

# Analysing Reflections of Academics Through the Framework of Well-Being

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**Abstract:** Although South Africa is a developing economy, the majority of its people live in poverty, exacerbated by load shedding, which leads to issues relating to connectivity and access to technology. This affects the teaching and learning modes of academics in the higher education sector. Academics have previously, and during the pandemic, shown efficiency and effectiveness in moving to various modalities as and when expected. The same was displayed when they were asked to prepare for online or remote teaching platforms that some of them had previously used. Consequently, in academia, this shift resulted in an escalation of the adoption of novel pedagogies accompanied by increased stress and anxiety-related illnesses. In this paper, the researcher reported on the findings of a survey conducted via focus group interviews with departments at a university of technology in South Africa to analyse its impact on their work and/or work-life balance. Ryff's (1995) theory of well-being was used to analyse the qualitative data. The findings conclude that the lockdown and subsequent move to online teaching has had a negative impact on the well-being of academics. Significant outcomes of online teaching, along with positive outlooks, caring relationships, and support between management and colleagues, have been reported.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, academic well-being, higher education, online teaching, academic reflections

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## 1. Introduction

At the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, while the health risks of the pandemic increased rapidly, other constraints like connectivity, bandwidth and technology played havoc with the new mode of online teaching. The failed grid in South Africa, leading to power outages for a minimum of two hours or longer in the rural areas has become a constant hindrance, affecting online teaching. The academics who had just moved to online modalities, had to now switch to a low-tech mode of teaching. This meant that the lectures happen asynchronously, which has its own resource implications as an asynchronous mode is generally more cumbersome and time-consuming when it comes to the preparation of content than delivery. All this brought in health issues around stress, anxiety, gut health, and mental health which became a topic for investigation (Mbunge 2020). The literature collection highlights the impact of the pandemic on issues around the mental health of front-line workers globally (De Kock, Latham, and Leslie 2021; Babore 2020; Cai 2020). Sahu (2020) introduces the challenges that academics face during a pandemic, such as moving to teaching online, travel restrictions preventing research and conference attendance, the challenge of assessing students online, and mental health issues such as depression and anxiety arising from increased stress and workloads, isolation, and the uncertain future academics now face as universities turn increasingly towards technology for cost-effective teaching. Such challenges, framed in the wider sphere of workplace readjustment during COVID-19 as a state of "pandemia", have been studied in a variety of international contexts; for example, in Australia (McGaughey et al. 2021), and in Ireland and the UK (Watermeyer et al. 2021). Not only this, but academics also had to worry about the health and mental well-being of their families, and their students' concerns and well-being. Keeping these contexts in mind, the researcher invited colleagues across the institution to participate in focus group interviews to highlight the challenges and impact of the pandemic on their well-being.

## 2. Literature

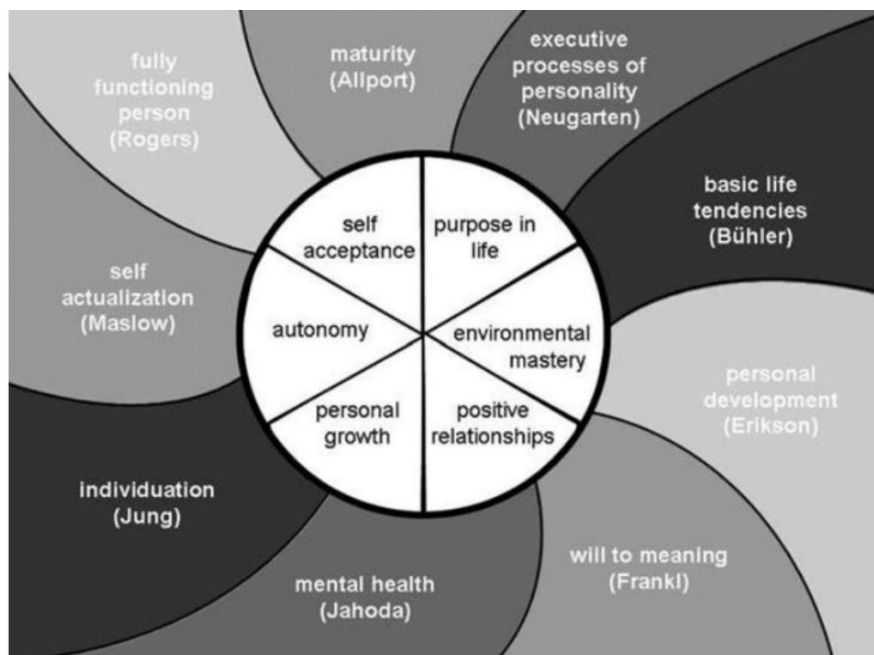
### 2.1 Exploring recent studies in the domain

