

# Navigating And Sustaining Online Mobile-Learning Under COVID Conditions At A Higher Education Institution: A Bricolage Of Networked Emergent Leadership And Care

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## Abstract:

COVID-19 disrupted the academic year at all teaching and learning institutions. This research presents a case study of how the teaching and learning sector at the School of Education at Richmond University navigated and sustained the transition to mobile online teaching and learning. Data was generated from purposively selected participants using interviews, reflective diaries and collages. The data was subjected to content analysis. The findings illuminate that navigation was construed first as networked and distributed with emergent leaders and second as networked virtual learning communities. Sustaining the transition to online learning was intrinsically linked to the notion of care, care as pillars of sociality and care as virtual pastoral care. Our findings have implications for how universities conceptualise leadership and professional development.

**Keywords:** care, distributed, emergent leaders, mobile online learning, navigate, networked.

## 1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the 2020 and 2021 academic years. The novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 was found to be easily transmitted through direct contact with infected people (Singh-Pillay & Naidoo, 2022). To curb the spread of the virus and ensure that no student is left behind,

all institutions where teaching and learning occurred had to transition to online teaching and learning (Rizvi, 2020; Quezada et al., 2020). The sudden halt to face-to-face teaching required lots of preparation and decisions to be made quickly by the teaching and learning sector of institutions to shift to the online mobile pedagogical terrain. At the School of Education (SoE), Richmond University (pseudonym), the teaching and learning sector comprises 4 females; they are responsible for curriculum planning, overseeing the academic offering of the programmes, ensuring the quality of the programmes offered are not compromised and staff development. The teaching and learning sector of the SoE conducted a review to gain insights on the scale of the shift needed, disciplinary requirements (for example, practical work, tutorials), revision of the academic calendar, the Department of Higher Education( DHET) stance work integrate learning in a school context under pandemic conditions (teacher training is a professional qualification), the need to revise module templates for online teaching, revision of assessments for online teaching, revision of assessment due dates to allow students to adjust to online teaching and learning, to seek approval of these online module templates from relevant structures (including senate) within the university, networking with various divisions and departments within the university to support the transition to online teaching and learning and make provisions for all role players with the university to be trained for transition to the online teaching and learning platform. As such, the review was vital to ensure that a plan of action was in place to transition to online mobile teaching and learning and maintain a sense of normalcy under lockdown conditions. The resultant plan for action, which emerged from the review conducted by the teaching and learning sector at the SoE to transition to online teaching and learning, outlined the steps, linkages to relevant formal structures, processes that needed to occur for 7000 undergraduate students and staff to transition to mobile online teaching and learning. With the plan of action in place, the teaching and learning sector still had to implement, monitor,

and evaluate it. Consequently, in April 2020, the SoE held training workshops regarding online software such as Moodle, Microsoft PowerPoint, Zoom, and Kaltura to prepare academics for online teaching and learning, redesigning assessments appropriate for online teaching, and data issues. Students were also capacitated with the relevant information on how online teaching and learning would unfold. They were also given a workshop on how to use online software. Although digital platforms like Microsoft PowerPoint and Moodle were utilised under normal circumstances to complement contact lectures, the pandemic meant that all teaching depended on digital platforms.

While many studies focused on the challenges encountered by both lecturers/teachers and students when transitioning to mobile online teaching and learning (Akramy, 2022; Chen, 2021), there are few studies on how the teaching and learning sector laboured, navigated and sustained the transition to online mobile teaching and learning. This research aims to address the aforementioned gap and responds to the following research question:

1. How did the teaching and learning sector navigate and sustain the transition to mobile online teaching and learning?

Exploring how the teaching and learning sector navigated and sustained the transition to online teaching and learning may provide valuable insights into the decision-making process and the kind of leadership adaptation that occurred under crisis pandemic conditions.

