network interruptions."*

S3: *"As effective as online learning is, we come across obstacles in understanding it as we are not used to face-to-face classes from high school, and the worse challenge is that we were never taught how to join classes and submit an assignment. Some of us come from disadvantaged schools we don't have basic knowledge on how to use a computer. Where do you start when you want to type your assignment, where to change the font and many other things."*

S8: *"Some of us are from the rural area and not familiar with computing, we do not even own laptops, attending class using a cell phone is a serious problem because sometimes you can't even see what's written due to the small screen on our phones."*

From participant S1, one could deduce that the student is not used to using an online platform for teaching and learning; the student had not used such a device. The newness of the platform made the student lag in academic work. Participant S2 also supported this by attesting that he found it difficult to adapt to online learning, and the Internet also seems unstable which affected his ability to cope well. The statement of S3 also confirms that they are not used to face-to-face learning in their previous level of education, which affects their quick adaptation. S3 also indicated that they were not taught how to navigate the system, join online classes, or respond to assessments. This is also connected to the fact that there is lockdown where both students and lecturers are working from. According to S3, they are mostly from disadvantaged homes with no basic knowledge of computers. In line with this, participant S8 also indicated that they are from rural communities and do not know computers and computing. They do not even have internet enabled facilities such as laptops, so they end up using their phone to attend classes which is not appropriate because the level of their phones is too low to accommodate such high-tech engagement.

These statements below also corroborate the above participants' statement on the issues of knowledge and the usage of the Internet:

S9: *"The biggest threats I have encountered as a first-year student during COVID-19 is failure to complete tasks or assignments with limited time. Lecturers don't want to know that we are not used to this online thing."*

S10: *"As a first-year student, I have lived all my life in the rural side of QwaQwa, I came to know so many things when I started my university, and they are strange. I had difficulties understanding online learning, which has made me miss many classes."*

The statement from participant S9 also reiterates that they (rurally located first-year university students) are not used to working online due to their background, which makes them fall behind in their academic activities. To support this, S10 confirms that he lived all his life in a rural area and began to know many things at the university level; it made most university activities strange to him. The participant also reiterated that the compulsory use of online platforms for learning is a big challenge to him.

From the above analysis, it has been revealed that first-year students in the selected rural university are challenged by their inability to acclimatise themselves to online learning tools, as the advent of COVID-19 has made universities in South Africa engage with complete online learning to mitigate the spread of COVID-19. The challenge of first-year students found in this study is also linked to the fact that most rural university students are from rural communities adjudged to be previously disadvantaged communities (Spaull, 2013). These finding also confirms Nghambi's (2014) findings that first-year students lack adequate resources in rural secondary schools, which has resulted in them lacking an understanding and not coping well with the 'new normal' in the universities. Furthermore, the lack of resources in rural high schools also contributed to their lack of knowledge and the usage of sophisticated academic resources (Okongo et al., 2015).

Objective 1, theme 2: Unreliable and bad Internet connection

Another challenge that the first-year rural university students encountered was bad and unstable internet connections. According to the participants, they were unable to do well in their studies because there was unreliable internet as most internet service providers are only functional when there is electricity. The internet signal weakens when electricity is off. The statements below confirm that the challenge persists among the rural first-year students:

S1: "Then, I also had network problems as I was not able to log in on collaboration sessions most of the time due to bad connectivity."

S2: "As a first-year student, I found it hard to engage in my studies due to the difficulties of having to study online coupled with internet issues."

S4: "Online learning is not that bad, but my problem is in the Global Protect we use, which takes time to connect, and this leads to us arriving late in class and missing important information that's being imparted to us."

S5: "Failure to attend online classes due to network issues and not enough data to download all the necessary material required to complete my tasks."

S9: "...due to network issues and electrical crisis around Qwaqwa which is a huge problem that makes it impossible to participate well in everything concerning schoolwork because when there's no electricity the network also is disturbed, and we can't log in to the blackboard."