While putting this paper together the inadequacy of peer-reviewed publications that focused on the impact of the pandemic on academic well-being became evident. A search carried out using PUBMED, EBSCOHOST, and ERIC found no articles that dealt specifically with this topic in the South African context. A local South African journal published one article that focused on universities globally, not specifically on South African universities (Hardman et al., 2022). Very few studies researched the impact of COVID-19 on gender and well-being from a different country's perspective. The SciOPS (Scientist Opinion Panel Survey) article could be the closest as it addresses similar issues (Jung 2020). The study found that COVID-19 had negatively impacted academics' ability to concentrate and increased anxiety around contracting the virus and the effects of unanticipated childcare responsibilities during home schooling.

The paper, however, prominently focuses on the gender dynamics that COVID-19 had on academics, especially female academics, when it comes to experiencing feelings of anxiety or difficulties in concentration and having parental responsibilities. The gendered dimension of the division of labour is well established in the literature in general (Miller 2020; Ward and Wolf-Wendel 2016; Guy and Arthur 2020) and specifically concerning the impact of COVID-19 on academics (Miller 2020; Yildirim and Eslen-Ziya 2021; Burzynska and Contreras 2020). Female academics who are mothers experienced a higher level of work at home because of the added responsibility of home-schooling and childcare, and consequently were more likely to report feelings of being tired or overwhelmed by the amount of work they were facing with online teaching (Miller 2020; Jessen and Waights 2020; Lutter and Schröder 2020; Andersen et al. 2020). The research is specifically focused on one institution which is the only University of Technology in the Western Cape Province of South Africa and the biggest university in the province with over 30000 students.

## 2.2 Ryff's model of well-being as a perspective

Ryff's (1995) model of well-being is presented in this article. It has six dimensions of psychological well-being, viz., autonomy, positive relationships, personal growth, environmental mastery, self-acceptance and purpose in life.



**Figure 1:** Ryff's model of well-being in adult life

Empirical research carried out by Ryff has established the validity of these dimensions (1995; 2014). On unpacking these dimensions, one can understand that personal growth at an individual level means having a sense that one can realise their potential. Environmental mastery refers to a sense of mastery over the external environment. For example, environmental mastery as a dimension of well-being in South Africa would be extreme poverty faced by much of the population, mitigating against a sense of environmental mastery, calling for serious systemic change. Positive relationships refer to an individual's ability to maintain and construct healthy, positive relationships with other people in their social situations. Self-acceptance refers to an individual's positive opinion of themselves. However, it also relates to being able to identify and acknowledge both strengths and weaknesses. One can navigate the world successfully on their own initiative and with autonomy. Finally, one's purpose in life is to have a sense of direction and aims and objectives for living, which is often derived from the career we choose to pursue. Well-being, for Ryff and other researchers, requires a level of autonomy and control over one's life and environment that is absent in spaces where poverty is endemic and unemployment amongst youths is over 50 per cent. While many people may feel alienated from their environment and lack autonomy over their own lives due to poverty, there is still the notion that positive relationships exist and can be used to develop one's well-being. It is against these dimensions that the current research paper seeks to understand the impact COVID-19 had on academic well-being at a university of technology in a developing country like South Africa.