This research paper is organised into five sections. The first section, the introduction, highlights the case of the School of Education and the plan of action to embark on online mobile teaching and learning. The review of the literature is presented in the second section. The method of data generation is foregrounded in section three. The research findings are discussed in section four, while the fifth section discusses the conclusion.

## **2. Literature review**

The abrupt move to online mobile teaching and learning during the pandemic has spotlighted the critical role leaders play in dealing with unexpected events threatening the existence of organisations worldwide (Bundy et al., 2017). Given leaders' position of influence, staff and students expected leaders to provide guidance and accurate information to save the academic year and ensure that no student was left behind. This section focuses on three aspects: challenges and enablers of online mobile teaching and learning, care, and leadership as networked, distributed and emergent.

### **2.1. Challenges and enablers of online teaching and learning**

The Covid-19 pandemic brought to the fore the many inequalities in higher education. For example, within the South African context, the disparity in internet access, availability of devices, conducive learning spaces, nutrition, and funding between students from different socioeconomic strata and geographic locations contributed to the widening digital divide among students. It resulted in students being left behind or dropping out (Bundy, 2017). Additionally, load shedding (power outages) disrupted connectivity in South Africa and impacted students' ability to access online learning (Singh-Pillay & Naidoo, 2022).

Online teaching and learning occur in a technologically enhanced environment, which requires both students and lecturers/teachers to be equipped and capacitated to engage in online teaching and learning using devices and learning platforms (Wang et al., 2020). Lecturers/teachers must also be capacitated on discipline-specific pedagogy to transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning. Chen (2020) conducted a study at a Malaysian university; they argue that successful and meaningful engagement between students and teachers depends on practical online pedagogical training for teachers. While

Kebritchi et al. (2017) concur with Chen, they point out that planning for online teaching is a time-consuming activity that goes beyond the direct transfer of face-to-face activities to online platforms.

## 2.2. Care

The care issue is a quintessential enabler of online teaching and learning under lockdown conditions. Care is seen as both a practice and a disposition instead of a set of rules or principles (Tronto, 2017). In other words, care is seen as a practice that involves thought and action. Everything is done to maintain, improve, support, and ease our minds, bodies, souls, spirituality and environment to live peaceful and content lives. Caring thus involves noticing that care is needed and assessing what is needed to meet the needs of individuals in a particular time and place, especially when they are vulnerable, fragile, uncertain, and lack hope (Tronto, 2017). So, caring is a practice that sculpts what we pay attention to in the world around us and what we consider essential to life.

## 2.3. Leadership as networked, distributed and emergent

The work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) is drawn upon to understand leadership better. Their work is based on principles derived from a metaphor of rhizomes. A rhizome is an underground stem that grows horizontally and gives rise to lateral (side) and adventitious roots. These roots are connected (to the stem) and grow in multiple directions. New plants can grow from a root that has been broken away from the stem. This regenerative ability makes rhizomes resilient and allows them to grow around boundaries or barriers (Hutchings & De Kroon, 1994). Thus, a rhizome has no beginning and end and is always in a state of propagation or proliferation, giving rhizomes the evolutionary advantage of surviving harsh and changeable external conditions (Hutchings & De Kroon, 1994). According to Leafgren (2009), a rhizome is antithetical to a

tree. Leafgren (2009) explains that a tree has a vertical linear hierarchy system, whilst a rhizome has a lateral structure comprising multiple roots and shoots. Additionally, the notion of the rhizome as networked, distributed in various directions, applies to leadership as dynamic and emergent. Adopting the rhizome metaphor in this study allowed us to uncover hidden leaders within the university who do not occupy designated positions of leadership but who come together, position themselves in particular ways, adopt new roles and responsibilities and whose actions are not always overtly conspicuous but were involved in navigating and sustaining the transition to online mobile teaching and learning. These individuals, like the roots of the rhizome, which are networked in all directions, were able to unite and forge both vertical and horizontal associations among staff, share a sense of identity, expertise, trust, belonging, willingness to help to support the transition to online mobile teaching and learning. In a way, the rhizome philosophy of connections/networks shows how individuals cohere and take on multiple roles during the transition to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic conditions. Moreover, the rhizome philosophy depicts leadership as complex, relational, and networked, which surfaces in response to boundaries or barriers encountered in the environment (in this instance, the university environment), thereby leading to the understanding that leadership is dynamic and emergent.

