



# Quality Assuring Unknown Territory

## *Reviewing the University of Johannesburg's Pandemic Teaching and Learning Approach*

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### Abstract

The declaration of COVID-19 as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation saw billions of students around the world unable to attend classes. On 15 March 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national disaster and ‘lockdown,’ impacting every aspect of life, as the country shut down for 21 days and all educational institutions closed. The University of Johannesburg (UJ), one of 26 South African universities, with a total student population of 50,000 students was no exception. In this chapter, the authors critically reflect on the university’s review of what has been termed education’s ‘new normal’ and the findings related to the experiences of remote teaching and learning. UJ exhibits a deeply held commitment to social justice, equity, access, and excellence, and these values remained paramount during the course of the pandemic. In changing modalities to emergency remote teaching, using online and electronic platforms, UJ ensured the uninterrupted continuation of its academic and social justice goals. The UJ management approved a quality assurance process that was specifically developed to assess the implementation of Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT). The QA review addressed the period of remote teaching and learning from 15 March 2020 to 31 July 2020, which was the first semester. The intention of the review was to identify and share areas of good practice across the university, and to identify areas in which additional support may be needed, especially during the next phase of teaching, and considering the uncertainties surrounding the trajectory of the pandemic. To achieve this dual mandate, the review focused on the effectiveness of the transition to ERT and through an extensive process, which included reviews of modules online, interviews with academics, support structures, and other data analyses, the authors reflect and distil findings from the review report on ERT.

The findings of the review were not unexpected, especially given the digital divide and the need to build cognitive and social bridges to engage students in the process of learning and teaching. The mandate of the university

was to ensure that the academic year was not lost despite the disruptions, and that no student would be left behind. The experiences of academics, support staff, and students identified several unexpected benefits to the transition, highlighted hurdles which were encountered, and showcased innovative practices that emerged from necessity.

This chapter provides insights into the agility of the university's ERT response and is a reflective, introspective account of the UJ experience of teaching and learning during the lockdown, and implications for the future.

**Keywords:** Quality Assurance; Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT); COVID-19; staff experience; teaching and learning

## Introduction

South African education was wrought from apartheid, with deep fissures of inequity and inequality in the system, resulting in a fractured system of higher education (HE). The equity of access to HE and success in the system largely remain stratified along race and class lines. The post-democratic South Africa, while unbound from formalised exclusion to HE, remains a context in which access is variable and is largely dependent on socio economic factors (Jansen 2009; Soudien 2012). In a South Africa that continues to be riddled with injustice, poverty, and inequality, it stands to reason that teaching and learning has to be rooted in and framed by a social justice perspective. Bell defines social justice as 'full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their need. The process of social justice should be democratic and participatory, inclusive and affirming of human agency and human capacities for working collaboratively to create change' (Bell 1997:3-4).

The HE environment remains, as Zinn and Rogers (2012:76) articulate, 'a battlefield, in which the struggle to build voice, agency and community continues.' This battlefield, already bedevilled by social, economic, and access inequities, suddenly had to face the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic. In response to the pandemic's unknown territory, South Africa's President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster (15 March 2020). A nationwide lockdown took effect, and consequently, a prolonged period of disruption of the normal activities of a traditionally contact-based university ensued. The impact and the disruption were profound, requiring agile and coherent responses to save the academic year as the country proceeded through the various lockdown levels.

The University of Johannesburg (UJ) is a comprehensive institution, offering a wide spectrum of qualifications from higher certificates to doctoral degrees, with 80 percent of the student body in undergraduate programmes. The university's rapid pivot to Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) had ramifications for all divisions within the university, including our diverse

student population. Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust, & Bond (2020:13) describe ERT as an attempt not 'to re-create a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional supports in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis.' The battlefield, alluded to by Zinn and Rogers (2012), resurfaced with new points of deflection in 2020, as the pandemic unfolded.

As a juxtaposition to the inhumane poverty and equality, the inherent value of humanising pedagogies is a just alternative to building an 'inclusive, socially just, and democratic political order' (Delpont 2016:6). Online learning, mediated by technology and hampered by poor and inequitable access, troubled the enactment of a humanising pedagogy, rendering difficult student participation and engagement in the learning process. With full awareness of the profile of the UJ student body, the university commenced the ERT process by affirming its commitment to social justice, equity, access, and excellence. This position, and the subsequent ERT mechanisms drove all academic and other activities. The disruptive nature of ERT at UJ 'provoked innovative pedagogical practices and even incidental or accidental learnings for academics and students' (Motala & Menon 2020:96). A key feature of the university's strategic plan (2014-2025) is a commitment to excellence in teaching and learning. This includes bolstering the university's capacity for blended and hybrid modalities by leveraging 21<sup>st</sup>-century technologies. It is this investment that allowed the university to use its existing resources, structures, and capabilities to enable its ERT.

A pandemic pedagogy refers to 'the approaches we employ in our learning environments to teach and foster learning in the context of a serious health crisis and the spread of a new disease' (Smith & Hornsby 2020:1). The haste with which universities were prompted into action, meant that there was little time to interrogate pedagogical approaches. Prompted by the speed of its transition to ERT, UJ elected to reflect on whether it had delivered on quality teaching and learning. This chapter outlines the process of quality review of ERT at the university and reflects on the findings, drawing on the report of the review (UJ 2020).

