

# Resilience Amongst Students at a University that Promotes Entrepreneurship

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## Abstract

*Students, particularly those that are classified as disadvantaged, face many struggles in higher education. These are students from low-income backgrounds and often rely on the campus facilities to enrich their university experience and to make up for some of their disadvantage. Since the Covid-19 pandemic research in higher education has been following the trends in student life experiences and development. Most of this research suggests that Covid-19 has created new challenges for students and the university. While this is true most of the challenges were already present but only amplified by the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper argues that Covid-19 has only been a season of hard "reboot" into resilience. Qualitative data from thirteen (13) semi-structured interviews with South African university students is used to demonstrate the Covid-19's re-awakening of resilience amongst disadvantaged students. This data is also analysed to understand the effects of resilience in the broader student experience in higher education. The data shows that students have concerns about on and off-campus experiences, turbulent online learning, and limited funding as well as the livelihood strategies they have had to adopt. The findings show the lived experience of performing against all odds amongst disadvantaged students. It is also evident that while this is embraced by society and some research it normalises student hardship and campus inequities. In conclusion the blind-spots in student hardship and as exacerbated by Covid-19 are highlighted. This paper assists researchers, university management and student development officers to meet halfway the student resilient efforts in a meaningful way. In practice this research provides university entrepreneurship mentors and student development practitioners with tangible student needs to consider when dealing with students amidst a crisis, but also when mentoring students to become entrepreneurs in a difficult period.*

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## Introduction

Research on the effects of covid-19 pandemic on students in higher education in South Africa is sparse and has naturally focused on physical and mental health (e.g. Theron). Other research that sought to address student experiences of university during the covid-19 lockdowns has since limited its focus to online learning and accessibility of campuses. All these are important and useful to understanding some of the practical challenges that students experienced during the covid-19 lockdown in South Africa. However, a need to show the intricacy of student life experiences during covid-19 lockdowns still exist. This research employs reflexivity and extracts from qualitative research data to provide a case for student experiences during the different stages of covid-19 lockdown(s).

This paper argues that South African higher education students are resilient and more specifically those who are black and from low-income families. This argument is based on research that shows that students from low-income families endure university against all odds. Walker provides the finer details of student suffering and poverty at university. Walker cites lack of access, food, cash, basics and sharing of NSFAS allowances with family as challenges that are faced by students at South African universities. The resilient character of these students has been more exposed by the Covid-19 pandemic and the choices that their university made in response to the pandemic. These choices were rather exclusionary and sought to create a distance between the university and students. This meant the processing of inquiries was delayed, those students seeking to correct funding issues and NSFAS matters could not access campus in the usual ways.

In addition, the university shielded itself under the state of emergency regulations thus leaving those students determined to make progress with no choice but to remain resilient in the university produced struggles.

The argument of this paper is located both reflexivity research on student life and in studies concerned about low-income and poor students in a South African university. The Covid-19 lockdowns were experienced differently by different people and classes of society whilst exacerbating poverty levels amongst low-income families. Therefore, this paper notes that students have had to be more resilient during covid-19 (making it against all odds) switching to online mode of learning and through limited access to campus support. They also have had to survive covid-19 against the societal challenges that ordinary citizens live through. Inequality worsened the situation in South Africa where already poor people are enduring through daily hardship and struggles for food security. The same students enduring university come from such families but were lockdown at home with little opportunities to earn a living or even engage in food searches including asking neighbours and friends to donate some. The same applied to students who were out of campus residence with no access to one another and limited in how they could assist each other navigate or cater for their daily needs including sharing of basics such as food. In addition, the other deprivation seen in both society and in student life is that the opportunities to share the pain of lockdown were also limited. Even though understandable that in person gatherings and interactions were limited the cost of accessing online communication platforms or cell phone calls were also prohibitive to those poor students and families having to choose between buying airtime and bread. Therefore, the struggles of low-income students mirror those of their societies including their resilience during the covid-19 lockdown period.

