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## A Phenomenon-Based Learning Enquiry: University Students' Self-Leadership Actions on the Social Impact of Covid-19

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**Abstract.** The aim of this paper was to gain deeper insight into Bachelor of Education Honors (B.Ed. Hons) students' self-leadership actions in response to the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives. Notwithstanding the growing body of literature showing the impact of COVID-19 on education, the social influence of the pandemic on the academic lives of students in higher education institutions (HEIs) remains contentious. Since the implementation of lockdowns and social isolation internationally, COVID-19, as a social phenomenon, has required creative responses from students in HEIs to advance academically. Through a phenomenon-based learning (PhenoBL) enquiry and applying narrative methodology, students' responses were analyzed by means of McCormack's (2000) four lenses, namely the lens of language, the lens of narrative processed, the lens of context and the lens of moments. Emails were sent to all B.Ed. Hons students to express their views and understanding of the influence of COVID-19 on their academic lives as postgraduate students. Five students responded and were afforded the opportunity to provide their insights and understanding of the phenomenon whilst exploring self-leadership actions for change toward transformative practices in their learning spaces. The results revealed that, through engaging in PhenoBL activities, students were able to employ adaptive practices and inquiry-based activities to enhance self-leadership abilities through self-influence and self-trust. The paper recommends that HEIs should consider PhenoBL activities for self-leadership as transformative practices of social justice to address the social complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on the academic lives of university students.

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## 1. Introduction

The occurrence of COVID-19 at the end of 2019 troubled higher education scholarship at an international level, caused considerable challenges for teaching and learning, whilst it threatened the loss of individuals' lives (Mengistie, 2021). With the termination of academic activities at HEIs, the necessity for a speedy conversion from face-to-face learning to virtual platforms became unavoidable (Kapasia et al., 2020). Although virtual learning has been perceived as a promising substitute for conventional learning, an absence of outdoor activity, social distancing and uneasy sleeping patterns have negatively affected the psychological safety of many students (Adnan & Anwar 2020).

In South Africa, lockdowns due to the pandemic ensued on 26 March 2020. The need to establish tight limits on everyone's access to and participation in their educational programs, at all levels, was unavoidable. Universities' on-campus activities were prohibited, and lecturers were instructed to deliver content using flexible learning designs. These constraints prompted all lectures for the Bachelor of Education Honors (B.Ed. Hons) course at a South African university of technology to be given online, primarily through the institution's online learning management system (Blackboard) and Collaborate Ultra. The fact that online teaching and learning activities, owing to a pandemic, have little resemblance to purposefully organized online teaching and learning, relegated this unanticipated transition to remote teaching.

Di Pietro et al. (2020) identify important aspects that should be included in positive and flexible learning strategies, such as guaranteed internet access and availability of digital technology like computers, laptops, or tablets, and the use of appropriate Virtual Learning Environments (VLE). Such digital technology can provide students with access to educational resources and equitably connect them with lecturers to facilitate remote lessons and improve the availability of lecturers. Du Plessis et al. (2022), however, report that finding a quiet location at home to engage in studies, little engagement with family members as well as challenges with Internet connection were some of the concerns South African students voiced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interrupted electricity supply was also a concern, with certain places experiencing power outages even before load-shedding was reinstated across the country. A rapid appraisal of virtual media regarding the status of student learning in South African HEIS as from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic revealed, amongst others, the need for students to adapt to self-leadership approaches to navigate their academic lives (Du Plessis et al., 2022).

In terms of the indicated studies (Di Pietro et al., 2020; Du Plessis, 2022), there seems to be a gap in research regarding students' ability to apply self-leadership actions to flourish in their academic lives. In this regard, Afridi et al. (2021) suggest that more research should be conducted to assist students to understand the

relationship between self-leadership and their academic achievement. In answering the call for more research on self-leadership, we hold the view that the academic challenges brought forward by COVID-19 requires that students' abilities to lead themselves during the pandemic be investigated. Despite students' struggles to navigate their academic lives and social well-being, COVID-19 has exposed prospects for innovation and creativity with novel choices in terms of self-leadership and learning in HEIs. Consequently, our intention was to draw from students' creativity to unearth how they employed self-leadership through an application of phenomenon-based activities to address the social complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on their academic lives. To analyze students' responses, the following question guided our research: *How did university students enact self-leadership through phenomenon-based activities in addressing the social complexities of COVID-19 and its influence on their academic lives?* Complementary to the main research question, the sub-questions were:

- What information could be obtained from B.Ed. Hons students regarding their application of self-leadership to improve their academic lives during COVID-19? And
- How could PhenoBL activities be proposed for students' self-leadership abilities to address the social complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on their academic lives?