### Quality Assuring ERT

The purpose of the review was to identify areas of good practice to be shared, and to identify areas in which support would be needed during the next phase. The review was premised on notions of fairness: How best to assess the goals of ERT and provide a 'safe space' in which staff members and students could reflect on their own experiences, and on the extent to which their actions had succeeded in addressing the need. To this end, the principles of fitness for and fitness of purpose, long-held values in the South African Quality Assurance

(QA) framework, and established measures of institutional quality referenced in the Council on Higher Education (CHE) audit and accreditation criteria, were relevant. 'Fitness for purpose' refers to the alignment between an institution's offerings and its mission and objectives. It locates the institution's mission and objectives in relation to local, national, and international dynamics. Fitness for and of purpose cannot easily be separated in determining a value proposition for quality. To meet both fitness requirements, the approach taken in the QA review aimed to assess the quality of ERT teaching and learning, and the experience of the transition by academic and support staff as well as students (predominantly undergraduate).

### *The Approach Used*

The review made use of a mixed methodology, in an approach similar to that applied by the CHE/Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC): Documents were surveyed, staff members and students interviewed, and the 'panel' of questioners' observations provided for a triangulation of the evidence which was obtained to reach a certain conclusion about the effectiveness of the ERT project. The approach to the review was designed to ensure that multiple perspectives on ERT were captured in the process.

At the start of the ERT project, the Centre for Academic Technologies (CAT) had surveyed 1,500 modules to determine the extent of module 'presence' in the learner management system, Blackboard (Bb). The modules were evaluated to ensure that a certain minimum was met: The learning guide was online, a welcome to the lecturers was in place, contact details for the relevant admin and support people were provided, and learning activities, assessments, and assessment feedback were included.

After the initiation of ERT, reviews of every module that was taught in the ERT mode were conducted by the Centre for Academic Staff Development among the student body. Using BlueExplorance, UJ evaluated 1,594 undergraduate modules that were offered to which 52,146 responses were received (a response rate of 28.95%). The reports per faculty and for UJ were drawn from the online evaluations. A Likert scale was used with 1 = Strongly disagree to 4 = Strongly agree. There was no neutral option, although 'Not applicable' was used where an object could not be rated. High scores (3+) indicate student consensus and thus a strength. Low scores (2 or lower) indicate an area that requires attention. Table 1 demonstrates an overall positive rating of the student experience of ERT (UJ 2020:69).

The overall mean of 3.23 is favourable, and despite the different context from the previous semester, it compares well: 3.28 percent – thus, only 0.05 percent higher. There is also a consistency in ratings, which meet the 3+ threshold which was reflected across the faculties.

Table 1: Mandatory module evaluation: Institution-wide score analysis

Question	Mean
I understood the changes made to my module when teaching and learning moved to online/remote learning.	3.28
The learning outcomes for the module are clear.	3.21
A variety of learning activities were used to help me achieve the module learning outcomes.	3.18
The assessment tasks were linked to the module outcomes.	3.32
Self-assessment activities helped me to track my learning and progress in the module.	3.17
A variety of assessment tasks were used in the module (e.g., quizzes, short exercises, paragraphs, and essays).	3.20
I can apply knowledge from this module to real world situations.	3.26
Overall mean	3.23

A review panel was constituted with five internal and two external representatives, all professors of education. The panel undertook more detailed module evaluations than those conducted by CAT, assessing the quality of the online presence of the module. Panel members were provided with moderator access to the modules online, with the requisite permission of the faculties. Evaluation was undertaken according to a set of criteria. Teaching interactions, assessments, progression through the module, and lecturer responsiveness were assayed. Although these reviews were useful, the fact that many lecturers and students had to move teaching and learning online into WhatsApp and Skype, for example, meant that these reviews had often to be tempered by consideration of parallel activities in different technological platforms.

Finally, using purposeful sampling, the panel conducted extensive interviews with individuals and groups of staff members across both academic and non-academic units, including the library, student administration, student support, fees, and finances. Each unit in the academic support services was requested to attend, all deans and vice-deans were interviewed, groups of six heads of departments from each academic department, and senior faculty administrators were interviewed. The perspectives of university managers – both academic and support – enriched these observations. The review identified a small group of notable individuals within faculties with levels of expertise and skills in online teaching and learning, who acted as ‘online champions’ and whose input on ERT proved invaluable. Students on representative structures were also interviewed by the panel. All student representatives who were sitting on representative structures were invited to the interview, and sessions were well attended. The directors and heads of divisions in every support unit of the university were approached for an interview and were invited to nominate staff members in their teams to attend

the interviews as well. Interviews were voluntary. Services staff (i.e. security, cleaning, and ground staff) were not interviewed.

Interviews were not done by closed 'questionnaires,' but rather by a set of open-ended questions which were posed in a space in which the interviewees' experiences were the focus. Interviewees spoke reflectively and critically, providing an overall assessment of ERT. The interviews with the staff members and students focused on programme management, teaching and learning considerations, the provision of student support, staff capacity in ERT, staff well-being, and the crucial question of assessment for ERT. The staff members were encouraged to be frank in the interviews, with the panel providing a safe space in which the challenges and frustrations as well as achievements could be noted. The interviewees indicated that this had value for the reflective nature of the exercise across 67 group and individual interviews. All interviews were recorded, and detailed notes were logged online.