The following sections are literature review structured to define the key concepts and the reflexivity framework used in this paper. It is followed by the presentation of the methodological approach used, discussions and conclusions of the study.

### Literature Review

This literature review is structured to provide the study's key definitions and framework. In this paper the concepts of student hardship, co-construction of knowledge through interview and reflexivity are defined. I define student life as the main inquiry about student resilience in a South African university during Covid-19.

### Framing Student Hardship at a South African University

Hardship is part of student experience in higher education especially in the context of poor and unequal societies like South Africa. Walker, (2020:62) conceptualises this into three kinds of hardship related to income namely acute, limited, and transient hardship. In *acute hardship* a student has no secure income year on year and lives with multiple insecurities. In the category of *limited hardship* status, a student has sufficient disposable family income and has access to a private sector bursary. In *transient hardship* a student may move upwards to limited hardship or spiral down to acute hardship. Typically, a student in this category would have a source of external support, such as a bursary, and access to a laptop, but with little unallocated disposable income to spend on things like clothes. Habib, (2019) argues that student hardship is not the responsibility of university executives, but they have a responsibility to ensure that universities produce enough professional graduates. While this is a widely accepted view, it is also true that hardship faced by students is a cause for dropouts and reverses progress in increasing professional graduates (Moodley and Singh, 2015).

In addition, Hammett and Staeheli, (2013) argued that higher education in South Africa has been tasked with an exceedingly big responsibility of addressing poverty within a context of powerlessness where some students have lost hope for personal and social advancement. In this research I recognise these broad understandings of hardship and how these impact on student life at university including the choices students make about addressing the challenges they face while at university. In the face of hardship, students explore ways and limited choices to survive.

One avenue is creating survivalist or necessity micro-enterprises (Karanja *et al.*, 2008). During this process, the same students are also encouraged in other ways to see entrepreneurship to secure their future

(Nwokolo, 2017). This idea often assumes that students, since they have some educational attainment, can run their micro enterprise during and post-university (Peters and Brijlal, 2011). This futuristic view withdraws attention from the real/pragmatic reasons students engaged in the creation of micro-enterprises and avoids addressing the differences in the understanding and conceptualisation of entrepreneurship (Vally and Motala, 2014). Unlike this futuristic view, this research will draw attention to some of the real reasons for (or not) pursuing entrepreneurship amongst students, including their general understanding of the concept.

### **Co-construction of knowledge through Interviews**

Research in higher education pertaining to interviewing and building rapport notes that power dynamics, reciprocity and co-construction of knowledge inform the doctoral student and interviewee experiences (Clegg and Stevenson, 2013). Where reflexivity is applied doctoral students can resist extractivist tendencies that dominate research between Africa and the West. As is the main argument, the lack of reflexivity studies focusing on doctoral students' risk producing researchers that are on the tandem of extractivism or best classified as riding on the backs of others to obtain an additional degree.

In response to the challenge of understanding power dynamics, establishing reciprocity and an interview that allows for co-construction of knowledge, normal institutional ethics procedures are deemed sufficient. However, these responses fall short of experiences that detail the interview experience beyond the already established ethical procedures. The Black research PhD experiences are an arena to explore the power dynamics, understand the process of establishing reciprocity and interview co-construction of knowledge.

Reflexivity in this study provides a theoretical base on which to reflect on the interviews conducted by the two researchers. The approach enables the researchers to explore the constructs of power, reciprocity, and co-construction of knowledge as the underlying factors to creating a research experience that is pure and feels less extractivist compared to research projects with no regard for reflexivity.