To provide information with respect to our research questions, we first conducted a literature review on constructs relevant to self-leadership, followed by an analysis of students' responses and PhenoBL activities for their self-leadership abilities during and beyond the pandemic.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Social complexities of COVID-19 on the academic lives of students in HEIs**

Students in HEIs are an exceptional social group with dynamic lifestyles founded on interactions and associations, university and physical activities, as well as attending meetings (Villani et al. 2021). COVID-19, however, significantly transformed students' lives. While we are unaware of the exact impact of the virus, we are cognizant of the worsening of students' academic lives in HEIs due to the influence of COVID-19. Alghamdi (2021) reports that social complexities like low online education infrastructure, absence from the social environment, social alienation and distancing, as well as burdens placed on learning time, were only a few examples of the discomfort students experienced in terms of their academic lives. The pressure to perform well academically in a progressively demanding setting, combined with a range of routine changes due to COVID-19, contributed to suboptimal academic and social wellbeing (Burns, Dagnall & Holt, 2020). Students' sense of individual aptitude can contribute to suboptimal comfort and an apparent sense of reduced happiness if they experienced a loss of competence pertaining to academic lives.

Despite the crisis caused by COVID-19, students had to reconsider the ways in which learning usually took place. Teti, Schatz and Liebenberg (2020, p. 1) maintain that whilst pandemics like COVID-19 are, "revealing and reinforcing, they also catalyse new social and cultural relations; lay bare inequalities and

anxieties, discrimination and division as well as solidarities and collective action". Against this background, students were obliged to find alternative ways as to how to navigate their academic lives and consider adaptive responses to education challenges with which they were confronted (Reimers et al., 2020). Thus, to learn and develop to their full potential, students were required to implement inclusive academic practices themselves (Khanna & Kareem, 2021).

Arguably, HEIs should thus be open to the voices of students which can be regarded a more inclusive response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequential influence on their academic lives. Giving students a say in decision-making to articulate their needs and ideas may improve their self-leadership abilities so that they can autonomously contribute to developing themselves during times of crisis (International Labour Organisation, 2020).

## **2.2 The power of self-leadership**

Self-leadership can be regarded as a practice through which individuals encourage themselves to attain the self-motivation and self-direction required to perform and behave in appropriate ways (Gharanfoli & Kemal, 2021). Individuals should realize that self-leadership is about taking action to ascertain who one is, what one can do, and where one is going (Delport, Van Jaarsveld & Challens, 2021). Having taken cognizance of the afore-mentioned actions, we were intrigued by the notion that self-leadership may be regarded as a way to "set goals for your life; lead by example; be fearless; embrace new ideas and opportunities; question everything; do what is right, not what is easy; be the change you want to see in the world" (Browning, 2018, p. 12). Words like "fearless", "new", "question everything" and "not what is easy" may be associated with self-leadership in times of crisis. Firstly, "fearless" can be associated with behavioral awareness in that individuals position themselves such that they motivate the self to be successful (Schultz, 2021). Secondly, both "not what is easy" and "new" relate to individuals' adaptive ability in leading the self, whilst engaging in naturally motivating tasks (Inam et al., 2021). Thirdly, "question everything" refers to an intolerance of accepting negative experiences as detrimental, whilst asking questions to the self in order to develop self-trust and commitment, and embracing new ideas and opportunities (Campos et al., 2020).

The viewpoints regarding self-leadership as discussed in this paper hold strong reference with PhenoBL in that it acknowledges that students can make decisions and contest unfavourable circumstances in an attempt to lead the self in an autonomous and meaningful manner.

## **2.3 The philosophy behind phenomenon-based learning**

Symeonidis and Schwarz (2016) indicate that Finland transformed its domestic primary education syllabus for elementary education in 2014. During the transformation process, indigenous syllabi were established and steadily presented in schools as from August 2016. Finland's domestic curriculum theorizes learning as a collective and directed practice in which students have a dynamic and autonomous role, setting their personal aims and solving challenges both collaboratively and self-reliantly (Finnish National Board of Education

[FNBE], 2016). During the process of learning, students become attentive to their individual learning and develop learning-to-learn abilities in that,  
*they learn to set goals and to solve problems both independently and together with others. While acquiring new knowledge and skills, the pupils learn to reflect on their learning, experiences, and emotions. Positive emotional experiences, the joy of learning and creative activities promote learning and inspire the pupils to develop their competence (FNBE, 2016, Section 2.3).*

Drawing on Nielsen and Davies (2018), the afore-mentioned definition of phenomenon-based learning may be useful to HEIs to assist students to deal with the social complexities of COVID-19 in several ways. Firstly, students were involved in the learning of the phenomenon because it came from their actual educational sphere and was applicable to their everyday existence. Secondly, students took accountability for their individual learning because they were able to interpret their own experiences regarding the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives. Thirdly, students develop 21<sup>st</sup> century abilities like communication, teamwork, creative and critical thinking during the practice of innovative learning.

Significantly, an application of PhenoBL implies that students would implement self-leadership skills by taking actual world matters and develop solutions appropriate to themselves. In this regard, the relationship between PhenoBL and self-leadership signifies that, *“we can make use of the human readiness to wonder, investigate, and go beyond personal ideas” (Lonka, 2018, p. 178).* The afore-mentioned relationship between PhenoBL and self-leadership is an indication of how students can affect their own cognition, behaviour and motivation (Schultz, 2021), whilst they position themselves such that they are able to tell their stories of personal engagement to improve their academic lives during COVID-19.