### 3. Methodology

In this paper, the author analyses the impact of the pandemic on the academic's health and well-being at a university of technology. The target population were academics from a university of technology in Cape Town, Western Cape province, South Africa. The survey was done within departments via focus group interviews to analyse and learn more about how teaching and learning impacts on their work and work-life balance. There are six faculties within the institution and the focus group interview invite was extended to all the departments in the institution. However due to modality of online teaching and the work commitments involved, the author couldn't get enough buy-in from all of the departments. Some who agreed and committed initially for the interview denied closer to the time due to work and family commitments even though the interviews were conducted virtually. The research therefore involved four faculties, involving 10 departments and approximately 30 participants. The participants of this survey were chosen from a convenience sample; this research paper is hence not intended to establish a wider population, but to pinpoint transitions that could be explored in future research. The department heads along with their staff were sent an invite to participate in the focus group interview. If the staff couldn't attend, then a special request was sent if the department teaching and learning coordinator or the curriculum officer could join with their department heads to get an overview of their department coping during COVID-19. Interviews of between 30 to 60 minutes were facilitated by the researcher. The focus group interviews were carried out virtually in the respective departments, which was based on their availability.

Interview questions were designed to gather insights into the perspectives on departmental buy-in, particularly on the impact on academic staff and their well-being, and the adoption of e-Learning platforms. Following this phase, interviews were transcribed and later analysed independently by the researcher. As a flexible method, it could impart a rich and nuanced account of complex data. The respondents differ widely in terms of age, digital literacy skills, and confidence in using technology or undergoing technology training, and accordingly, their impacts will differ from one another. However, there were converging themes, such as collaboration, reflection, and empathy, all elements of a design thinking mindset. Ethical clearance was sought through appropriate institutional channels. For purposes of confidentiality, participant details were kept anonymous.

The demographics show 39% of females, 60% of males, and the remaining 1% preferred not to state their gender. Most of them live with at least one family member and possess the academic status of lecturers, associate professors, and heads of departments. Fifty-four percent of the participants have doctoral degrees and the remaining are either doctoral students or have Master's qualifications.

### 4. Findings

The focus group interview included open-ended questions. These open-ended questions were analysed using the categories outlined by Ryff's (1995) framework. The responses from the academics were first transcribed using a transcriber and were put together in a document format and coding was done to put them under themes that suit best to Ryff's framework. Towards the end of the coding process there were few outliers which were not included as they involved talks like greeting each other at the beginning and end, acknowledging each other virtually and checking on the timeline due to work commitments. The findings mentioned below are in the form of responses as was stated exactly by the participants, no change in language and grammar has been made to avoid bias to the research work. The statements are kept in italics for ease of readability to the audience. As the interviews were slotted close to an hour there were a lot of discussions involving both parties, however for the purpose of the page limitation the led the author to include most of the statements and not all of them.

#### Theme 1: Autonomy

Ryff's framework speaks about autonomy, which refers to one's belief that one can navigate the world using one's own initiative and regulate one's behaviour to be who one is, rather than submitting to a societal picture of who one should be. Academics have expressed their concerns about the lack of time for research and personal growth and the reduced autonomy over teaching.

*"What's happened in terms of my workload now, it's as I said, what's happened. The HOD's basically increased my workload from this year onwards. So, as I said, normally I would have two. I would have had the full first and second-year groups, which would have taken me up to over 500 students, you know. = But you know, it's almost something I want to do, like research my practices*

*and everything. You know, I can't get enough time and it's like no one cares. And I have to make myself available if anyone needs support."*

The participants expressed concern that teaching and support have been extensive and that there is very little time for research. Being passionate about the work they do, missing out on publishing their own practices does impact them. Publishing research work is vital and central to an academic's growth of a sense of autonomy, which has now been impacted by the pandemic.