### **3. Materials and methods**

#### **3.1. General background**

This case study sought to explore how the teaching and learning sector of the SoE at Richmond University navigated and sustained the transition to mobile online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, espoused the interpretative paradigm. The interpretative paradigm suggests that reality is socially constructed and that individuals make sense of the context in which they work or live, resulting in

multiple realities (Cohen et al., 2018). Based on the paradigm embraced, this research adopted a qualitative approach to understand, describe, and explain social phenomena from the inside (Flick, 2007).

### 3.2. Participants

The participants, Peace and Nomfundo, were deliberately selected because of their suitability to advance the purpose of the research (Rule & John, 2011). They headed the undergraduate teaching and learning sector at the SoE. and were responsible for the transition to online teaching and learning. Peace and Nomfundo are part of the management at the SoE. Informed consent was sought from Peace and Nomfundo, and they were assured confidentiality and anonymity.

### 3.3. Instruments

The following instruments collated data: semi-interviews, reflective diaries, an art-based method, and collages. The interview was audio-recorded with the consent. The interview lasted 45 minutes and focussed on what they did to transition to online teaching and learning and how they sustained the transition to online teaching and learning. Reflective journals were used as they allowed participants to reflect critically on the experience that was being studied and gave a more robust and in-depth understanding of their experiences by writing them down (Ismail, 2017). A template was provided to participants to reflect on two aspects: how they navigated the transition to online teaching and learning and how they sustained it. Peace and Nomfundo maintained the reflective journals for the research project, which was six weeks. An art-based method, namely collage-making, complemented the data generated via reflective journals. Photographs/pictures and other materials are used to make a collage by sticking them on a poster or similar backing. The images selected represent feelings and experiences about the situation explored. Before Peace and Nomfundo could begin to construct their collage, an explanation was provided to them about art-based methods

and the making of collages. They were requested to select pictures/materials that “spoke” to them about how they navigated and sustained the transition to online teaching and learning. According to Singh-Pillay and Sotsaka (2020), collage-making, as a research method, provides researchers with a window into the participants’ lived experiences and a means to understand how they make meaning of their experiences. In this instance how, Peace and Nomfundo navigated and sustained the transition to online teaching and learning. After the collage was constructed, each participant explained the meaning of their selected picture and the ensemble of images. These explanations on the pictures and ensemble of images were audio recorded.



Network of expertise- no hierarchy, not top-down, emergent leaders linking expertise







Caring is being supportive, reaching out, and giving hope virtually to create a sense of normalness

Image from collage

Data analysis

In preparation for data analysis, the interview transcripts and the transcripts from the collage-making session were sent to participants for member checking. Member checking helps improve the data's accuracy, credibility and validity (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The interview data, reflective diaries, and collages were juxtaposed, read, and re-read many times to engage in content analysis. Patterns, similarities, links, associations, differences, and divergences were noted before coding could commence. As shown in Table 1, the allocated

codes were re-examined before they could be re-arranged into themes. The emerging themes were sent to Peace and Nomfundo to check for accuracy in terms of analysis and interpretations.

Table 1: Showing categories and themes

Research Question	Categories	Themes
Navigation of transition to online teaching and learning	Distributed	Navigation as networked and distributed with emergent leaders
	Networked	
	Emergent	
	Virtual learning communities	Navigation as networked virtual learning communities
	Professional development	
Sustaining the transition to online teaching and learning	Care	Care as pillars of sociality
	Multiple forms	
	Pillars of support	
	Virtual pastoral care	Care as virtual pastoral care
	Pedagogy of care	

#### 4. Findings and discussion

The teaching and learning sector embarked on a review to gain insights on the scale of the shift needed for the transition to online teaching and learning under the Covid-19 lockdown conditions. Data from the reflective diaries., semi-structured interviews and collages were used to respond to the research question: How did the teaching and learning sector navigate and sustain the transition to mobile online teaching and learning? Content analysis of the data highlights the emerging two themes: navigation of the transition to online teaching and learning and sustaining the transition to online teaching and learning.