### **3. Research methodology**

To understand university students' personal and unique experiences within the social context they found themselves, this qualitative study applied a narrative methodology. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) assert that narrative researchers search for ways to understand and then present real-life experiences through the stories of research participants. In this paper, we focused on the narratives of five B.Ed. Hons students regarding their experience of the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives. We sent emails to all students enrolled in the B.Ed. Hons course at a South African university and received responses from five students who expressed interest in the study. Hennick and Kaiser (2021) purports that small sizes in qualitative research should be regarded as adequate because they are effective in reaching data saturation.

Narratives are not simply stories that are told but are a technique of analysis that applies storytelling to reveal particular information through dialogue and reflection (Wang & Geale, 2015). Narratives can be regarded as individuals' personal interpretations of their experiences (Holloway & Galvin, 2017). Thus, by allowing the B.Ed. Hons students to tell their stories, they were positioned to provide rich accounts of their experiences, whilst the researchers were positioned

to make meaning of students' narratives. We regarded this as important because the students' voices (Trahar, 2013) regarding the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives might have remained silent. An understanding of their narratives was based on the presupposition that the students were already conscious of the content of their stories (Murmah & Avraamidou, 2014), and that such content was used by them to understand their own experiences, whilst they were able to tell their stories.

#### **4. Transformative learning theory**

HEIs play a significant role as "future-shapers" of students and are platforms for ethnic, societal, and financial transformation, rendering it as an ideal environment to address challenges that they might have encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, B.Ed. Hons students from a university of technology in South Africa were afforded an opportunity to provide their insights and understanding of the phenomenon whilst exploring self-leadership actions for change. Such exploration had relevance to the social complexities of COVID-19 on their academic lives. Having requested the students to look back on their experiences, we were able to analyze their perspectives, applying transformative learning as theoretical lens.

Transformative learning theory, "has evolved into a comprehensive and complex description of how learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experience" (Cranton, 1994, p. 22). Thus, when individuals are involved in serious thinking about their experiences, the possibilities exist that they might take action to change their perspectives of particular experiences (Mezirow, 1981; Fleming, 2022). Significantly, learning takes place when individuals provide evidence that they are willing to reconsider their orientation frames, abandon existing habits of mind and consider different appreciate options in an attempt to act differently instead of legitimating what they already know about their current situation (Mezirow, 2000).

We looked at the students' experiences through the lenses of transformative learning, particularly how they implemented innovative strategies to navigate their academic lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Mezirow (1991) reiterates that, when individuals understand how their beliefs and assumptions might have been dissimilar in the past, and when they are willing to change their ways of thinking, they would be able to plan a course of transformative action. Drawing on Spooner and John (2020), transformative learning during a pandemic is ideal as it empowers and frees students from disruptive thinking that may impede sound judgment and action with respect to their academic lives. This implies that they can contemplate the kinds of transformative learning strategies required to understand a situation or problem. The acquisition of new knowledge, adopting innovative viewpoints and interpretations of their experiences are significant to making meaning and advancing learning (Mezirow, 1991; Fleming, 2018). In this research, the students were afforded opportunities to share transformative perspectives that might have been muted, repressed, or possibly never been heard of before (De Klerk, 2014).

## 5. Sampling and data collection tools

Within the context of this paper, the narratives of five B.Ed. Hons students at a university of technology in South Africa were gathered to understand their experiences concerning the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives. The B.Ed. Hons students, in the department of educational management, usually study for a period of one year full-time, whilst part-time studies are for a period of two years. During the planning phase of the paper, the first author wrote an email to all B.Ed. Hons students to ascertain their availability to participate in this study. This was done because the students were preparing themselves for final assessment activities at the time. We, therefore, made use of voluntary response sampling to maximize the reaction ratio and reduce the likelihood of non-response predispositions (Lehdonvirta et al., 2020). This form of communication was possible because all students have access to digital technology and the internet. Although the issue of internet coverage was not a problem at all, only five students responded. To ensure objectivity, trustworthiness, and honesty (Golafshani 2003), the same question was emailed to each of the participants. The students' responses were emailed to us and in case of uncertainties, follow-up questions were prepared. The responses were then copied and pasted onto a Word® document, the participants were de-identified and pseudonyms were assigned (Fritz & Vandermause 2018). The scripts were then read and prepared for analysis.

Of significance is the argument that the five students who responded were adequate for this research because qualitative research does not focus on numbers, but rather on the richness of the data provided by the participants (Kim, 2016). We requested the assistance of a colleague to verify the total number of responses.

When using narratives, “people make sense of their lived health and well-being in their social context as they understand it, including their self-belief-oriented stories” (Ntinda, 2020, p. 1). To enable the students to tell their stories regarding the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives, we requested the students to write a personal narrative (story) based on the following:

*Write a narrative (maximum two pages) in which you express your views and understanding of the influence COVID-19 has exerted on your academic life as a postgraduate student. In your narrative, please indicate the specific challenges you experienced (such as social, emotional, academic) and what actions, behaviours, or transformational practices you implemented to cope with the pandemic to ensure that you are successful in your studies.*

We allowed the students to email their responses to us because, the responses from participants can result in well-written, rich and informative accounts (Mann, 2016). Email responses were in order because all the students were technologically savvy and expressed their comfort to communicate their stories in written text (Dahlin, 2021). The students' responses through email were valuable, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, because it provided them with adequate time to assemble and organize their views, while concomitantly guaranteeing the protection of both researchers and participants (Amri, Angelakis & Logan, 2021). On receipt of the students' narratives, their names were removed, pseudonyms

were allocated to each student, and the responses were saved in different word documents (with separate encryption codes) to guarantee protection of the data. The data was then organized before the analysis process commenced.