The report canvassed a cross-section of quality considerations and personal experiences of teaching and learning. The process provided an outlet for staff members' experiences and judgements of the transition to ERT. Although some students were interviewed, they were not the focus of the review. The quantitative reviews which were undertaken by other divisions, were used extensively in determining the responses which were needed to the student experience. The student interactions in this review were used as part of the triangulation of the staff members' experiences. Existing qualitative and quantitative data which were obtained from surveys, were used to triangulate the inferences and conclusions that were drawn from the data which were collected for review purposes. Data sets included those that were drawn from institutional and faculty reviews, targeted module reviews, and students' evaluations of their experiences. The entire process, including the production of the report, took six weeks and addressed the reflective and evaluative goals of the review, providing insights into the period and identifying the areas of support that were needed for the undefined future.

### *Internal Quality Review*

In most quality engagements that are already in the system (i.e., accreditation, audit, and national review), the *experiences* of the staff members are unsought, and those of students are sought in terms of what can broadly be termed 'the student experience.' The UJ evaluation attempted to balance the evaluation of the outputs of ERT (teaching and learning, assessment, student interaction, completion rates, etc.) with the experiences of support and academic staff members and students. As a result, the QA review sought input across a wide range of considerations likely to impact on staff members and students and which could in turn disrupt the timely completion of their programmes of

study. For some, especially students in their final year and students studying for professional qualifications, the pandemic and its consequences for universities placed post-programme employment or professional registration prospects at risk. As in other international cases, internships, work-integrated learning, clinical, and practical sessions were halted by measures to control the pandemic. ERT had to legitimately serve the educational need and meet the module and programme outcomes. Programmes accredited by statutory professional bodies such as the Health Professions Council of South Africa and the Engineering Council of South Africa, for example, meant that students had specific requirements to meet prior to the completion of their studies for professional registration to be granted (UJ 2020). However, the lack of access to workplaces or campuses had the potential to impact equally severely on students whose programmes contained practical sessions, such as those in the hospitality programmes and those in need of laboratory access (UJ 2020).

The CHE's view of ERT is that it was essentially an altered form of delivery using the same kinds of activities, albeit in a remote setting. How this was to be achieved was unclear and its usefulness for the *actual* transition to ERT was limited. Nonetheless, it provided a simple yardstick against which to measure UJ's successes over the period. Significantly, the CHE approved all programmes which were accredited in the contact mode for delivery in the distance mode, by announcing on 7 April 2020 that 'all higher-education qualifications registered on the National Qualifications Framework (NQF) that were previously accredited for the contact or distance mode of delivery [were to be] regarded as also accredited for the blended and online modes for the duration of the 2020 academic year' (CHE 2020:5). The accreditation 'extension' period has been extended in 2021 by an additional notice to cover the 2021 and 2022 academic years (CHE 2021). The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) too required reports on ERT, as well as on teaching, learning, assessment, and campus readiness plans by May 2020, and into the 2021 academic year. With Universities South Africa (USAf), DHET identified and assessed the implications for work-integrated learning, experiential learning, and practical sessions. In many cases, UJ was able to assist DHET, USAf, and CHE through providing its guidelines and documents for use across the sector.

### The Transition to ERT

The time that was taken to effect changes to the mode of delivery at UJ was a significant achievement, especially as there was no framework or standard operating procedure in place for how to manage HE during a pandemic. Nonetheless, CHE (2020) made clear that universities were required to quality assure their ERT offerings for the period of full lockdown (three weeks from

26 March 2020) and the period which followed, when the academic programme proceeded with restricted campus access, providing little by way of guidance as to how best such a quality assurance project should be undertaken. UJ defined the mechanisms through which it could a) self-reflect on the period in the context of its own, and the national quality framework, and b) conduct an assessment of the extent to which ERT met the goals of 'saving' the academic year and maintaining academic standards. A mechanism for the review was approved by governance structures in June 2020.

Quality assurance, staff development, academic administration, library services, and student support, among others all needed to direct their processes and efforts at supporting the move to ERT. Like the library, these teams work directly in support of the overarching academic project. Although the division under discussion does not engage directly with students – unlike, for example, the library or student support services – the impact of its work is felt immediately on teaching and learning, a factor it shares in common with the work of units such as the library and the academic technologies division.

Globally, the pandemic saw over a billion students who were unable to attend classes in person (Mogaji & Jain 2020). UJ's senior management deliberated on how to proceed with teaching and learning, using ERT as distinct from 'online' or 'distance' education. As Nordmann, Horlin, Hutchison, Murray, Robson, Seery, & MacKay (2020) outline, 'remote' learning is different to 'distance learning' which has at its heart the assumption that the student and the teacher will be separated by time/space. The assumption that underpins distance learning, thus has at its core mechanisms to manage and traverse these spaces. Where online distance learning is used, there is a set of specific pedagogies and curricula that set out measured and impactful steps to ensure that learning is supported and effected, despite the distance between student and teacher (Smith & Hornsby 2020). ERT, however, was what UJ used for its rapid and practical approach to balancing the learning needs of its diverse student body against the urgent need to not lose an academic year (UJ 2020). Thus, the ERT approach, which is neither traditional contact learning nor traditional distance learning, proceeded from a different planning context, using non-contact teaching modalities to achieve its overall objectives. As Hodges *et al.* (2020:1) posit, '[ERT] is a way of thinking about delivery modes, methods, and media, specifically as they map to rapidly changing needs and limitations in resources.'