##### 4.1. Navigation

Two themes emerged: navigation as networked and distributed with emergent leaders and navigation as networked virtual learning communities.

#### **4.1.1. Navigation as networked and distributed with emergent leaders**

The personal attributes of the individuals within the teaching and learning sector and their flexibility and responsiveness to the lockdown condition impacted how they navigated the transition to online teaching and learning. The testimonies from the interviews, reflective diaries and collage attest that navigation was networked and distributed with emergent leaders.

We roped in the young digital natives amongst us to serve as champions, like CM, RG, AM, the team from the 4IR project – JN, AP, class reps, academic development offices, academic monitoring mentors, counsellors, disability unit, module administrators to come together to drive the transition to online teaching and learning. Collaboration across the SoE was vital to transition successfully to online teaching and learning. We deviated from the standard business-as-usual approach. There was a reversal of roles, and young academics were leaders negotiating for zero-rated sites, data bundles and training staff and students. Staff revised the templates and assessments for remote online teaching with the assistance of the champions. Many older academics battled with the change to online teaching. It was essential to keep staff and students updated at all times via emails, newsletters, and blogs. (Interview-Peace)

Leading this shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning entailed allowing others to drive the transition to online teaching and learning and rethinking leadership in a crisis. There is no hierarchy or levels in leadership or heroic performance. This is teamwork and collaboration at its peak- a network of expertise distributed in multiple directions across the university. The ones sharing their expertise do not hold formal positions of leadership. Staff and students were kept

informed of developments via social media, email, and WhatsApp. (Reflective diary- Nomfundo)

The teaching and learning sector collaborated with young academics and the 4IR research project team to champion digital technologies and pedagogies with various stakeholders (academics, class representatives, counsellors, administrators) to navigate and facilitate the transition to online teaching and learning. The intense collegiality, collaboration and realisation that all voices within the university were important were significant to navigating the transition to online teaching and learning. The above testimonies and collage images elucidated that the teaching and learning sector at the SoE construed the transition to online teaching and learning as a networked, non-hierarchical distributed process across the various sectors of the university. According to Latour (2005), a network reflects cohesion, coming together, association or collaboration among persons to perform a particular task (in this case, the transition to online teaching and learning). Instead of a top-down, vertical hierarchical approach to navigate the transition to online teaching and learning, the teaching and learning sector considered the need for multiple persons to network their expertise to drive the transition to online teaching and learning. These various collaborations with personnel across the different university sectors bring to the fore the emergent leaders (CM, RG, AM, JN, AP) and the building of a community of practice during the transition to online teaching and learning. Under crisis, the everyday business-as-usual leadership style gave way to flexibility in thinking about leadership as emergent. Lee and Farh (2019) see emergent leadership as a process in which one or more persons use their expertise or skills to pursue the group's or organisation's objectives without having the formal authority or role of a leader (Charlier et al., 2016). The Champions thus took on new roles and advanced the transition to online teaching and learning within the network created by sharing their expertise and good practice on digital technologies. They led the

university community by training staff and administrators, thereby disrupting inequalities in the use of digital technologies and ensuring students could engage in learning during the lockdown conditions. Academic staff also became conspicuous as leaders who promoted the transition to online teaching and learning by participating in the training provided and adjusting existing module templates and assessments for remote teaching. In other words, a community of practice was forged that allowed for engagement in reflective and reflexive practice.