## 6. Data analysis

We employed McCormack's (2000) four lenses to provide a malleable structure for the scrutiny of the narrative data because it enabled us to take fundamental stories and themes of experience in the original story and disclose these to the reader with honesty. It is important to note that, "each story would be unique, but there may also have been interconnecting themes between stories - drawing these out may have added to the evidence that brings new understandings" (Dibley, 2011, p. 14). Firstly, the lens of language guided us to focus on the words used by the students, what influenced their selections of words, what they told and how they told it. Secondly, we then applied the lens of narrative processes in combination with the lens of language, focusing on the way the students structured their words to tell their unique stories. Thirdly, the lens of context provided us with an opportunity to understand the students' stories about the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives. McCormack (2000) indicates that stories are not told in a void but are located within a particular context. Fourthly, the lens of moments focuses on the point in a story when the narrators come to a different understanding of issues, implying "a sudden leap of understanding that unexpectedly emerges as the storyteller addresses previously unrecognised issues" (Dibley, 2011, p. 17). It was during this lens that we derived self-leadership actions which were based on PhenoBL activities which can be implemented by HEIs to address the social dynamics of COVID-19 with respect to students' academic lives.

To apply McCormack's (2000) lenses, we reread the students' narratives and applied some techniques in identifying themes before conducting an analysis of their stories. Firstly, to apply the lens of language in connection with the lens of narrative processes (McCormack, 2000), we applied word repetition which enabled us to explain the emotional experience of students. Drawing on Jing (2015), words that are repeated or emphasized by participants can be regarded as evidence for a theme. Thus, the more frequent a concept occurs in texts, the more likely it is a theme. Evident from the students' responses is the frequent use of the word "fear" which was indicative of their emotional experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic and which led to the formulation of the first theme: *students' emotional experiences as they learn*. Secondly, to apply the lens of context, we focused on what was being told by the students, that is, what they were telling about the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives. This led to the formulation of the second theme: *the social impact of COVID-19 on students' academic lives*. Thirdly, to apply the lens of moments, we reread the students' narratives and found moments of epiphany - moments where they unknowingly applied PhenoBL activities for self-leadership to resist the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives. This led to the formulation of the third theme: *PhenoBL activities for self-leadership to improve academic lives*.

During the analysis and discussion, we remained true to the students' original stories, and in so doing, we were able to demonstrate that the reported findings were situated in the original data.

## 7. Findings and discussion

To present the findings and discussion, we assigned the following pseudonyms to the students: Boikhutso, Lindiwe, Puseletso, Kgomotso and Babalwa. The findings and discussions are presented in the order the three identified themes were identified: *students' emotional experiences as they learn*, *the social impact of COVID-19 on students' academic lives* and *self-leadership actions for improved academic lives*.

### 7.1 Students' emotional experiences as they learn

We focused on words that were repeated by all the participants and then analyzed the tone used by the students to describe their emotions during COVID-19 whilst busy with their B.Ed. Hons studies. Peterman (2020) describes tone as narrators' attitude towards an event, considering how the language had been used. The tone in which "fear" was used, painted a gloomy picture of students' emotional experiences whilst learning took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The students expressed themselves in the following ways:

*What hurt me the most was that I had followed all the instructions we were told to follow in order to avoid getting infected. I was in denial that I was sick. **My biggest fear** was that I would infect my siblings as I spend a lot of time with them. [Boikhutso]*

*COVID-19 came into students' lives at bad times. It was emotionally, socially, and academically draining. **It was fearful**. It was hard for me. [Puseletso]*

*I was living in great fear of contracting the virus and constantly worry about my future as well as how I am going to progress with studies since universities have been closed. What was hard for me was that we had to be in isolation which ultimately affected my emotional well-being as well as my social life. [Kgomotso]*

*We as students faced challenges that our lecturers are unaware of. **We feared failure** and felt that we could not cope at times. [Lindiwe]*

*Although it was a fearful experience, COVID-19 had minimal impact on my postgraduate studies. Due to the fact that I am working while studying towards my B.Ed. Hons, COVID-19 changed everything for the best. [Babalwa]*

The use of "fear" and "fearful" is indicative of a tone that feels heavy and serious. This supports the literature in this paper which indicates that the circumstances in which the students found themselves contributed to discomfort in their personal and academic lives (Alghamdi, 2021). To emphasize the emotional uneasiness that they experienced, the use of "fear" and "fearful" further found expression in phrases such as "I was going to die", "scaring me" as well as

“emotionally, socially and academically drained”. Arguably, the language used by the students created a sense of despair, sadness, and worthlessness. Such negative tones can be associated with a reduced confidence and a lack of belief that academic achievement would have been possible. Cherry (2021) holds the view that individuals with little confidence are usually more insecure about their abilities and may distrust the possibilities to thrive. They may not be interested in attempting innovative things because they are sceptical if they would achieve positive outcomes. Evidently, the “fear” that the students experienced initially raised concerns as to whether they would have been successful in their academic work whilst they were struggling with issues such as a loss of self-worth and dignity (Abdel-Khalek, 2016).