*"So that is really because for us it's about departments now, it's we have a very clear mandate now from the DVC, you know, we need to start focussing on this pocket of excellence and make sure that this is more welcoming [inaudible] and we're still a very small team, so we're trying to understand how best we can impact."*

What is evident from the above two participants is the fact that one of them sees growth and an opportunity to grab on and create excellence through it, and the other is concerned about how it has affected her personally and her personal growth.

## **Theme 2: Environmental mastery**

In a country poverty-stricken like South Africa, where there is inequality and , trying to control one's environment is gravely diminished, and the pandemic has further brought it into the centre of attention. The pandemic and the drive towards rapid digitalisation havemade academics move more towards managerial activities, which is not the environment they flourish in and hence feel alienated. They no longer have control and at all times wait for directives from the management. The statements below say what the academics have to say about the management and the steps taken by them recently.

*"It's two-way because if there's no interest by management or for anything part-time, then you know, or in a more flexible way and then there are these pressures from the outside. I mean, there is lack of space and lack of equipment and lack of infrastructure and all of that, I think from the institution, because if you say that yes, the departments can have guidelines which are specific to their needs, but from the institution, the reason being is that at the ground, Dr, at the element where people we are teaching, if you come up with something and say, "This should be for a department." And then people are saying, "Ja, but other departments are not doing it" or, "This is not a mandate from the institution so I'm not going to do it. It's not compelled by the institution." So from there, if something that the DVC says, "This is what we need to do" or "This is what we need all of us to embrace, Deans, Teaching and Learning Coordinators, HOD" you enforce on the ground [indistinct]. And then I think that can work and then of course departments can have context-specific guidelines but from up there, the strategy needs to filter down."*

*"There were other challenges for me, not sure if the others had the same like me. The schools allowed kids to study online, but what about the follow-ups, the homework, the distraction and noise from their sessions. If you had a pre-schooler, then that added to the glory. Amongst, all this one cannot perform even if you lock your doors, and by the time it's quiet at night you are already tired. There were many months, not days where I had to stay awake till [the] early hours of the morning to make a quality contribution to my work. And the constant fear that no one should fall sick, that we eat the right food and supplements to stay healthy and fit."*

There could be many reasons behind this thought; the institution undergoing financial constraints, the closing down of departments and retrenchments among others. From such perspectives, one loses mastery over the academic environment and feels disempowered by the managerial roles that have accumulated, which could be detrimental to academic well-being. Also, at a personal level, being a breadwinner as well as a parent comes with its own challenges of managing the workspace and personal space. The environment was not always conducive at home, where one could calmly focus on work and at the same time worry about chores, homework, health and the well-being of the family.

## **Theme 3: Purpose in life**

Since moving from face-to-face teaching to remote emergency teaching, more emphasis is placed on teaching than on research. This has instigated an acute state of awkwardness and disquiet among participants in respect of their career graph and professional status, where career development, research outputs and competitive

funding as rewards have been taken over by the demands of teaching. There is visible distress and that tidal turn that has been seen in colleagues and academics who have been research-driven throughout their professional careers. As reiterated by an academic below:

*“And so I’m going to sell them something that[is] already half baked, and I’m going to say, “Okay team, so what can you contribute here? What do you think, is this okay?” You know, be very diplomatic about that and so in that way, get the whole team’s buy-in, but I can’t go to the team with a blank slate. My intention is to go to the team with something that’s there’s already a framework, the framework that I had in mind with this 30% being done and rest we put together as a team.”*

The need to be concerned about everyone’s well-being, be it students or colleagues, calls for an ethics of care at a university that requires that an academic to sacrifice their own needs or purpose of life to meet those of others.