### **Reflexivity and resilience**

Literature on reflexivity and the interview has for a long time neglected the need to consider the interviewer and interviewee perspectives to research participation. There is also very little research on reflexivity addressing the use of other approaches of collecting data in qualitative research other than interviewing. It is only in the recent past that researchers have dedicated time to probe reflexivity in qualitative research more holistically. This paper expands on Palaiologou, Needham and Male's, (2015) definition of reflexivity and defines it as the researcher's role and position in the organisation of their research. This includes being reflexive about the background, privilege, and baggage the researcher holds. However, this kind of approach is prone to biasness. In dealing with this I use a reflexivity framework that provides space to provide a clear background to my involvement with this research and I explore reflexivity as a doctoral research issue that can improve research on student resilience in higher education. Furthermore, the literature review addresses three aspects of reflexivity and in addition the theoretical contribution of this study.

### **Reflectivity as a doctoral research issue**

Most research in the South focuses on doctoral student research projects that employ ethnography as a method of research and other similar studies elect to follow the feminist paradigm. There is nothing wrong with all this. However, these sharpen the need for studies that focus on the broader experiences of students whose work is not underpinned in ethnography and limited to paradigm specific requirements. This paper opens the concept of reflexivity in research as an important issue in doctoral study experiences of Black students pursuing their PhDs abroad. This then makes reflexivity an open subject to discuss broadly the doctoral research.

### **Methodology**

Educational research is complex and messy. Researching education in South Africa does require researchers to appreciate the contextual issues that define society such as poverty, inequality, and low incomes. This paper employs a qualitative research methodology. The overarching design is a reflexive case

study of fieldwork research and the interviews conducted with students at a South African university. The case study contextualises the Covid-19 pandemic and the student experiences of the lockdown period.

I now turn to opening the qualitative methodological approach of this study. This method is well established in educational research, and it is applied with various research paradigms when seeking in depths account about issues in education. In this research I use the qualitative methodology to understand through semi-structured interviews the concerns and discomfort of students who turn to resilience to hold onto their studies in a difficult time. Unlike other research I do not commit to specific research paradigms but opt for amplifying the voice of students and my experience of asking questions about covid-19 experiences of students within a large fieldwork research project.

The remainder of this methodology section provides the context of the study, the number of interviews and ethical considerations. I also make a case for reflexivity in researching education and for the usefulness of knowledge gathered in engaging with such a process. The context of the study is an 18-month fieldwork project conducted at a university in Pretoria, South Africa. A university that attracts students from poor backgrounds and low-income families. About 70% of students at this university are black and rely on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to finance their studies. Under usual circumstances these students stand in long queues to hand in their funding applications with stacks of documents evidencing their poverty. These include affidavits from their unemployed parents or guardians, some because of non-existent family structures they ask other family members to provide these documents for them. Obtaining these documents presents a different struggle of interacting with government officials in the police and in social services. When successful the students get NSFAS allowances at the average of R1000 (70 USD) to cover their basic needs and even share with their poor families. These students often and collectively occupy picket lines to have their demands heard. Although the university sees the availability of NSFAS funding as a chance to break the chains of poverty for both low-income students and families this remains to be seen amongst growing levels of unemployment amongst graduates. The students at this university had a difficult time prior covid-19 and continue to experience hardship. This is explored in the discussion of the interview findings thus the argument about resilience.

The table below shows the number of participants in the main study and those students that expanded on their experience of the covid-19 period. The main study as already explained in the introduction is about a broader question on conceptions and promotions of entrepreneurship amongst at the Pretoria university. It was relevant to ask the questions about covid-19 experiences because of the significant effects of the pandemic on student livelihood and its exacerbation of hardship amongst students, and society. In addition, the pandemic was topical and a reason for concern in most conversations I also could not ignore it. As a researcher I took the opportunity to systematically ask the covid-19 to question adopting a more reflexive approach in interviewing the participants listed on the table below. I also took a chance to learn about their experiences and share my own experiences with them.