Interestingly, although Babalwa also used “fearful”, she regarded the whole experience with COVID-19 in a more positive light. Babalwa’s response is, however, not far-fetched. In line with the literature review in this paper, when individuals find themselves amidst a crisis like COVID-19, some are able to apply intelligence to understand what is happening around them (Reimers et al., 2020), adapting again and again as situations change. Thus, although the student’s response is contradictory to language with a negative tone, Babalwa later indicated that “I do believe we should keep on adapting and changing the way we learn and teach.”

## 7.2 The social impact of COVID-19 on students’ academic lives

An unavailability of internet services, learning equipment (such as notebooks, smartphones, and tablets) as well as the speed and cost of the delivery of study materials are some of the social issues that negatively impacted students’ academic lives during COVID-19 (Mahdy, 2020). For instance, many students struggled to create opportunities for self-study and lacked the ability to complete lessons that required a practical application of knowledge, greatly reducing the complete sense of scholarship which encompasses inclusion, inspiration and commitment (Zhao, 2021). The students told the following stories about the social impact of COVID-19 on their academic lives.

*I adapted well to the new changes but when I had contracted Covid-19, it inconvenienced me a lot academically. Some of the tasks required students to do them in groups, online of course, and I couldn’t participate. This means that I was not gonna get marks because I did not give my input on the group formal task. Some students are old and are not familiar with learning online, so technology is not their thing. And I am one of them. [Boikhutso]*

*We were not allowed to access computer lab due to Covid-19 level 3. It was painful because we had a computer module, name Computer Practice. The module requires the student to have either a computer or a laptop to do activities and write tests. I had a problem with my laptop and that created a problem for me. [Puseletso]*

*I also experienced a great challenge of producing a work of poor quality because online learning was a new experience to most of us and as results I lacked basic principles of academic writing of assignments which*

*ultimately had negative impact on my assessment scores. I was discouraged throughout the course of the year because I had run out of ideas as how can I best improve my academic results. [Kgomotso]*

*One of the difficulties I encountered was that all of the question papers were in the same format. We are being wiped clean by the same cloth because of students who are not serious about their work, not realising that some of us desperately need help and support. Academic difficulties have arisen as a result of the pandemic. We don't get timely feedback on our performance, and we only realize we need help when it's too late. [Lindiwe]*

*Everything changed from doing things and attending classes on a preset time, to you yourself determining when to do what. The lectures were helpful and could be reached at any given time via WhatsApp. This made everything much easier whenever you had a problem you just asked, and an answer was given to you. You did not have to wait for the next lecture session to ask questions. [Babalwa]*

Despite favourable conditions, that is the possible safe circumstances at home during COVID-19, Boikhutso's remarks signify that students experienced slow academic achievement while learning from home, resulting in them suffering learning losses (Engzell, Frey & Verhagen, 2021). A study by Dorn et al. (2020) report that lockdowns and closure of higher education institutions in the United States experienced learning losses which, "exacerbate existing achievement gaps" and the resulting "hurt could last a lifetime" (p. 1). Boikhutso's experience of a lack of participation as well as a fear of failure can, therefore, directly be related to learning losses. Considering the notion that learning is an active practice that builds on previous learning, learning losses contributed to a possible loss of previously attained skills on which supplementary learning could have built (Kuhfeld et al., 2020).

Puseletso's viewpoint indicate that digital tools like laptops and computers can be aligned with the notion that, not only does digital marginalization lead to a division of knowledge, but it also limits opportunities for intercultural communication, understanding and networking (Resta & Laferrière, 2015). Although challenges with the use of digital tools are not new, the students' experiences during COVID-19 indicated an increased lack of meaningful access to a computer or the Internet. Consequently, a lack of access translated into missed lessons, the inability to find useful learning materials, and difficulties completing assignments. Evident from Puseletso's response as well as information from the academic literature is that the digital divide during COVID-19 had made it almost impossible for many students to enjoy meaningful academic lives. Consequently, many of the students who struggled the hardest to thrive academically might have found it even harder during COVID-19, having experienced interruptions in their academic endeavours which might not be easy to rectify (Garcia & Weiss, 2020).

Although virtual learning, remote learning and persistent education became a remedy for this unparalleled international pandemic, many students found it

hard to adapt to the new circumstances in which they found themselves (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The struggle to adapt and to deliver work of quality is emphasised by Kgomotso and Lindiwe. Challenges such as accessibility, affordability, flexibility, and a lack of support can be interpreted as Kgomotso and Lindiwe's experiences of education in a crisis. Such crisis finds meaning in the difficulty students experience in terms of adapting from onsite teaching to an online setting, as well as the challenge for students to rethink and redesign the ways in which they used to work (Jandrić et al., 2020).