These emergent leaders responded to the call for change from face-to-face to online teaching and learning and positioned themselves as leaders and agents of change. They recognised that most staff require particular training to engage in online teaching and learning before staff could help their students with online learning. Thus, their agency is construed as an arising phenomenon of the context through which it is enacted (Singh-Pillay & Samuel, 2017). This means that agency context-specific, in this instance, conditions of lockdown and the transition to remote online teaching and learning to overcome and survive the harsh contextual factor.

Furthermore, the network and joining of hands depicted on the collage provide insights into how the teaching and learning sector considered leadership during the transition to online teaching and learning. Leadership was seen as the coming together of multiple connections, extensive negotiations and change of roles in transitioning to online teaching and learning. The findings above resonate with Francisco and Naquin (2020), who asserted that COVID-19 pandemic challenges had changed normalcy regarding management, capacitation, priorities, digital knowledge, preparedness, inclusion and resources (Shufutinsky et al., 2020). Our findings confirm that navigating the transition to online teaching is a bricolage of networks, collaborations, and emergent leaders in response to contextual factors that impacted the transition to remote online teaching

and learning (Nelson & Squires, 2017). The network also extended to disseminating information about decisions undertaken and healthcare information to staff, students, and stakeholders. Our data gives a nuanced account of everyday academic practice during pandemic conditions and highlights that leadership is a complex, interactive, networked, distributed process with emergent leaders.

#### **4.1.2. Navigation as networked virtual learning communities**

Within the SoE, 5 clusters are offering undergraduate modules. The TL sector and the emergent leaders met with the 5 clusters. They organised webinars on discipline-specific pedagogy as part of the professional development needed to transition from face-to-face to online pedagogy. The webinars also capacitated staff in designing online materials and assessments, as evident in the excerpts below.

We (the TL sector and emergent leaders) arranged for online discipline-specific pedagogues to support staff with pedagogy used in online teaching, developing materials and assessments for online teaching. Staff were requested to create their own virtual learning communities to share best practices, what worked and what didn't work, and to establish the kinds of support they required to have an engaging online lesson. Feedback from the 5 clusters highlights the immense benefit to professional development and how staff can innovate and contextualise the curriculum. (Nomfundo reflective diary)

The feedback from staff about the virtual learning community was phenomenal. The science team reported about virtual practical work and kitchen chemistry, while the technology team stated that they embarked on project-based learning on indigenous technologies. The math team expressed how a safe space was created for them to learn from each other without fear or embarrassment. Staff also mentioned what they did to reach out to students, with bring and share sessions, dance, and community engagement. It is heart-warming to note that

the transition to online teaching and learning is sustained in many ways. (Peace, interview)

The above excerpts highlight the innovative ways to navigate the transition to online teaching by forging virtual professional learning communities for collaboration, cooperation, sharing best practices, what works, what does not work and creative solutions to support each other to embark on quality online teaching. The above testimonies reveal the staff's willingness to admit their need for more expertise in a safe space without being undermined. To learn from each other, share best practices, and try new methods to improve their online pedagogy. The collaborative networks of learning communities are effective because they expose staff to new ideas and practices, improve teaching through feedback and discussions (Gerken et al., 2016), and promote critical reflection (Hord, 1997). These virtual professional learning communities signal a shift from the normal silo operations in the academic environment. Consequently, staff confidence increased, they reimagined how to shape instructions and pedagogies in a virtual context, and they embarked on innovative strategies to engage their students in meaningful activities on the online platform, such as kitchen chemistry, simulations, indigenous technology, and project-based learning. These above findings resonate with that of the (Singh et al., 2022) study that offering specialised training to faculty helps motivate and increase staff confidence levels and practice.

#### **4.2. Sustaining the transition to online teaching and learning.**

Two sub-themes linked to care sustained the transition to remote online teaching and learning: Care as pillars of sociality and care as virtual pastoral care. Each of these sub-themes is presented next.