*Table 1 Getting to know the Interviewees*

Gender distribution	7 Female Students & 6 Male Students
Study level	7 Final Year, 4 Second Year & 2 First Year
Fields of Study	Photography, Arts, Somatology, Business, Engineering
Source of Funding	NSFAS Funding and bursaries

An ethical clearance was obtained to conduct interviews via WhatsApp and financial support via airtime vouchers and data bundle advances were provided. This was based on both the practicality of the research project and avoiding asking interview participants to use their meagre finances, as cited by the ethics committee, to finance their participation in the interviews. The range of responses to the covid-19 questions is spread across the gender binary, study fields and levels of study. My approach to ethics was to ask the questions in a conversation style and bearing witness to the experiences that students were sharing. At the same time openly sharing my own experiences and asking further questions exploring the subject. Instead of: 'tell me about your covid-19 experience' I asked 'How are you doing? where are you? What is

happening where you are?' thus unlocking the conversation about the experiences. Furthermore, I shared my experience of coming into South Africa from Oxford on a repatriation flight during lockdown this further opened the dialogue between myself and the interviewees. Thus, I could state that this approach allowed rapport and reciprocity in the interview.

### Results and Findings

Qualitative data is drawn from 13 student interviews stating the challenges posed by Covid-19 in both their broader student experience and for their academic progress. These students are mainly from low-income families and see university as a gateway to success. As was the focus of my fieldwork to understand the conceptions of entrepreneurship amongst students some interviews allude to the student strategies of raising income through selling of goods and services to increase their cash. This shows the intricacy of resilience amongst students and the desperations for income or cash.

The resilience themes emerging from the 13 interviews are: uncertainty (future job, attainment of educational qualification, slim to zero chances of employment, close of opportunities to earn an income), compromised educational experience (not meeting lecturers, unable to do practical training or work integrated learning projects, struggling to cope, limited use of campus facilities, slow adaptation to online learning), funding (NSFAS as a source of income), Lack of income and support from existing sources of funding for the missing middle students (fear of potential income cuts due to poor economic performance and the wide-spread budget cuts in both public and private sector thus affecting individual households, and breadwinners), digital divide (devices to access online lessons, lack of internet access), close of opportunities for recreation and denied religious practice (no church or preaching),

### Uncertainty: Job, Employment and Opportunities to Earn an Income

Employability refers to readiness and preparedness for employment from the lens of university education and higher education policy in South Africa. Majority of students from low-income backgrounds hold a belief that university education provides them a status of employability. However, the Covid-19 pandemic threatened this belief and hope. It reversed the gains of confidence amongst students who already made it into higher education through challenging circumstances.

The vignette below provides a view of a student's experience concerned about finding employment. The student uses 'marketable' to refer to being employable. This shows that the student already appreciates the effort he has made to reach a state of employability but exposes how the conditions presented by the Covid-19 pandemic are invalidating his efforts. The student expresses that Covid-19 has made unemployment worse. This according to the vignette also means that unemployment is unbearable during Covid-19 not only the closed prospects to secure a job. The student has a view on who to blame for the problem and that is the government. The student feels let down by government systems. Whilst wearing a hat of resilience the student also recognises that they have done their part including meeting set requirements.

This student says I have worked hard to tick all the boxes but with all that I have become I still cannot be guaranteed employment. This vignette shows two sides to resilience that is the acts of making it against all odds to meet requirements only to be met by a system that does not recognise those efforts or reward them with a job as it is the desire of the student to know that they are guaranteed an employment opportunity. This then prompts me to probe whether this is not a fair ask and concern coming from a student? As a researcher in entrepreneurship promotions in higher education I battle with views that look down at the efforts and resilience of students by asking for more where there's already none. This happens when students express their employment concerns that mentors, lecturers, and policy makers saying students must drop the job seeking mentality but create their own jobs or that they must become job creators.