The inability to attend and teach in traditional in-person contexts, and the desire for social justice, gave rise to many and varied strategies to support and enable ERT, a staggering task for its almost 50,000 students, many of whom are drawn from among the poorest communities across the country. According to the Department of Basic Education, Quintile 1 schools in each

province cater for the poorest 20 percent of learners, while Quintile 5 schools cater for the least poor 20 percent of learners in the province. Quintiles 1 to 3 are no-fee schools, and their categorisation is 'according to the level of poverty in surrounding areas. The factors that they consider, include the surrounding infrastructure and how many homes in the area are made from brick, wood, iron sheeting, and so on' (SECTION 27 2017:146). For example, UJ's HEMIS data indicates that, of the 9,321 first time entering students in 2020, 5,274 were drawn from Quintiles 1, 2, and 3 schools.

Notwithstanding the fact that only a few students had access to the resources – technological or otherwise – that were needed to effect ERT, the university was able to very rapidly give effect to its ERT. Access to ERT was dependent on appropriate technology, bandwidth, data, and network coverage. These four aspects of access to teaching and learning are curtailed by the 'digital divide,' which is defined as the 'gap between those who do and those who do not have access to new forms of information technology' (Van Dijk 2006). Characterised by the United Nations (2021) as the potential new face of inequality, especially in light of the pandemic, this divide poses significant challenges to the UJ students and staff members.

Added to the social and economic issues – such as food insecurity, living conditions, and gender-based violence – which were already confronting UJ students, both students and staff members reported that they were feeling harrowed and anxious during the period between March and July 2020 (UJ 2020:84-86). Motala and Menon (2020) discuss how the inherent social inequality in South Africa made the challenges of ERT yet more difficult and contend that many of the modalities that were developed by universities to move teaching and learning online, operated from an expectation of access to the very resources that were not in place for the majority of South African students.

A detailed account of how this translated at both governance and academic levels is set out in Motala and Menon (2020:87), which include the following:

- Revising the academic calendar.
- Developing guides and toolkits for staff members and students to implement ERT.
- A week-long student orientation on remotely learning to use Bb.
- Revising modules to consider the deferring of practicals, laboratory sessions, or clinical training.
- Assessing which modules were online and how best to transition all undergraduate modules for Semester 1.
- Revising assessment for remote learning.

- There were no summative assessments for the first two weeks to allow students time to settle.
- Ensuring that all academic changes to modules, including assessments were submitted through faculty governance structures and to senate.

### The UJ Context

In its 15 years as a merged institution, UJ has focused on developing its research and teaching as a successful comprehensive university in Africa with a reputation for excellence. UJ's strategic plan to achieve global excellence and stature, provided a cohesive approach to developing institutional measures, structures, and functions, and has had considerable successes which permeated the institution's pandemic response. The creation of an enabling environment for ERT required governance, reporting, and communication, and all UJ structures were focused on this. The weekly updates from the Vice-Chancellor on the UJ COVID-19 webpage provided (and is still providing) a chronicle of activities and the unfolding of events. Online training and support were provided by both CAT and the library, as the Library App took its functions online. Governance structures for COVID-19 were established and steered decision-making. The 2020 academic calendar was rapidly revised and distributed, and ERT commenced on 20 April 2020, with targeted documents guiding students and staff members.

Unlike, for example, UNISA, UJ is a contact university, and lecturers and students alike are accustomed to interacting in face-to-face classroom sessions and other settings. The speed of the transition to ERT was challenging, specifically because the distance mode was not one with which the majority was familiar (UJ 2020:21). Added to this, removed from campus, lecturers and students immediately had to perform all academic duties from their homes, without access to the physical support resources ordinarily available on campus. Lecturers report that having to perform academically from their homes, while under lockdown, with family and other responsibilities, added to the already difficult challenges of interacting with students. Many lecturers had to rapidly acquire the skills needed to navigate the online environment, adapting their interactions and assessment as required. As Kupe notes, '[T]he very essence of pedagogy – the shared trust between teacher and learner – [had] been corroded by the imperative of social distancing' (Kupe 2020:1), as teaching and learning was forcibly 'decentralized into students' own homes' (Williamson, Eynon, & Potter 2020:108).

UJ's comprehensive status means that it offers a wide variety of programmes from higher certificates on NQF level 5 to doctorates on NQF level 10, demanding a wide range of knowledge and skills not only from lecturers,

but also from support services such as the library and the quality team. Table 2 sets out the enrolment patterns at the university (UJ 2020:13).

Table 2: Headcount enrolments

Registrations	Faculty	2020
Postgraduate	College of Business and Economics	2,983
	Faculty of Education	1,210
	Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture	259
	Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment	1,902
	Faculty of Health Sciences	1,217
	Faculty of Humanities	1,062
	Faculty of Law	202
	Faculty of Science	1,005
	<b>Postgraduate Total</b>	
Undergraduate	College of Business and Economics	14,815
	Faculty of Education	3,095
	Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture	1,066
	Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment	6,946
	Faculty of Health Sciences	2,888
	Faculty of Humanities	4,543
	Faculty of Law	1,534
	Faculty of Science	3,867
	<b>Undergraduate Total</b>	
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>48,594</b>

The extent of interventions and controls needed to manage the transition can be discerned from Table 2, as well as from Table 3, which provides a breakdown of the number of staff members to students, as well as the registration patterns (UJ 2020:13).