Babalwa's response is an indication that she did not believe that COVID-19 had an adverse effect on her academic life. Although she was not specific regarding the exact reason for her seemingly positive experience, particular characteristics such as consideration, autonomy, motivation and encouraging learning behaviours usually contribute to resilience during difficult situations like COVID-19 (Singaram, Naidoo & Singh, 2022). Resilience involves the ability of individuals to plan for, adjust and react to a crisis and in this regard Babalwa seemed to have found alternative ways of learning, whilst creating flexible pathways to pursue her academic life (Martin & Furiv, 2020).

### **7.3 Phenomenon-based learning activities for self-leadership to improve academic lives**

Through phenomenon-based learning, "students have an active and self-regulatory role, setting their own goals and solving problems both independently and collaboratively" (FNBE, 2016, Section 2.3). During the processes of learning, students become attentive to their particular self-leadership abilities by, "*leading oneself toward performance of naturally motivating tasks as well as managing oneself to do work that must be done but is not naturally motivating*" (Neuhaus, 2021, p. 1). The latter views align with McCormack's (2000) lens of moments in that the students' responses reveal that they found themselves at moments where they had to implement innovative activities to autonomously lead themselves toward academic success. The students shared their epiphany moments in the following ways:

*I then decided ...[Boikhutso]  
Then at midnight...Puseletso]  
I got the idea... [Kgomotso]  
I realised that... [Lindiwe]  
I became cognizant...[Babalwa]*

The above phrases are indicative of those particular moments the students realised that they were capable to enact self-leadership through PhenoBL activities to address their own academic needs. According to Dweck (2016), such moments of realisation refer to the development of a growing mindset – a belief of individuals' ability to develop and change things themselves. In terms of the development of their mindsets to change things for themselves, we were able to derive PhenoBL learning activities from the students' responses which could be aligned with self-leadership for the improvement of academic lives amid challenges students may encounter.

It should be reiterated that PhenoBL presupposes that students can set their own goals, thus work independently or they can engage with others to solve problems collaboratively (FNBE, 2016, Section 2.3). Gleaned from their responses, three students (60%) indicated that they implemented authentic learning, whilst the remaining two (40%) indicated that they implemented inquiry-based learning for self-leadership.

Firstly, authentic learning, as a feature of phenomenon-based learning presupposes that individuals are in a position to use approaches, materials and tools which are indispensable in everyday circumstances to solve difficulties (Symeonidis & Schwartz, 2016). Boikhutso, Babalwa and Puseletso's responses signify how they implemented authentic learning for self-leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic:

*I decided to teach myself how to do things online instead of relying on my group of students. I decided to push myself with the notes and study material. [Boikhutso]*

*For me, it was a time to determine for myself when to do what. We have technology at our fingertips, let's use it to our advantage. [Babalwa]*

*I would take photos of the chapters required for assignments. I would transfer those photos that has chapters to my laptop so that I can be able to write my assignments. [Puseletso]*

Authentic learning emerges in the use of "to teach myself", "to determine for myself" and "to write my assignments" and is associated with the way in which individuals direct their own learning. It is that moment when individuals "take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes" (Gresham, 2019, p. 1). When related to PhenoBL, authentic learning, in the form of "with the notes and study material", "technology" and "take photos of the chapters" brings genuine practices and processes into the learning situation. In this way, the students managed to lead themselves to take responsibility for what they learned, when they learned, where they learned, and the method in which they learned (Gresham, 2019). It is evident that the students' authentic PhenoBL activities contributed to the development of self-leadership during COVID-19. In this regard, self-leadership emerges in the way the student implemented learning practices to intentionally influence their thinking, feelings, and actions in a bid to achieve specific objectives (Warren, 2021) – in this instance, to achieve success in terms of their academic lives. When students discover such inner strength, that is, placing emphasis on self-leadership through active engagement with everyday circumstances to solve difficulties that are relevant to their academic lives (Symeonidis & Schwartz, 2016), they may be in a position to know themselves, whilst developing their strengths, aspirations and interests.

Secondly, inquiry-based learning, as a feature of phenomenon-based learning assumes that students formulate individual questions and collaboratively

construct knowledge during the learning process (Silander, 2015a). Kgomotso and Lindiwe's responses signify how they implemented inquiry-based learning for self-leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic:

*I got the idea to join postgraduate groups on social media platforms in which we encourage each other throughout the course of our study.*

*[Kgomotso]*

*I realised that I found it helpful to interact with my fellow classmates in order to cope with the challenges. I've also realised that I've learned a lot about technology. [Lindiwe]*