**Student 1:** the issue of unemployment is broad. When I spoke at first, I did not say that I am comfortable with unemployment. I'm saying that it's so much of a reality that if I were to stress about it, I would be depressed. It is a reality beyond, because you find that most people that we know are unemployed, COVID 19 made it worse. It's more of a government issue; I wouldn't blame myself and say that I am un-marketable, I am marketable. I am a young person, I do have a qualification, and have studied. I am marketable in terms



of what is required in our country to say that a person between the ages of 15 and 35 whatever, I am within that space. I don't know how to put it because I don't want to lambast the government as it is a broad issue. Even if I were to go to the Western Cape right now and find another student, I think we will speak the same issue of unemployment being hard. We see the opportunities; I follow them almost every day. When I wake up, I check the circulars, I check where I meet the requirements and apply but do not receive call backs.

The student uncertainty was exacerbated by Covid-19 and similarly the appetite for resilience under hardship. The uncertainty is marked in the following excerpts using words such as (1) scared, (2) scepticism, (3) limitation in movement (cannot go abroad), (4) companies closing and (2) industries cutting down on staff. The first excerpt cast self-doubt. The student identifies themselves as 'knowing nothing' and this in conjunction with the limited learning opportunities during Covid-19 portrays that the student assumes further disadvantage on top of that which already exists. The disadvantage of being less knowledgeable university student is now combined with the lack of opportunity to learn under Covid-19. The student expresses being scared and that they are sceptical but states that nonetheless they are still excited. An excitement I consider essential to understand that the student has made gains amidst the challenges and that excites them. These gains are basic but when obtaining these against all odds they breed this excitement. This is a student who originates from a low-income family where being at university is only a dream, but the student is in university and the possibility to work through covid-19 to obtain a university qualification excites them enough that it matters a lot to obtain a job but even if not obtain they remain excited.

**Student 2:** Because of coronavirus I am scared because companies are going to be sceptical about hiring people from the university who know nothing. But still, I am excited.

When one of the respondents was asked: What opportunities do you think are readily available for you after completing your studies? The student's response highlighted lack of opportunity in South Africa and a future of uncertainty. The student identified entrepreneurship as an alternative whilst 'trying to find a job.' Both these seem to be big life demands and directions for a future post university in a Covid-19 era. The student clearly communicates taking further responsibility for their future over and above their existing responsibilities as a student which entail attending lectures, writing assessments and student life. Student 4 echoes the expressions made by student 1 and 2 of applying for jobs including waking up early to read job circulars. These students apply for opportunities even though they do not receive response about their applications.

**Student 3:** uhm, to be honest my course does not have much in South Africa and it is not easy again to go abroad because of Covid. What I thought of doing is to continue with the business and continue with entrepreneurship while trying to find a job so that I can learn more because I am not yet in the industry. I will use what I have from my savings.

**Student 4:** Yes, I was still applying for jobs whilst I was still there, but nothing came up. A lot of companies would tell us that because of COVID nothing is working out. A lot of companies were not hiring, and other companies would even tell us that they are closing due to COVID. Others would be cutting down staff, it was just a challenge.

These experiences of uncertainty amongst students explain a long-lasting and strenuous demand on their side to face the new odds brought by Covid-19.

### The Compromised Learning Experience

The learning experience plays a major role in student life in higher education. This informs the medium, space and time for learning. The learning experience also has a bearing on inclusion, access and understanding. All these issues when denied compromise the learning experience. I return to these issues in the next interview excerpts. The covid-19 pandemic reproduced a compromised learning experience at Fundisa university. It changed the medium being the terminology used from attending lectures in a venue to space being a student's dormitory in campus residence or a room at home if they had one. The time for learning for some was negotiated between family commitments and coping with Covid-19 demands, and limited access to other amenities.

**Student 5:** I still have another year... it is a bit complicated now. There was something for practical, but we could not attend them due to Covid-19. They called us to come and work there... because we were far.

I was doing a Diploma, Fundisa switched us from Diploma to Degree – so last year I was doing my first years and second year modules together. So, we couldn't go there to finish the second-year modules.