*“So, that’s why I say, there is really not a lot of dialogue happening about anything in the department, never mind eLearning, so ja, it’s kind of a frustrating situation to be in – a departmental meeting, to me, plays such a pivotal role in the operations of a department because that’s a chance where you get to see your colleagues in a professional environment and discuss issues of importance.”*

The COVID-19 pandemic and the need to subsequently move to online teaching have guided academics towards dedicating more time through multiple platforms, in groups and individually, to meeting students’ well-being at the expense of their own career path and growth. This is especially so for female academics, who carry a larger burden of care than their male counterparts, impacting their career progression (Viglione 2020; Gabster et al. 2020; Burzynska and Contreras 2020; King and Frederickson 2021; Parlak, Celebi Cakiroglu, and Oksuz Gul 2021).

#### **Theme 4: Positive relationships**

While most participants indicated that emergency remote teaching has affected their well-being in many ways, some discerned that they had advanced in more positive, caring relationships with colleagues and students. There were liminal spaces that the participants spoke about, which made them build different relationships during these times:

*“So I invited these colleagues [and] then I said, “Well, why don’t you take the tool and copy it into your subject and then you see how it goes?” Like you know, you do a small something, and two of my colleagues actually did that, and that’s how their shift started, and the next thing you know, they were asking me about Collaborate and then they participated in one and then they get their own one, and now they have grown so quickly that it’s more a case of I feed questions from them based on their own experiences and then I discover that one of them showed someone else who then had a big Collaborate with his students.”*

Another participant spoke about bridging the bond not just as a relationship but also in terms of knowledge.

*“And the build the bridge. They build a bridge between their knowledge and [an]other person’s knowledge. So, it’s the bridge that the other person can cross over and for them, their job is not to lead but to build a bridge where the other person can walk on. Whereas, I think their other role is to say I’m the leader, follow me. Whereas, there’s a different analogy here where you’re saying, if I build bridges, then you can help yourself to where you want to be.”*

*“It was actually pretty good, hey that whole thing, so I just like signed up for it and went on it. It was actually excellent and also helped me in terms of my development because I don’t think we’re doing that yet. You know we’re not really facilitating online at the moment. If I take myself, I am using it to make learning aids available to my students to make it more self-directed from their side.”*

It is clear that the sense of collegiality has improved. However, it comes at a price that needs to be paid. The burden of care that academics have towards their students is heavy. Academics face the reality of burnout while working from home without much support. Evidence emerging from publications around the world suggests that it is female academics who are more likely to face burnout due to the increased burden of care they carry (Viglione 2020; Gabster et al. 2020; Burzynska and Contreras 2020; King and Frederickson 2021) and the very real negative impact COVID-19 has had on their ability to publish and engage in scientific research.

### Theme 5: Personal growth

The pandemic has given everyone an opportunity to use platforms that would not have otherwise been ventured onto. It has given me a lot of life lessons, lessons with perspectives, and learnings that I will carry with me until I retire.

*“Yes, so I think it’s good to pilot things in small chunks. That’s how we started; you know with your encouragement and help, we started with blogging and digital stories and this and that in the full-time programme. Based on that, we could then see that it might work for a part-time programme, but we couldn’t make it work inside.”*

*“Ja, the design of it, and it’s easier because it is ... it’s easier the second time around than the first time. Like, setting up this whole, like the foundation [of] Google Classroom, it’s really, really hard work. It really – I had to spend a lot of time last year setting it up. This year is so easy. Now, I just click, click, click and this is active and it’s now very easy to do, and I don’t know how we are going to get over that fear of I have to work harder, but I think, for the younger lecturers, they, anyway, want to do something new.”*

*“I mean, I like the idea of BlackBoard Collaborate or even a Zoom virtual classroom. A virtual chalk and talk but make it much shorter and ja, and then see, like some people were saying that students want to engage. They don’t necessarily want to just have theory pushed over to them. They want to somehow interact with each other.”*

The feeling after accomplishing something, be it learning a new way of teaching, a quick trick, or even a shortcut to achieve something gives us feelings of satisfaction and happiness, which are small iterative steps towards bigger personal growth. These steps bring us closer to work, give us some life lessons about people we care about and motivate us to work more effectively. Responses from participants highlight the above sentiments. However, learning new skills through platforms like LinkedIn learning has been minimised a lot due to time constraints when it comes to co-learning from colleagues outside the institution through webinars and workshops.