Approximately 30 percent of undergraduate programmes require work-integrated learning, practical sessions, or some form of experiential learning as part of their studies, a factor that had to be considered by the staff members as they were planning and preparing for teaching. The lack of access to campus facilities made these types of in-person teaching and learning engagements impossible. In some cases, lecturers were able to adjust by using online simulations, videos, or the like. In other cases, however, students and staff members had to wait for the facilities to reopen.

Table 3: Summary enrolment data (31 October 2020)

Headcounts	Total
Number of headcount undergraduate students registered in 2020	39,375
Number of headcount undergraduate students that deregistered in 2020 (cumulative)	617
Number of remaining undergraduate headcount registered students	38,758
Total number of course (module) enrolments taken by undergraduate students enrolled in 2020	288,718
Number of headcount postgraduate students registered in 2020	10,134
Number of headcount postgraduate students that deregistered in 2020 (cumulative)	314
Number of remaining postgraduate headcount registered students	9,820
Number of permanent staff members in 2020	3,992
Number of permanent instruction/research (academic) staff members in 2020	1,094

### QA in a Crisis

Given the scope of UJ’s offerings and the newness of ERT, the review was designed to allow for a frank evaluation, recognising the extreme demands that the situation placed on all who are concerned and being cognisant of the perception that QA is a bureaucratic burden which is imposed by either management or an external QA body (Seyfried & Pohlentz 2018:259).

Of course, South Africa is not unique in this experience, and universities across the world grappled with the importance of institutional innovation and resilience. From Malaysia (Abdullah, Husin, & Haider 2020), to the United States (Schlesselman 2020) to countries in Africa (Affouneh, Salha, & Khlaif 2020), academics and administrators sought to acquire and transfer the resources and capacity which were needed to enable the remote teaching and learning process. Czerniewicz, Agherdien, Badenhorst, Belluigi, Chambers, Chili, De Villiers, Felix, Gachago, Gokhale, & Ivala (2020) demonstrate how the pandemic exacerbated three forms of inequality in South Africa: Vital inequality, resource inequality, and existential inequality, and how this spanned the university sector in South Arica. The three inequalities are both shaped by, and are shaping the ‘nexus of mutually constitutive factors such as gender, culture, race, class and geopolitical context’ in constant flux (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2020:948). For UJ, these factors were at the core of the development of a humanising pedagogy, fit for the purpose of ERT. The process of pivoting to ERT, signalled a university coming to terms with a pandemic pedagogy which retains the student as an active participant in teaching and learning, taking context into account – in the words of Smith and Hornsby

(2020:6), 'Compassion and flexibility in our classroom needs to be a hallmark of pandemic pedagogy.'

In assessing the success of the ERT project and its impact on the staff members and students, the review sought to identify areas of good practice across the university, as well as those areas where additional support was needed. The latter focus was especially important given the lack of clarity on the trajectory of the pandemic, and which now, in the third wave, is still impacting on significant areas of the university's operations, restricting class sizes, impacting on the timetable, and requiring additional work and often repeat sessions from the academic staff.

UJ's transition to ERT was successful, at least in part, due to the fitness for purpose of structures, initiatives, and activities which were already in place prior to the start of the pandemic. As mentioned above, fitness of purpose and fitness for purpose are two quality principles of the HEQC/CHE (HEQC 2001). With regard to fitness of purpose, the intention was to assess and review UJ's transition to ERT and whether it was appropriate for the specific conditions of teaching and learning in South Africa. The key question in considering fitness for purpose is whether ERT was met at an appropriate level and with the required support, taking into account the needs of the students.

In line with its commitment to enhancing teaching and learning, several initiatives which were already in place, provided a sound basis from which ERT developed at a rapid speed. UJ's commitment to blended learning (Strategic Plan 2025) (UJ 2018) led to the implementation in 2019 of structures and support mechanisms which were needed for student success. First, at the start of the pandemic in South Africa in early 2020, over 300 programmes were already in blended format with a defined process in place to expand the adoption of blended learning.

Second, the first-year experience and the Integrated Student Success Initiative (ISSI), in combination with accredited and integrated tutor training and support, had significant positive effects on student success. ISSI uses data to plan and respond to student needs which are prioritised by faculties and the Academic Development Centre. Semester 1 of 2020 saw 43 interventions, with ERT ensuring that additional initiatives which were already underway, were speedily optimised.

Third, UJ has also consistently invested in CAT, of which the advantages were evident in the circulation of its contingency plan for ERT in early March 2020, meaning that even before the lockdown was announced, CAT and the faculties had already implemented many of the practices which were essential to make ERT successful. For example, most undergraduate students already used Bb as part of the first-year programme which introduces all students to learning in this environment. CAT instructional designers (IDs) are allocated

to each faculty, and at the beginning of the year had engaged with every department in UJ, devising customisable Bb templates for modules. By the time of lockdown, 96 percent of undergraduate modules were on Bb with the balance having to be created in March. CAT speedily developed, designed, and loaded a Bb module for staff members on ERT, and another for students. Extensive help was provided to all from a dedicated helpdesk and in targeted e-mails, Bb, and other forms of communication.

The active tracking of student activities was the final initiative, making it possible for UJ to know at any given point how many of its students were online, what device/s they were using to interact with the university, and on which activities they were most/least active. CAT tracked student and staff activities on Bb and, by the second half of semester 1, 85 percent of the undergraduate student body was active on Bb. Once data had been distributed, all but 350 students were online. Students who were not online, were contacted individually and, in each case, attempts were made to understand the contextual factors that were limiting their access and aided in addressing it. The distribution of 4,000 laptops to students (in addition to the 1,740 devices which were already provided to National Student Financial Aid Scheme recipients) served to enable access to teaching and learning. Pastoral, technological, pedagogical, and assessment support was also available to students and staff members.