I now return to the points about inclusion, access and understanding as indicated in the opening paragraph. Covid-19 reversed the gains to inclusion, access and understanding of curricular as those already achieved by students through their own resilience. This explains partly the view of this paper that students survived the Covid-19 pandemic through a sense of revived resilience. Like student 5, they explain a reality that 'things were fine' but during the heightened restrictions put in place to regulate during 'coronavirus' students couldn't meet lecturers. This means learning changed including how it was delivered, the place of delivery became a small screen and understanding limited to what could be heard, and less of what could be felt or a shared sense of understanding within a lecture room. The student also missed out an opportunity to do practical work at nursery they hoped to work in.

**Student 6:** Oh, okay... I am Lunga\*, I am doing my second year in landscape technology at Fundisa. I am 19 years of age. At first things were going well at Fundisa, we were fine, and the lecturing process was okay but due to corona we got disturbed and couldn't meet lecturers – so that is how we got disturbed, and everything got back to normal – after lockdown or rather level one lockdown.

Students already experiencing comprehension and performance challenges in their modules have had to re-master their ways of coping within the adjusted conditions of learning. The excerpts from Students 6 and 7 reflect the difficulties experienced by students and how these reshaped the learning experiences in unusual ways even if they wore their resilience. These are students in their final year of study, and it would be assumed that they would be confident as they navigate learning under Covid-19, but this is not true. Instead, they indicate experiencing hardship; things getting harder and harder, challenging modules and shortened period of study (excerpt from student 6).

**Student 7:** To be honest it is very challenging – the more you are reaching the finishing line it is the more things get harder and harder. The modules are very challenging, they need more time and attention. Due to covid we are affected. We are doing semester courses. The semester was 3 months. It was very hard; we pushed a lot – we need time to study and understand. Time was running out. We attended classes for a few weeks. The next thing we had test week, assignments, and exam.

As already indicated on the first theme that uncertainty dominated student experiences the excerpt provided below is another unique account about the change of use of learning spaces on campus. This change brought about uncertainty within the campus and the use of different spaces that were accessible prior to the Covid-19 lockdowns. This is a Black student in photography and needed to use a campus studio, the only one they have access to. However, numbers were restricted, queues long and working hours still limited. These measures were in place to keep safe from coronavirus spread. This meant that low-income students had to carry lack of income, slow progress in academic work and the health protection burden as they navigated their access to the facility.

**Student 8:** Truly speaking it wasn't easy, especially with this COVID 19 season. Our studios are small, and we only have three printers, and you will find that you have a lot of students waiting to print. You find that there are 30 students wanting to print and it is stipulated that only 15 students can be at the printing studio, with the maximum of 20. The other 10 students must remain outside. Those inside won't leave the studio until they are finished with their work. There's a time I had to stand outside. You could arrive at 8am and stand outside until 3pm only for the studio to close at 6pm.

### **Funding, Lack of Income and Cash**

Funding, lack of income and cash is a problem faced by students hailing from low-income families. Government funding and making higher education fee-free since 2015 has assisted many students especially those from Black families to gain access to higher education. However, the financial aid allowances aren't always enough to meet student needs. Below is a vignette from an interview transcript presenting part of an interviewer-interviewee dialogue about student financing. In the vignette the student begins the conversation explaining their source of income and specifically that which they receive from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). The student provides their uses of the funds and explains their dependency on this aid. They also highlight that the financial aid income is not enough to cover all expenses they supplement it with additional cash obtained from their family members. This shows a

persistent problem of funding, lack of income and cash even when a student is a beneficiary of the government funding aid.

**Student 9:** I use the money I get from NSFAS. When I am short my family helps especially with transport and clothes.

**Interviewer:** How much does NSFAS give you? Interviewee: R1500 per month.

The above also shows the precise value of the allowance provided by the funding aid. It is below minimum wage in South Africa and can barely afford students all their needs per month. But still, it appears that the allowance is essential for the interviewee to maintain a livelihood and as such any lack of this money would create a deficit and lack in taking care of their needs. The NSFAS funding income can be seen as a critical resource for sustaining the livelihoods of low-income students monthly. This then prompts the need to ask further questions, one of which is, how do these students take care of their needs during recess and how did they take care of their needs during the lockdown? It is clear from the interview vignette that any disruption to the flow of the allowance into their student's bank account created a lack in cash and that it was sustaining to still have the allowance paid out during the Covid-19 lockdown period.