When phenomenon-based learning transpires in a collaborative setting, "it supports the socio-constructivist and sociocultural learning theories, in which information is not seen only as an internal element of an individual; instead, information is seen as being formed in a social context" (Silander, 2015b, p. 19). Phrases like "join postgraduate groups on social media platforms" and "to interact with my fellow classmates" are indicative of the creation of social platforms in which learning took place. It seems that whilst working collaboratively, the students changed their frames of references regarding the way they lead themselves to enjoy successful academic moments. In so doing, the students became lively scholars who accepted accountability for their learning, whilst developing a flexible understanding of their academic tasks. In this instance, inquiry-based learning emerges in the form of active learning that gives students the agency to lead themselves in such a way that they acquire ownership and agency of their learning (Lonka, 2018). When students take on self-leadership in online learning, they intentionally influence their own thinking, feelings, and actions to ensure that they enjoy positive academic lives. Thus, whilst applying inquiry-based learning, the students' self-leadership abilities surfaced as skills "for leading oneself across challenging and performing situations towards goal achievement and necessitated goal setting and goal striving" (Eseryel, 2020, p. 125). Despite the difficult situation brought about by COVID-19, the students exercised self-leadership in the way they applied processes (social media platforms and technology) that seemingly contributed to their optimal functioning as leaders, having combined individual and collaborative efforts (Goldsby et al., 2021). A summary of findings is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Summary of findings**

| <b>Finding 1</b>  | <b>Finding 2</b>  | <b>Finding 3</b>  | <b>Finding 4</b>  |
|---|---|---|---|
| When individuals find themselves amid a crisis like COVID-19, some can apply intelligence to understand what is happening around them, whilst adapting multiple times as situations change. | Students found it difficult to thrive academically during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the enormous interruptions in their academic endeavours which might not be easily rectifiable. | PhenoBL activities can assist students with self-leadership so that they might be in a position to set their own goals, thus working independently or while engaging with others to solve problems collaboratively. | As students engage in self-leadership actions, they intentionally influence their own thinking, and approaches to ensure that they influence their academic lives positively. |

The findings in Table 1 are supported by the transformative learning theory because students are encouraged to act differently instead of legitimating what they already know about their current situation (Mezirow, 2000). In so doing, students have the opportunity to engage in serious thinking about their experience where possibilities exist that they might change their perspectives and take action to transform their academic lives. The findings, aligned with the transformative learning theory, also speak to our research questions.

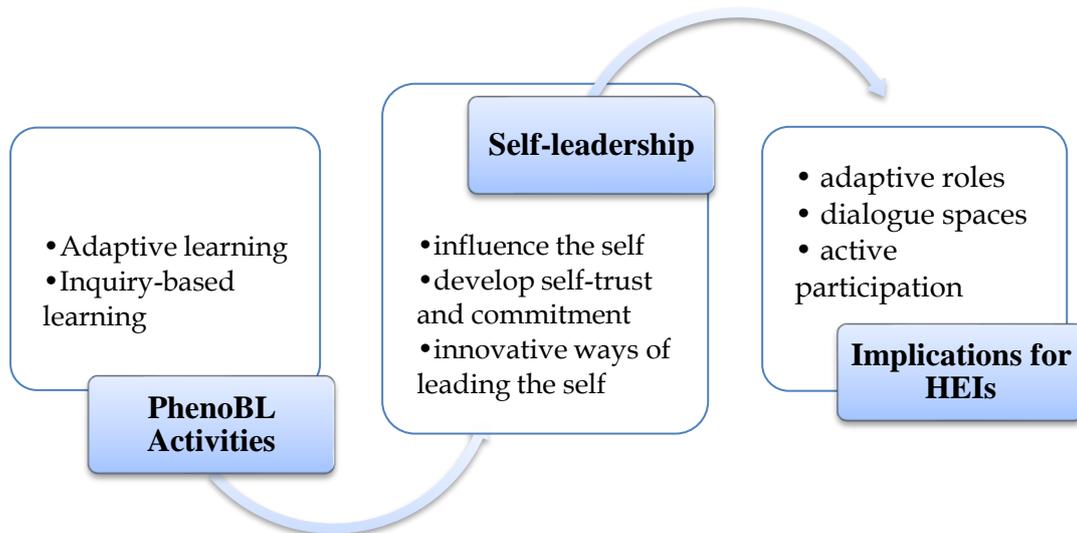
The first sub-researched was answered by means of students' willingness to share information about their application of self-leadership during COVID-19. Students identified moments where they experienced an epiphany about their academic lives and indicated how they might have developed a mindset to change their perspectives. Additionally, students indicated how they frequently explored solutions autonomously to address challenges they experienced and how they developed constructive thought strategies which enabled them to positively influence their own cognition, feelings, motivation, and behaviour. An application of authentic learning may contribute to students discovering who they are and what they are capable of in terms of their learning. Finally, when students realised that they could lead themselves amid difficult situations, they applauded the prospect of being self-leaders of their own learning whilst also helping others.

The second sub-research question was answered by discussing possible PhenoBL activities which may be applied by HEIs to train students in using self-leadership. Firstly, we recommend that HEIs apply more advanced technologies so that students can adapt easier; constantly observe students' progress; and create innovative teaching and learning strategies so that they achieve success in their academic lives. These technologies may include, amongst others, Universal Design of Learning (UDL), more expressive presentations of new academic content using multimedia and more self-directed learning activities. Secondly, HEIs should put communication platforms in place so that students are enabled to share experiences and emotions whilst they are not on campus. Thirdly, HEIs should consider students' active participation in their academic endeavours as a means to ensure that they can become independent thinkers, discussants, and responsible learners within a challenging environment.

The findings revealed that students' attempts to use PhenoBL activities for self-leadership have implications for HEIs. Drawing on Khanna and Kareem (2021), HEIs should be open to hearing the voices of students which can be regarded as a more inclusive response to the COVID-19 pandemic and its consequential influence on their academic lives.