### Staff Experiences of ERT

The review captured staff members' experiences, an uncommon inclusion in a QA review, keeping in mind the differences in disciplines, teaching styles, and circumstances. A clear set of common motifs emerged from this input as can be seen below, taken from interviews held with participants in the review.

Time and time pressures came out strongly in the feedback that was obtained in the reviews, as many of the staff members reported having to work quickly on their preparations while also learning to transition to ERT. Typical comments to this effect refer to '*intense pressure*,'<sup>1</sup> '*extra work*,' and a move that was both '*fascinating and nerve-wrecking*.' While some staff members were familiar with Bb, others were less so. Those who were already familiar with Bb reported a '*good head start*,' with some of them who were already using continuous assessment. Many of the staff members were already working on accredited degrees in the online mode and their '*experience and enthusiasm*' provided much-needed support, in a '*collegial*' and '*collaborative*' environment. Nonetheless, everyone felt the enormous time pressure, with one staff member commenting, '*now we were supposed to do it overnight*.'

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1 Comments from interviewees which were obtained from interviews that were held in the review, are indicated in inverted commas and italics.

The increased workload meant that both teaching and administrative staff were reliant on their line managers for communications and direction, as the university made and effected rapid decisions in a wide range of areas. The communication strategy of the university was intensified to ensure a two-way communication to inform decision-making (cf. Motala & Menon 2020). Many interviewees in management positions reported that they were feeling particularly besieged over this time, having to manage increased demands on their own work, as well as monitoring, managing, and supporting the work of those who were reporting to them. In addition to the staff members who were working long hours and experiencing fatigue and stress, many had to juggle work with other demands: *'There is literally no time when you are not doing UJ work;'* *'My life is a computer – since the online move. I'm on the laptop all day... almost 24 hours on the computer.'*

Lecturers reported that they were coping due to the support that was offered by the various support services, with students being directed to CAT, the library, psychological services, and the academic development centre for assistance. Although additional monitoring and administration demands added to the strain, lecturers were intent on the task at hand, doing their best to keep the academic year on track. For those who were already steeped in the online mode, the requisite pedagogy was already in place, which was evident in module reviews being undertaken by the panel. Data and connectivity constraints pushed lecturers to find ways to ensure *'socially just and highly inclusive teaching,'* with lecturers who were often being *'[p]ushed out of necessity to be mindful of the need for that.'*

A small number of interviewees expressed an aversion to ERT, in a blend of personal and professional identities related to what their sense of being an educator in a university should be. The classroom in an online setting is no longer as private a space as in the physical realm. In some cases, the reasons for the preference for traditional contact environments related to the discipline being taught. For example, in teaching students to be teachers, 'modelling' is used to provide trainee teachers with the skills that are needed to teach children. Given that for most children this will not be online, many found it *'particularly difficult to adjust to not having faces/bodies to teach.'* Some lecturers spoke about missing *'students, looking at their reactions, having fully informed conversation with one-to-one or one to a group'* and of *'teaching people you can see and interact with physically.'*

Another obvious result of the transition that was reported by both students and staff members was anxiety, exacerbated by an inconsistent electricity supply and a lack of cellular connectivity. Heads of departments reported that their staff members were fatigued and exhausted, continuing to perform under a bombardment of student communications, driven by

fear. Increased communication, although necessary, and multiple online meetings added to the stress. Support services staff too took strain as they worked alongside the academic staff, providing assistance and addressing student queries from home. The increase in the volume of work can be seen from one example – the ticket count in Table 4 which notes the number of queries logged with the CAT helpdesk between March and June 2020. Although the helpdesk was meant to address the students’ and staff members’ concerns about using Bb, it became a ‘one stop shop,’ with the staff members either responding to, forwarding, or referring queries across the range of issues. Queries which were received, included academic and administrative queries, which were forwarded to faculties, library access queries, fees queries, and so on. The majority related to questions of ‘how to’ manage ERT. The key point, however, is the increase in the volume of work for the staff members on the helpdesk – from 593 queries in the month of March to 3,739 queries in the month of April, a more than sixfold increase (UJ 2020:27).

Table 4: Number of helpdesk queries

Month	Number of tickets/queries dealt with
March 2020	593
April 2020	3,739
May 2020	3,545
June 2020	2,580
<b>Total</b>	<b>10,457</b>

In addition to the challenge relating to time and workload pressure, students and staff members struggled with connectivity. Both the rural and urban areas were problematic, which resulted in lecturers having to make use of any platform that made it possible to teach via Bb, WhatsApp, and even e-mail. Although Bb is the university’s official platform, it is data intensive and finding creative alternatives drove much of the teaching: ‘*Bb is harder to connect to than e-mail*’ or WhatsApp. Although it is very efficient, in that voice messages, documents, and videos can be easily distributed, WhatsApp meant that students had access to lecturers’ telephone numbers. A few reports of ‘*inappropriate content*’ and ‘*invasions of lecturers’ privacy*’ were received. The allocation of ‘night owl data’ meant that many students sent messages after hours. Three lecturers who were interviewed, reported that they were teaching after midnight to respond to student queries.