##### **4.2.1. Care as pillars of sociality**

During the pandemic, working from home and social distancing resulted in a lack of face-to-face interaction and physicality with colleagues and, consequently, the lack of opportunity for social, emotional, recreational and spiritual get-togethers. The

transition to remote online teaching and learning disrupted the nature of interpersonal connection among staff. Working from home also increased the workload of female staff; they had to manage their homes and household chores, children's schooling, supervision, and research outputs from a single space. Transcripts from the interviews, reflective diaries and collages bring to the fore the multiple forms of support, getting together, and active sharing of advice between the teaching and learning sector, academics and support service staff.

When I talked to staff, I noted many of them have a low morale, they are uncertain about the future, they miss their families, friends and colleagues. We have to create a virtual space where the typical day to day activities continue, so we can touch base and staff will feel they are not alone- there is this chumminess, pillars of different types of support and sense of family- these activities will help to keep us grounded, if staff experience a sense of care, it will make a world of difference, they will extend care to the students. Also, our female staff are under tremendous pressure on the home and work front, the performance management needs to be reimagined for the lockdown. (Nomfundo- interview)

Social activities and support must continue virtually, spoke to different staff members, they have all come on board and put together group activities we can all engage in. virtually, just to keep in touch and support each other, it is very therapeutic.... for the mind, body and soul. There is online Zumba, meditation, lunch/coffee, prayer etc. Reaching out to staff spurs me on, creates a sense of hope and helps me cope with my home and work responsibilities. Having these pillars of support and care is essential so that the sense of care can be spread (Peace, reflective journal)

The Nomfundo and Peace organised activities to engage staff in meditation, prayer, coffee, lunch, motivational talks, wellness and virtual Zumba, as evident in the excerpts above. They created a safe virtual haven for emotional, spiritual, recreational and social support to overcome feelings of



isolation, loneliness, uncertainty and despair that may have resulted from the lockdown conditions. These activities arranged by the teaching and learning sector make visible the quality of their relationship with staff, their deep sense of care, trust, and empathy and the safe space they have created with each other to share personal issues. It is conspicuous that support was not restricted to online teaching but extended to many realms of life (emotional, health and social support). The extension of emotional, health, and social support foregrounds the intersection of care as sociality with the virtual platform. Maintaining staff morale and providing comfort and reassurance via the planned activities was critical. According to Cook, Heffron et al. (2016), engaging in common activities connects and raises a sense of togetherness and loyalty among colleagues. These aforementioned activities thus became the resin or glue that reinforced and sustained the growing ties, associations and blossoming pillars of sociality between the teaching and learning sector and staff to sustain the transition to online teaching and learning. Out of these shared activities, more pillars of sociality were forged. Moreover, the selected images in the collage, for example, the image of the hands, represent a “helping hand” to cope with enormous pressure, a hand to guide you when necessary, and a sense of togetherness. Further, the helping hand alludes to the sensitive negotiation for a hold on the performance management system and granting staff still completing their PhD to receive an extension. These excerpts illuminate Goffee and Jones’s (2000) notion that leaders’ empathy is quintessential in crisis moments. The image of having lunch/coffee/doing meditation/Zumba represents support and developing resilience to cope with the challenges of the pandemic. The idea of the blossoming flower and the butterfly reflects the growth of the sociality to overcome the day-to-day challenges encountered during the pandemic conditions of lockdown. Concerning the above finding, it is worth noting that Spoonley et al. (2020) study emphasised that resilience arises from sociality, the ability to unite and to form solidarity, and to be

inclusive while recognising and valuing difference. Our data suggest that the blossoming sociality paved the way for the teaching and learning sector to cope with the multiple demands made on them and the staff when sustaining the online teaching and learning terrain at the SoE.

#### **4.2.2. Care as Virtual Pastoral Care**

The pandemic disrupted students' lives and intensified students' isolation and struggles to cope with the digital divide, especially among students residing in rural areas (most live below the breadline and lack essential resources). The teaching and learning sector were highly concerned for the students and capacitated staff to provide virtual pastoral care for students, as evident in the excerpts below.