On the theme of resilience students seek continuously other sources of income. The following excerpts are from student interviews that highlight the enterprise activity that two different students created as means for income and creating opportunities for themselves. The first excerpt is of a student who started a 'cleaning company' providing hygiene services. Their motivation is not necessarily the demand for the service they are offering, and their skills set but an avoidance of lack of job opportunities. The interviewee uses a common phrase that is 'we cannot blame the government when it comes to job opportunities. This interview shows someone taking up responsibility for a government shortfall and making means for another stream of income in addition to aid.

**Student 10:** In the generation that we are in now it is no longer a call but a must. I even myself have got a cleaning company that is also more on fumigation and disinfection services. So, entrepreneurship is no longer a call but a must because now we cannot blame the government when it comes to job opportunities.

Whilst the excerpt above shows a student whose pursuing an enterprise to generate cash and fight what he calls a generational fight the excerpt below shows the contrary. The excerpt below is from a student whose experience with enterprise is unfavourable and could not thrive during the pandemic. This excerpt is a window into many student struggles for generating cash in a pandemic. However, the last sentence in the excerpt shows a resilient attitude and that is to 'work hard' for a positive end. This could mean until they obtain their academic qualification or until an opportunity for the enterprise becomes available. This excerpt shows different pockets of resilience amidst obvious struggles.

**Student 8:** I have my own business which is a wellness spa it was not going well because of the pandemic – those were my challenges so far. But now I am planning to work hard for me to reach the end goal.

### **The Digital Divide, Internet Access, and Recreation**

The covid-19 pandemic and the government response to it did exacerbate the already existing divide. Internet access at home become more important as activities like work and study switched to online. The switch also moved recreational activities to online these include body exercise, religious activity, and other performance portable for virtual display. All this happened amidst concerns about those living in squalor and lacking decent homes and basic network coverage.

Five excerpts below provide accounts of different experiences that should leave higher education scholars asking: how are students surviving university? Since student hardship and resilience have been normalised in the South African context these questions are not always asked and more especially when they only affect the voiceless, poor, and low-income students. Through my own interaction and interviews with the students I gathered that (1) a student participant in my research had a difficult time studying online, (2) a student from a rural area felt excluded from university, (3) internet access was a challenge and (4) sporting and religious practices were shut down.

**Student 9:** As for COVID, I had to study online, so it wasn't easy because I didn't have a phone to maybe submit some of my assignments. I was left behind and the pressure of it was not easy. Fortunately, I got a phone, so I submitted my assignment, of which from then it worked. Another thing is that it is way difficult without contact learning. Now that it is covid we are learning online we still must adapt to this online



learning. It is difficult because some of us come from rural areas we do not have resources to deal with network connections, we run out of data, we do not have computers to type assignments, we must go to internet cafes and pay. Since covid has interrupted it is difficult for us as students.

The following excerpt places internet and online access as an essential in the life of the student from whose interview the excerpt was taken. They explain that this need is driven by the need to learn and to compensate for in person classes which they also describe as essential for understanding the content being lectured to them. They make further propositions that two in person lectures would bridge divide and inequalities in understanding. However, this was not possible under the Covid-19 regulatory policies. They prohibited gatherings and lectures as such. Places of higher learning were shut, lecture halls locked, and campus gates barricaded. But in a university that promotes entrepreneurialism amongst students one would imagine a situation where the 'student entrepreneurs' are supported to keep their enterprises afloat but from the accounts of students in this study this did not happen but instead they and their enterprises were left to look out for their needs for internet and opportunity.