Technology was another constraint. Students have a variety of devices – from cell phones to tablets to laptops – but not all are able to run the software being required for their studies, resulting in alternative activities

having to be devised, including the use of simulation software and online educational gaming (where available), YouTube videos, etc. The suitability and appropriateness of devices are clearly programme-specific, and their implications for ERT have been addressed in 2021 with either access to computer laboratories, campus, and library facilities being managed to permit for use, or more suitable technology being provided to students in need. Finally, large classes were especially challenging, and lecturers would not have coped without the trained tutors.

### Was ERT a Success?

In open-ended interviews and in response to the question, ‘How successful can ERT be said to have been?’ lecturers agreed: ERT has worked to save the academic year. Responses were overall in the positive, with comments ranging from ‘*highly successful*’ to ‘*relatively successful*’ and ‘*fairly successful,*’ to ‘*It’s not a score – it has happened – we did it!*’ Not one comment was received which indicated that it had been a failure, or that it had not achieved its goal. Although responses as to how successful ERT was, varied, and taking the circumstances into consideration, lecturers commented, ‘*By any metric, not just student performance, this has been a success,*’ and ‘*We could have done it better, but we have done it better than other universities.*’ Interestingly, both staff members and students who were interviewed, commented that an increased trust in the staff members appeared among students, with one lecturer commenting that ‘*the students trust us – we are not going to do them in. As far as possible we will do what is in their best interest.*’

Linked to the above, there were mixed responses to working from home as lecturers managed multiple roles – household chores and home-schooling jostled for space alongside teaching, marking, and research. Many noted the flexibility of working from home with better time management. Interestingly, lecturers reported that they were feeling more connected to students, ‘*freed from the peer pressure...in the physical classroom,*’ and ‘*[i]n the online environment, students were more forthcoming, more brave. In the discussion board, they asked questions.*’ Some students took the opportunity to explore other readings, taking initiative, and undertaking additional research. For lecturers with repeat classes, ERT ‘*saved on work and allowed greater focus on better assessment.*’

Most significant was the adjustment to lecturers’ assessments of what constitutes good pedagogical practice. The majority of interviewees concurred with the view that the use of the online platforms was useful and committed to the use of blended learning in future. One lecturer’s comment is particularly telling: ‘*When the university resumes, I will continue to use the online because it serves to get our students together – some are outside the country – it’s easy for*

*them to meet because we meet at night – better for working students – helps to do PG supervision.*’ Another one remarked: *‘I believe that I learned as much as the students did. They taught me things and we learned together, which ended up being fun in the end,’* while another prosaically commented, *‘We cannot replace face-to-face teaching – no doubt about it – but the online has saved us and the students the year.’*

A consistent thread has been the demands which were placed on staff members across UJ who worked hard and long hours to support students. Students were anxious, needing *‘quick answers’* and *‘24/7 availability, partly because night-time data is cheaper.’* Students responded gratefully to the support which they received, while active staff collaboration and flexibility in dealing with students enabled greater engagement and participation. Without underplaying the challenges, new opportunities for professional growth emerged as lecturers, tutors, IDs, and support staff collaborated, as well as opportunities for students who demonstrated remarkable responsiveness and engagement. Students went to great lengths to connect and stay connected: *‘Students were insistent that “they did not want to be left behind”.*’ They appeared to be *‘spending more time [on their work]’* and the quality of work was often higher. ERT resulted, for many, in *‘on demand content’* and *‘flexibility, maybe also in the curriculum.’*

For staff members and students alike, however, the isolation was difficult, and the stress a burden, while ERT offered an opportunity to sustain some of the relationships and activities that characterised their daily lives. One student noted: *‘I miss my social gatherings at UJ – lecturers, book discussions, I miss conversation and the VC’s book thing, I miss the girls from the residences.’* Commenting on the impact of the pandemic on the disruption of these moments, a staff member noted that a university is *‘a space where people meet – without which the idea of a university would disappear rapidly. Lockdown has shown the importance and value of a meeting space such as the university.’*

Overall, lecturers reported no substantive amendments to curricula, but numerous modifications to pedagogy. Lecturers and IDs reported a new focus on interactivity and *‘prompt interactions.’* Seeing students in their homes appears positively to have influenced lecturer engagements with students: *‘I used to just leave lectures, now I’m more there for students,’* and *‘[it’s] really important to have feedback loops with students: Make sure that students enjoy, understand.’* Creativity in teaching came to the fore, as staff members were forced to *‘try things, new methods, new media’* which *‘added value and led to exciting new creative ways. Staff members are learning to make learning more fun.’* ERT *‘spurred us to reflect...on our own knowledge and abilities and teaching processes and strategies.’* Attendance at weekly master classes and other platforms at which pedagogy and curriculum enhancement are shared, is evidence of a

massively increased interest in developing new skills and collaborating with other academics across fields to improve teaching and learning. The Division for Academic Planning, Quality Promotion and Academic Staff Development collects data on staff attendance at training and other developmental events. By way of illustration, in 2019 staff development workshops would attract between 25 and 30 participants, while in 2020, at the height of the pandemic, attendance exceeded 100 per session.