S1 complains that a network problem restricted her from logging into one of the learning applications, Blackboard collaborates. In the same vein, participant S2 also shared the same sentiment that he found it hard to engage with his academic activities because of bad and unstable internet connections. In S4's statement, one could also deduce that the availability of the Internet is not friendly to the students living in rural communities. It even inhibits them from using the Global Protect application that enables them to access free internet. S5 also confirms that students fail to

attend classes due to network issues and a shortage of internet data. Not only that, but S9 also agrees with other participants that network issues resulted from the epileptic electricity supply, which has become a huge problem in the community they live in. To corroborate this, participant S6 also has this to say:

"We cannot join classes; electricity crisis is the main challenge we face right now, which influences network connectivity. "Global protect" given by the university is also the main challenge since it is unreliable and unstable. Remember, as students, we are given assignments that require us to visit Internet sites frequently, YouTube channels for research, but Global protect does not allow us to do so. We even end up purchasing our own data to access all the information we need. We cannot even access videos sent to us on Blackboard since Global protect is restricted. All these factors make us regret ourselves for coming into the university."

The statement by S6, as indicated above, also borders on unstable and bad internet that is rampant in the rurally located communities of South Africa. This may be connected to the previous revelations that unreliable electricity supply affects the network provider that supplies internet data, among others. This was justified by S7 that:

"The biggest challenge is the electricity problem which affects the network connectivity. It made tests or assessments difficult to submit in time. Even Internet data mostly run out, and it causes you to disconnect from the class."

From the statements by S7, one could deduce that electricity supply plays a significant role in ensuring the availability of the Internet in the rurally located communities. However, this has been found to be a huge challenge to the academic activities of first-year students.

Drawing from the above analysis, it was discovered that one of the challenges hindering first-year students' academic activities was bad, unstable, and unreliable internet connections. This could also be linked to the fact that those rural communities fall under what could be regarded as the previously disadvantaged community who have suffered unequal distribution of social amenities and other basic resources (Fintel, 2018). This finding aligns with Kahlenberg's, (2001) that most rurally located universities also operate with limited recourses. Furthermore, the findings of Kahlenberg (2006) confirm that limited resources are responsible for students' inability to adjust to the new system of higher learning, which is a threat to the acquisition of skills, knowledge, and competence of the first-year students' higher-level system (Badat, 2010). This is also in line with Mbulaheni's (2020) findings, that a lack of facilities such as computer sets are a major problem to the implementation of the 'new normal' in universities.

Objective 2, theme 1: Provision of internet data and access to university Wi-Fi

To respond to challenges faced by first-year students transitioning to the university level during the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants confirmed a need for access and provision of internet access to either personal or university data. This has been reported in this study as a challenge facing the academic activities of the students. See the below participant statements:

S1: "It will be better if we are given data from the university because the majority of us cannot afford data, and the Global protect app does not work at all."

S4: "A simple solution to the above-mentioned challenge would be that the varsity must actually allocate data to each student every month since I believe that, for example, allocating 30GB - 50 GB would be much cheaper than using Global Protect itself."

S8: *“Students must be given access to campus Wi-Fi, and we must be provided with enough prepaid data which we can use instead.”*

S5: *“For solutions, I think that students should be allowed to get access to campus internet, and we should be given data because the global protect app that we are using has many restrictions and it always disconnects us during online classes and tests.”*

S6: *“Perhaps provision of monthly data could be the best solution to these challenges because we are suffering, especially as first-year students.”*

Among the solutions suggested by the participants, is the need for unhindered access to the Internet to cope well with online learning. This is evident by the statement from S1 that they are better off if provided with internet data by the university, with an argument that the Global Protect application given to them is ineffective. In the statement by S4, the same agitation was made with the recommendation that 30 to 40GB of data would go a long way in assisting them. The suggestion by S8 is also on the need for data, with a recommendation that students should be given access to campus Wi-Fi to enable them to use campus internet. S5 also supports the view that students should be given access to campus so they may access the Internet or could be provided with data. The statement by S6 is also in line with other participants that monthly provision of Internet data would be best for them. In the same proposition, S10 and S9 also had this to say:

S10: *“The best way for students to pass their modules will be to go to campus or get free data. The solution to that is that we must be provided with free data since we can’t go back to campuses due to the current situation of COVID-19.”*

S7: *“We fail, not because we do not study, but our school way of service delivery has an influence. No one wants to fail. I think our university could implement new ways of approaching online learning and give us a better connection plan.”*

This argument is also the same as the views of others. Therefore, this recommendation appears unanimous among the participants as it tends to enhance students’ academic activities for the better. This also surfaces in the statement by S7 that they fail, not because they do not study but because the services relating to the online studies is not supported due to connectivity. The argument here is that students’ activities will be better when there is adequate access to the internet connection.