**Student 2:** My needs are not that much. I need access to the internet since we have now started learning online and doing things online. I need access to internet to researches and do my online classes. Watch videos online and tutorials. My other need is to have at least a minimum of two contact classes. Even if they group us according to the appropriate number that doesn't exceed the covid regulations. We need contact classes as students, some of the things our minds and brains are not the same. Some of the things are only understandable when things are done physically and practically than when they elaborate to us through the phone. That is my needs. When to apply for those needs.... At least we must have unlimited access to the internet throughout the week. Some of us study on weekends. When I do not have the gigs especially – I use that time to push my schoolwork.

Of the major struggles and concerns that students were dominated by during Covid-19 lockdown over and above learning online it was the demise of recreation and opportunity to express religion. These experiences are essential in the life of a student but also contribute to resilience. Recreation offers physical well-being, sense of belonging and activity whilst religious practice provides motivation, grounding, and some perseverance for people in general, and coping mechanisms for students who are religious. Over and above religious practice also provides students with a community that shares a common spiritual understanding and an approach to processing events in and outside of university. The Covid-19 lockdown and its enforcement rendered all this impossible thus leaving students frustrated and hopeless about the very same elements that promote resilience in their lives.

**Student 6:** Yes, I do. I'm one of Jehovah's Witnesses so we have so many activities at church. We go out preaching, this was easier before COVID and now with COVID we no longer go out as much. We no longer go out. We call people to preach to them or over a text. Other than that, I'm currently on this other competition that going on at Loreal. They have a competition that is going on and I'm waiting for the results as we submitted some things. They should be doing the shortlisting by Friday.

The findings shared are personal accounts and evidence of the fall of various essentials that low-income students rely upon at university. These essentials also influence the degrees of resilience amongst students. The absence of NSFAS allowance during recess or university break has a detrimental effect on student livelihoods including the cash that is available to them. This affects how they exist on campus, online and in the social spaces they create. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the flow of all these essentials and created an additional struggle and as such these require additional resilience on the part of low-income and poor students committed to making it 'against all odds.'

## Discussion

Universities pride themselves as institutions that provide a suitable climate for students to start new business or to pursue entrepreneurship. However, Covid-19 pandemic proved that the conditions and climate provided by university for student entrepreneurship is limited and cannot be sustained in times of emergency. As such all students left campus and went back to their homes during lockdown. This meant some of students gave up on their ideas whilst some continued to work on those resiliently. This then shows that even though universities promote entrepreneurship students have themselves to rely on especially in times of difficulty as exemplified by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Students persisted working on their ideas even during Covid-19 and without full university support. Without their persistence and resilience, they would be without income and even lose their ideas. Their commitment shows a true entrepreneurial spirit and willingness to work on their entrepreneurial activities even during trying times. However, the university was exposed for its partial commitment to student entrepreneurship besides that it promotes entrepreneurship amongst students.

### Practical Implications, Conclusion and Study Limitations

The research question in this study is: how and in what ways did students reproduce resilience during the covid-19 pandemic. This question is addressed on this part in two ways. Firstly, through the discussion of the resilience of students in a university promoting entrepreneurialism amongst students and secondly, through an analysis of my experiences as a researcher conducting the study.

This paper has discussed student resilience during covid-19 through a qualitative and reflexive lens providing rich insights about the realities of students during the pandemic. But it also shows the relevance and applicability of the reflexivity as a tool to understanding student resilience in higher education. The paper contributes to debates about student resilience by showing through literature the traverse of student hardship and livelihood. It provides a specific account of the day-to-day experiences of students during the covid-19 pandemic and amplifies the voices of the students in the process. This research has practical implications for the work of student development practitioners and mentors. It helps them understand and deal effectively with the realities of students in a crisis such as a pandemic.

The study was limited to a single university case study, and it only used a qualitative research approach. Future research can compare two university case studies especially in the South African context where there are comprehensive universities and the universities of technology. To accommodate big student number participation a future study may adopt a mixed methods approach to studying the resilience of students.

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