Lecturers reported that they were thinking more deeply about assessment, particularly in assessing applied skills. The time impact was significant as time for assessments had to be increased and more time was spent on setting and marking assessments. Monitoring student progress *'became more demanding as academic progress was infused with personal issues as never before.'* An increased risk in ERT was students' academic misconduct. There was little consensus about its prevalence across responses from lecturers and students, and evidence regarding it has as yet to be collated. Lecturers' responses varied. Some indicated that *'students were found to be quick to use excuses, difficult to verify,'* students *'claimed problems with connectivity,'* *'copied from external sources,'* and sought *'assistance from other people.'* However, some lecturers stated that most students *'were honest without having to be told.'* External examination took place as required, despite logistical issues. As one HOD noted, ERT *'[a]ssessment must be rethought very carefully.'*

One unanticipated result of ERT was the development of some invaluable assets: *'Instructional videos that we created were really useful. We will continue to use these even after things turn back to "normal",'* *'people [had] to think more innovatively and this leads to interesting solutions to problems,'* *'a complete revision of the kind of material and how it is taught,'* and *'it's forced us to learn new technologies that can be integrated in future.'* UJ's staff demonstrated extraordinary resourcefulness and a willingness to 'go the extra mile.' Although the advantages of blended teaching have not outweighed the preference for face-to-face contact, ERT provided a lens for critical reflection on pedagogy. As discussed above, staff members are doing active research to develop new online skills across a range of platforms extending beyond WhatsApp and Skype and into other downloadable packages. Attendance at staff development sessions held online has made for an increased awareness and interest across the university.

### Conclusion: Balancing Quality and Pragmatism

COVID-19 has imposed and deepened many of the existing inequalities in HE and made responding to these inequalities more urgent for the academic programme to continue. To assess this aspect in detail, more research into assessment and practical work is needed. Social justice is a key principle

for UJ, and many measures were taken to provide students in need not only with devices and data, but also with food parcels and access to support. Nonetheless, systemic inequality worked against the desire to complete the academic year and to not disadvantage students further. Also of concern were disruptions to the professional and work-integrated learning components. Guidelines for these were prepared, and each faculty, together with DHET, professional bodies, and industry developed strategies to cope. The impacts on those students, needing to meet professional registration requirements, were potentially significant, and UJ extended the academic year and engaged with professional bodies to resolve as many of these issues as possible. Either way, the theory that was acquired online will still need to be integrated with practical experience. In some disciplines there was no solution other than to wait – a phenomenon not characteristic to UJ. The effective management of practical-based learning is essential for graduating students to transition to employment.

The findings from the review of UJ's transition to ERT as a result of the pandemic, have been presented, and highlight the complex terrain which both staff members and students navigated to save the academic year. Strong staff cohesion and a responsive and inclusive academic management created an inclusive teaching environment. This inclusive approach is invaluable, as students with disabilities and other barriers to learning are already in a vulnerable relationship with HE. The ERT module development appears to have resulted in a thorough interrogation of how module content serves module purpose. The UJ ERT experience suggests that lecturers build stronger personal connections with students and demonstrate greater empathy for their circumstances after being exposed to these first-hand, getting to know students who would not usually participate in classes, and understanding the factors that impacted on the completion of tasks. Other unexpected advantages for further investigation include new scholarships of teaching and learning, how to define excellence, integrating rurality and students' experiences into the curriculum, and systems of ERT delivery beyond Bb.

The brief for the review was to provide for reflection on the transition to ERT and was primarily developmental, designed to identify how the university can enhance quality. The review used both quantitative and qualitative data, providing university staff members with the opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences. In assessing the effectiveness of ERT, it is necessary to address its goal: To maintain the academic year wherever possible. By this measure, ERT was successful. UJ's response was high level, thorough, and considered, and its infrastructure and management team showed itself to be resilient and agile. The existing experience in blended learning, collegial relationships, and training and support created a productive environment in which to address the interests of the students. The transition to ERT was

radical and disruptive, but the university retained its focus on social justice, going to extraordinary lengths to redress inequality within the realms of possibility. The distribution of laptops and other devices and data, the gradual return of students to accommodation where circumstances were not conducive to teaching and learning, and the provision of food parcels to students in proximity to the university are just some examples.

The university had an enhanced awareness of the challenges that students had to face, resulting from a deepened understanding of students' everyday circumstances and the factors that were hindering their participation in ERT. UJ's deeply student-centred approach hinges on the belief that the institution had an opportunity to entrench existing, successful interventions and pilot others that could form part of its long-term strategic vision for the 4IR, with the focus on avoiding the deepening of 'social exclusion and inequity...with the distinctions between advantaged and disadvantaged students determining access to learning in yet unprecedented ways' (Motala & Menon 2020:93).

Expanded research into students' circumstances and experiences, staff training on curriculum design and pedagogy, and a focus on integrated assessment are needed. Particular attention needs to be paid to first-year students' experiences and to the management of large classes. ERT is neither cheaper nor easier than face-to-face teaching, and often impacted negatively on the staff members' workload. That said, UJ's ERT exceeds the CHE's characterisation of it as 'a temporary solution mirroring normal activities – the study of text, primarily the textbook, attending (digital) lectures and attending (digital) tutorials' (CHE 2020:5). The future, though fraught with uncertainty, will require the university to continue to draw on pedagogies which are rooted in social justice and compassion. Drawing on lessons from the pandemic, university pedagogies have, more than ever before, to derive first principles from a clear commitment to successful and effective teaching and learning, grounded equally in equity and excellence. Globally, there is consensus that there are intractable problems that are pervasive in HE and the society. The pandemic exacerbated these fault lines. The review clearly demonstrated that UJ was able to drive an ERT strategy which presented the opportunity for the academic year to be saved.

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