Based on the above analysis, the study revealed that the provision of internet data and access to the university Wi-Fi would go a long way in assisting the students in navigating the hurdles of being first-year students. This finding may not be unconnected to the fact that these students are new in the higher level of education with different environmental demands. They are also from rurally located communities with little or no knowledge of the Internet. As recommended by the students, the solution is in line with the assumption of the asset-based approach, which is mainly to emancipate the marginalized by exploring their potential, strength, and limited resources for self-development (Syarifuddin and Amir, 2017). The solution to this problem lies on university management, which could be considered an asset that is available within the community (university). This finding also corroborates the recommendation of Coleman et al. (2020) that using the available assets within the community will enhance their unity towards building social networking in their community by getting to know the domicile of the assets within themselves.

Objective 2, theme 2: Students' Readiness to Learn and Adaptability Need

As part of the solutions provided by the participants, it was evident that the first-year students also have a share in how the problem could be ameliorated. Among these, is that students need to adapt to the 'new normal' and show readiness for their studies irrespective of any challenges. This is not limited to the fact that students need to learn how to do things in line with the 'new normal' brought about by COVID-19.

S2: "The solution to all this is to simply learn to be more understanding of such things as the pandemic outrage has become our new norm."

S3: "It is, therefore, our responsibility as students to adapt to the changes and find a way forward by studying hard and ensuring that we pass all our modules by all means."

S4: "Going back to campus was our escape plan on how to continue with our academic work minus the online learning stress, but with the increasing cases of COVID-19, it's impossible. It is now up to us to try and find those who understand online learning more and learn from them."

S5: "It is our responsibility to make up our minds to ensure we do what is needed to be done by checking Blackboard every day without fail to keep track of what is happening."

From the participants' statements above, one could deduce that the first-year students transitioning from rural high schools to universities also realised that they need to take responsibility for their academic activities. This is reflected in the statement by S2 that the students need to be more understanding that the pandemic has 'come to stay', which means they must adapt to the new norm. The statement by S3 also affirms that students need to adapt by studying hard to pass their modules during the pandemic. Even that statement by S4 also supports that the students need to find those who understand online learning better to teach them more since the pandemic has made it impossible to go back to face-to-face learning. This is supported by the statement by S5 that the students must make up their minds and ensure that all academic activities are done diligently by checking Blackboard every day to be sure that nothing is missing or remains undone. Blackboard is one of the learning platforms used by the university. In the same line of recommendation, the following participants also have this to say:

S6: "It's up to us to ditch the attitude of saying online learning is hard because we don't benefit from it, but we fail from it. It's up to us to change our mindset into positive thinking and come out victorious in online learning in this disruptive pandemic."

S9: "This is not to say that we as students must not do anything to help ourselves, we need to understand that the pandemic is not the fault of anybody; therefore, we need to adapt."

S10: "The solution is that for the second semester in order to do better than the first one, I have to come to reality and move to the private accommodations around the campus or inside the university premises in the student residence."

Participant S6 also recommends that students take away the attitude that online learning is difficult and must face reality. In the same vein, the statement by S9 also confirms that students need to adapt to the new ways because the emergence of COVID-19 is nobody's fault, therefore, academic activities must continue. To support this argument, S10 also stated that students need to find solutions to some

of the issues by themselves. He said that he would move to a residence close to campus because he wants access to the range of campus internet and enough time to address academic demands.

Based on the above analysis, the study revealed that the students' mindset and readiness to adapt to the new normal would go a long way to respond to the challenges. This finding also complements the asset-based approach's proposition that all communities and their people are asset-rich. Therefore, concentrated, and collaborative efforts must be made to discover those assets (resources) and use them to their benefit (Kobayashi, Cloutier, Khan and Fitzgerald, 2020). To this end, the first-year students, who are the participants, also realised that they must contribute by looking inward towards exploring their strengths rather than weaknesses (Coleman et al., 2020).

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the above findings from the data collected, within the purview of the Transformative Paradigm and lensed using PR and ABA, we can conclude that the challenges hindering first-year rural university students' academic activities are students' inability to acclimatise themselves with online learning tools and unstable internet connections in the rural community. It was also concluded that the provision of internet data and access to university Wi-Fi alongside students' readiness to adapt to the 'new normal' are a dimension that could enhance the academic activities of first-year rural learning in the universities. Based on this, it is recommended that rural universities, that majorly admit students from rural communities, should provide adequate internet access to first-year students to navigate the 'new normal'. Lastly, the first-year rural university students should also take responsibility for their learning by making sure that they study hard with little or no reliance on external intervention.

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