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## **The SEP-TLF Study Shines a Spotlight on Academic Staff Experiences During the Pandemic**

The long-awaited study that was exploring *Staff Experiences of, and Perspectives on Teaching and Learning and its Future (SEP-TLF)* has been concluded. This study, a joint project of the Council on Higher Education, Universities South Africa and the University of the Free State, has surfaced important insights on **a)** remote teaching and learning experiences of teaching staff; **b)** the future of teaching and learning and **c)** academic leaders' perspectives on their staff experiences.

The survey was carried out at 24 public universities, in a sample of 1,851 academic staff representing approximately 3.4% of the sector. Low participation persisted despite institutional efforts to interest staff to respond to this survey, including prompts from USAf and the extension of the study administration period. This could be attributed to the general staff fatigue evident in the participants' responses.

**Regarding teaching staff experiences**, key findings indicate that 76% of the respondents enjoyed reliable access to the internet when working off-campus. They also show that 70% of the respondents' access to the internet was self-funded, with 25% of them sharing financial responsibility with their institutions and 5% receiving full funding for their remote internet access.

Still on their experiences, academic staff report great frustration over students' lack of participation and engagement, particularly because of their awareness of students' struggles with connectivity, devices, and the cost of data.

On matters of academic integrity, findings report conflicting perspectives over the quality of learning taking place during the pandemic. While some respondents express confidence over the quality of learning – in fact arguing that it has proven even better in the circumstances, others report a significant decline in quality due to the amount of dishonesty encountered.

The study has also reported **positive teacher experiences**. These include stronger collaborative relationships during the pandemic; increased lecturer empathy for students' challenges and concerted attempts to accommodate the students through use of videos, voice-over slides, podcasts, flipped classrooms and an increasing shift towards more soft copies and provision of a wider range of learning materials. Many teachers want these to remain permanent features in the new "normal".

From the **academic leaders' perspective**, the pandemic era has been synonymous with increased teacher workloads; challenges regarding balancing home and work life -- especially during periods of national lockdown; and teaching staff feeling overwhelmed and unsupported. Academic leaders admit feeling out-of-touch with their staff during the pandemic, witnessing staff frustrations and feeling a general loss of control. They also report positive experiences, nonetheless. These include efficiencies realised from conducting meetings online; acquisition of new digital skills and increased usage of technology in day-to-day operations and a shift to more flexible working environments.

For the future, almost all respondents concur that devices and data for academic staff are necessary. Up to 74% also state a need for digital skills training for both staff and students as well as laptops for students. Furthermore, about 60% feel that tracking and monitoring students' engagement and measuring the impact of learning would be very important.

Even though 90% of respondents concur that students are more likely to skip contact classes when recorded lectures are made available, lecturers prefer continuing to provide students with recordings even when face-to-face teaching is restored as this allows different usage of classroom spaces. The findings indicate significant support (from 66% of teaching staff and 71% of academic leaders/managers) for instituting alternative measures of assessments to ensure quality.

Two broad **recommendations** emerging from this study concern a) **creating an enabling environment for blended teaching and learning** and b) **enhancing quality assurance**. Championed as part of an enabling environment is access to reliable devices, internet connectivity and adequate data for both academics and students. It is also recommended, among other matters, that measures to restore academic integrity and the sharing thereof in the system, be fast-tracked. This was inspired by alarming reports of cheating and illicit collaborations that have overwhelmed student disciplinary structures at institutions.

The SEP-TLF study, which complements the *Students' Access to and Use of Learning Materials* (SAULM) survey which was carried out in 2020, sees numerous concerns of teaching staff dovetailing with those found in the SAULM study. Both studies contribute to future policy formulation and the sector's planning for future teaching and learning practice.

Commenting on the two studies, Universities South Africa's CEO, Professor Ahmed Bawa, says CoViD-19 fast-tracked experiments on the digitalisation of teaching and learning. "The empirical evidence being presented by these two studies can only enbolden us to seriously re-think our approaches and strategise more decisively to broaden access to higher education, deepen success and strengthen the research and innovation capacities of our universities."

Read more on the SEP-TLF study in the [full report](#) published on the USAf website.

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