## **8. Implications for higher education institutions**

The analysis of students' responses holds transformative social justice implications for HEIs. Considering the literature review in this paper (Reimers et al., 2020; Khanna & Kareem, 2021) as well as the analysis of students' responses, HEIs should consider PhenoBL activities for self-leadership as transformative practice for social justice to address the social complexities of the COVID-19 pandemic and its influence on students' academic lives (Figure 1).



**Figure 1: Transformative social justice implications for higher education institutions**

We recommend that HEIs should play an adaptive role by applying technologies that would constantly observe student progress and use data to unceasingly transform learning opportunities that will speak to the needs and behaviours of individuals. For instance, HEIs may implement more vigorous self-learning programmes to advance students' innovation abilities through autonomous learning (Ziyu & Jing, 2019). In so doing, students may be in a position to find engaging and interesting real-world solutions to solve academic challenges (Mathewson, 2019). Such positioning may be regarded as a transformative social justice act in that HEIs would provide enabling spaces in which students are able to lead themselves, whilst developing a sense of their own agency for academic success (De Klerk & Palmer, 2020; De Klerk & Smith, 2021).

Furthermore, HEIs must create dialogue spaces for meaning construction, focusing on students' experiences, emotions, and abilities whilst they are not on campus. Dialogue spaces should become shared spaces where manifold interpretations can be explored and advanced (Jesson, Fontich & Myhill, 2016) as well as spaces for reflection and critical thinking (Palmgren-Neuvonen, Littleton & Hirvonen, 2021). From a transformative social justice perspective, dialogue spaces may advance opportunities to build collaboration where constructive transformation can be planned and endorsed. Students are thus afforded an opportunity to take on significant self-leadership roles with the potential to endure any noteworthy impact that goes beyond their academic programme (Rodriquez et al., 2021).

HEIs must consider active participation as a means to ensure that students become independent thinkers, discussants and responsible learners amidst a challenging environment. In an active participatory environment, students play key roles in knowledge development, concept application to their daily lives, question design, data collection and sharing their own views while connecting with and being involved in real world situations (Al Mamun, Lawrie & Wright, 2020). When

aligned with PhenoBL and self-leadership, active participation may empower students to take ownership of their learning through diversification of learning objectives and working approaches to achieve success in their academic lives (Symeonidis & Schwartz, 2016).

We contend that transformative social justice practices in HEIs may assist students to engage in a deeper, richer, more textured, and nuanced understanding of themselves and their world. Moreover, HEIs will be able to empower students and “have them realize that they, as a collective, have the power to make positive changes in their lived realities” (Orlowski, 2019, p. 31). One way of accomplishing transformative social justice actions would be to help students understand that they have the potential to be conscious actors in the social relations that affect them in terms of their academic lives (Orlowski, 2015).

## 9. Conclusion

This paper answered the research question: *How can university students enact self-leadership through phenomenon-based activities in addressing the social complexities of COVID-19 and its influence on their academic lives?* Having employed McCormack’s (2000) lenses to analyse the students’ responses, this paper contributes to the knowledge corpus by having highlighted significant information with regards to self-leadership through an application of PhenoBL.

Our paper supports previous outcomes in the academic literature. Afridi et al. (2021) tested the correlation between students’ self-leadership abilities, performance outcomes and self-efficacy in the virtual academic milieu. Their findings revealed that when students demonstrate a high level of self-leadership, they are able to experience improved levels of performance satisfaction and self-efficacy. Complementary to their study, our paper found that a higher level of self-leadership is possible through an application of phenomenon-based learning.

## 10. Limitations

Only five students from a university of technology in South Africa were willing to participate in this study. It thus excludes the voices of a larger student corpus who might have had different opinions of self-leadership through phenomenon-based learning during COVID-19.

## 11. Recommendations

This paper recommends that similar and comparative studies be conducted at different higher education institutions to elicit the voices of more students regarding their self-leadership competence during times of crisis, but also during a post COVID-19 era. Issues such as self-influence, self-efficacy, self-directed learning, and self-achievement may be regarded as significant aspects to be considered when a comparative study regarding students’ self-leadership competence is conducted.

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## Appendix 1



Central University of  
Technology, Free State

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES  
Department Postgraduate Studies in Education

Dear B.Ed. Hons student

We, the undersigned, are conducting research on the topic outlined below and would like to request your input please.

**TOPIC:**

**UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' INSIGHTS INTO THE SOCIAL IMPACT OF COVID-19: A PHENOMENON-BASED LEARNING ENQUIRY**

**Kindly answer the following question by providing your personal narrative (story) please:**

Write a narrative (maximum two pages) in which you express your views and understanding of the influence COVID-19 has exerted on your academic life as a postgraduate student. In your narrative, please indicate the specific challenges you experienced (such as social, emotional, academic) and what actions, behaviors or transformational practices you implemented to cope with the pandemic to ensure that you are successful in your studies.

Thank you for your participation.

Regards

Prof JM Palmer (Central University of Technology, Free State)

Dr ED de Klerk (North-West University, Mahikeng Campus)

Dr A Modise (Central University of Technology, Free State)