Staff are encouraged to report students struggling with online learning, isolation, and poor living conditions to the teaching and learning sector. Arrangements are made for printed material to be sent to students struggling with connectivity issues; contact has also been made with municipalities to assist students in accessing public libraries. Food parcels were delivered to students still awaiting funding from NASFAS. Students who used to access the campus clinic received multivitamin hampers sponsored by a pharmaceutical company. Lecturers tracked students' academic performance and reported this to the TL sector. Furthermore, students lagging behind academically were attached to mentors and ADOs who supported students academically, and students with connective issues were given a chance to repeat the task. (Peace, Reflective diary)

Lecturers were requested to provide care to students, check on student well-being before each lecture, create and provide additional materials to students needing additional support, pass on councillors' details to students, and create zoom links for students to engage in social activities like those arranged by the TL sector for staff. Lecturers were encouraged to use

WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube to engage students in learning. Students are very appreciative and cooperative, using multiple social media platforms to embark on learning. These platforms allow a network to be formed, creating a learning community (Nomfundo, interview).

The above excerpts show that the TL sector encouraged staff to adopt a care-centred pedagogy to extend virtual pastoral care to students. The TL sector recognised that students were dealing with uncertainty; many were vulnerable, lacked conducive learning spaces and devices, and they might be caregiving or coping with grief and loss of family members; members of their families may have lost their jobs due to the COVID pandemic and shortage of food. At the SoE, the majority of the students come from disadvantaged communities. The TL sector believes that care for students is the cornerstone of teaching and learning. Along similar lines, Doraiswamy et al. (2022) suggest that prioritising the needs of those led (for example, students) is about involvement, care and empowerment. Virtual care is seen as a way to reach out to students and provide them with hope and empowerment despite all the gloom they face. Peer information about those in need quickly filtered through the networks created, and the need for various forms of support multiplied. The TL sector ensured students received formal and informal pastoral care and the support required. Using multiple social media sites allowed students to access online learning material to ensure they succeeded with online learning. The above excerpts show that the TL sector embraces the ideals of equity, access, and enhanced student participation espoused in White Paper 3 (DoE, 1977).

## **5. Conclusion**

This study sought to explore how the teaching and learning sector of the School of Education at Richmond University navigated and sustained the transition to mobile online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Data

analysis from the interviews, reflective dairies and collages revealed that the teaching and learning sector encountered navigation to the transition to online teaching and learning as networked and distributed with emergent leaders and as networked virtual learning communities. The implications of navigating the transition to online teaching and learning as networked and distributed create a “flatter” concept of organisational decision-making, the emergence of leaders (without having the formal authority or a designated leadership position) across the institution and provide a new basis for thinking about a bottom-up type of professional development under conditions of lockdowns, rather than a top-down approach. Also, worth noting is the emergent synergy and strength brought by the associations of expertise in responding to the demands of emergency online teaching and learning brought by COVID-19. This network, collaboration and support assisted staff and students in navigating the uncharted waters and the complexity of the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that no student was left behind. Returning to the top-down hierarchy of functions and silo operations in universities would be a retrogression. The SoE experience showed that networked, distributed and emergent leadership was effective as each team was empowered to make decisions. in a crisis (Berjaoui et al.,2019). With this in mind, universities can consider continuous professional development as increasingly dependent on the quality of the established networks. As can be seen from this study, networks have a crucial role in supporting innovation and development in virtual and non-virtual spaces.

Regarding sustaining the transition to online teaching and learning, two sub-themes emerged from data analysis: care as pillars of sociality and care as virtual pastoral care. Our findings highlighted that the teaching and learning sector at the SoE prioritised the needs of staff and students to maintain a sense of normality by reaching out, keeping in touch, caring, and hoping to dispel feelings of uncertainty and isolation under

trying lockdown conditions. These findings on care as pillars of sociality and care as virtual pastoral care imply leadership EQ.

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