### Theme 6: Self-acceptance

Participants emphasised the amount of work that has gone into ensuring that the move to online platforms happens smoothly and benefits students with different needs by making themselves available through various platforms. At the same time, it has shown them a side of themselves that they were perhaps unaware of when it came to working tirelessly to the best of their ability, supporting colleagues and enriching students’ lives with available resources. They have steadfastly learnt new tools, implemented them and are willing to share them with colleagues.

*“And then also at the same time, because I am in a position, this is the nice thing because I know how webinars work, I know how screencasting works, I know how H5P works. I can show them, look these are the things that we can use that’s going to make ..., I’m going to tell them it’s going to make our life easier but I hope they’re not going to realise. At first it’s going to be more difficult before it gets easier. So that is my plan, whether it’s going ... so keep your fingers crossed with me, whether it’s going to work or not, I don’t know, where, we’ll see.”*

*“As part of our departmental meeting I had little bits of things about, taking them through, showing them what reports they can draw. At the last meeting, we went through showing them what reporting is available so they themselves can also monitor, you know, what’s happening in terms of the student side of things.”*

*“Oh, absolutely you know if I ... I looked back the other day and when we started this and I was also doing my thesis at the same time, I don’t know how we did it. I was sitting weekend after weekend after weekend recording classes, loading questions and I was teaching two subjects and loading questions and recording sessions etcetera, etcetera. So you know that if I look back and now it’s all there and now we can just expand and improve.”*

Self-acceptance is evident in the participants’ answers above, which are the results of perseverance and a sense of accomplishment. Irrespective of the walk of life they are in, the pandemic has also given them the opportunity to realise their potential and their ability to emerge triumphantly.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This paper analysed how the adaptation to online teaching impacted academics' well-being. The qualitative uncovering foregrounded that the COVID-19 pandemic left a negative impact on academics' well-being, be it work pressure, mental health, or relationships and bonding at the formal level, especially in the areas of autonomy, environmental mastery, and personal growth. Self-acceptance, the purpose of life and positive relationships have nurtured them as professionals. The institution's strong bearing on managerial control has impacted the participants' hold of autonomy. Diminution towards growth in other areas like research has led to anxieties about career growth.

The participants expressed apprehension about losing out on new skills or courses even though progress is being made incrementally, which was possible earlier, which was not only part of personal growth, but also environmental mastery, staying on trend with new advancements in their related industry. Overall, the paper concludes by stating that COVID-19 and the shift to online teaching have negatively affected the participants. Some positive findings in connection with assisting each other included growth in camaraderie, areas of development, positive work relationships and sociability amongst crisis, which resulted in building resilience, and standing up for each other, acted as pillars to well-being (Corbera et al. 2020). This fits in with the African philosophy of ubuntu, towards the development of an ethics of care amongst academics. The onset of the pandemic was beyond anyone's control; however, the researcher hopes that this paper motivates academics to build an ethics of care relationship and design a thinking mindset not only with their colleagues but also with students to face a similar crisis in the future with dignity and support.

The pandemic forced academics to teach courses online, but it was a major change for institutions that were not designed as distance learning units. Other factors like poverty, unemployment, and a failing electricity grid made it worse. The feedback from focus group interviews accentuated the aftermath on academic well-being. All this has also again foregrounded the positive relationships between academics, great learning environments and deeper engagements and interactions with students. Further research is needed to see how effective these relationships and co-learning have been. Will it bring up some firm outcomes on ways to approach another probable crisis or move towards constantly changing industrial revolutions? It is already evident and encouraging to witness academics and students move towards collective well-being and not just individual well-being.

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