

## Exploring Factors Affecting the Academic Performance of Young Female Students in an Open and Distance e-Learning Environment During COVID-19

Thulani Andrew Chauke and Ntandokamenzi Dlamini

**Abstract:** The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic has been felt by both male and female students in Open and Distance e-Learning (ODeL) and contact-based learning institutions in South Africa. However, young female students have been the most affected group. Societal norms that reinforce cultural practices which favour male students hinder the academic performance of young female students. Therefore, this study aims to explore the factors that affected the academic performance of young female students in an ODeL environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight female students between the ages of 21 and 35. Data were analysed using a thematic analysis. The findings revealed that the categories of factors that negatively affected their academic performance were a lack of family support, a lack of resources, and living in an overcrowded home. This study recommends that local municipalities in rural areas where



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these students reside should have at least one community hub centre that has working computers with consistent and stable access to the internet to enable female students to access information and their educational material.

**Keywords:** academic performance, COVID-19, young female, students, open and distance e-learning

# **Exploration des facteurs affectant les performances académiques des jeunes étudiantes dans un environnement d'apprentissage en ligne ouvert et à distance pendant la pandémie de COVID-19**

**Résumé :** L'effet de la pandémie de COVID-19 a été ressenti par les étudiants et les étudiantes des établissements de formation ouverte et à distance (ODEL) et des établissements de formation par contact en Afrique du Sud. Toutefois, les jeunes étudiantes ont été le groupe le plus touché. Les normes sociétales qui renforcent les pratiques culturelles favorisant les étudiants masculins entravent les performances académiques des jeunes étudiantes. C'est pourquoi cette étude vise à explorer les facteurs qui ont affecté les résultats scolaires des jeunes étudiantes dans un environnement de FOAD pendant la pandémie de COVID-19. Des entretiens semi-directifs ont été menés avec huit étudiantes âgées de 21 à 35 ans. Les données ont été analysées au moyen d'une analyse thématique. Les résultats ont révélé que les catégories de facteurs qui ont eu un impact négatif sur leurs résultats scolaires étaient le manque de soutien familial, le manque de ressources et le fait de vivre dans une maison surpeuplée. Cette étude recommande que les municipalités locales des zones rurales où résident ces étudiantes disposent d'au moins un centre communautaire équipé d'ordinateurs en état de marche avec un accès constant et stable à l'internet pour permettre aux étudiantes d'accéder à l'information et à leur matériel pédagogique.

**Mots-clés :** résultats scolaires, COVID-19, jeunes femmes, étudiants, formation ouverte et à distance.

## Introduction

During the first quarter of 2020, the world witnessed a historical global pandemic that nearly brought the world economy to its knees and disrupted everyone's developmental needs, including the academic development of students across the globe (Demuyakor, 2020). With the advent of COVID-19, millions of people, including students across the globe, suffered from mental health issues because of the uncertainty regarding the future of their education (Varma et al., 2021). Many countries adopted online distance e-learning programmes to try and regain what was lost in the academic year. However, globally 40 percent of countries are regarded as being the poorest in the world and were unable to provide the necessary support needed to implement teaching and learning in open and distance e-learning (ODeL) modes (Microsoft Education, 2020). ODeL teaching and learning modes include course delivery through distance and online learning, which democratizes education by enabling access to education for everyone including those who are poor and marginalized (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Letseka, 2015). While ODeL institutions do not require students to be physically present in the institution, some of the service providers used, including post offices, require a student to be physically present to collect and post back their study material, and these service providers were affected by the lockdown restrictions brought about by governments as a measure to contain the spread of COVID-19 (South African Post Office, 2020; McCann, 2021). Depending on the module offered, students may have to get

access to computers and have a stable internet connection to successfully learn in an ODeL institution.

ODeL is essential in the era of the post-global pandemic because it plays an important role in the empowerment of women. In this regard, ODeL may involve the use of technology to implement quality education. Zalat et al. (2021) indicate that the lack of computers for students and teachers in ODeL affects the quality of teaching and learning. Al-Shaya and Oyaid (2021) further argue that when implemented correctly, e-learning can play a pivotal role in addressing gender inequality. However, it must be noted that students in ODeL institutions experience difficulties with network connectivity, which affects their learning process (UNESCO, 2021). Just as with their male counterparts in ODeL, even when female students do have access to the needed technology, that does not mean they always have access to the internet. The lack of internet coverage poses a considerable risk to the academic success of female students (Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2020).

Paraschi (2020) indicates that during COVID-19, e-learning was used as an alternative mode of teaching to reach students who were used to traditional face-to-face learning. The COVID-19 pandemic affected female students across the globe including those already enrolled in ODeL institutions (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020). The government of Botswana established the Botswana College of Distance and Open Learning (BOCODOL) in 1998. The college was founded to target young adults, including young women, who are

outside of school to reduce the level of illiteracy among this target population (Lacic & Nleya, 2021). While limited research has been undertaken on the intersectional factors that negatively affect the academic performance of young female students in ODeL within the context of the pandemic, it is still important to know how these intersectional factors negatively affected the academic performance of young female students during this period. This study aims to explore the factors that affected the academic performance of young female students in an ODeL environment during COVID-19. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- *What were the experiences of young female students studying in an ODeL institution during COVID-19?*
- *How did COVID-19 negatively affect young female students studying in an ODeL context?*

## **Literature Review**

There are widely different definitions of what constitutes ODeL. However, all of the definitions agree that ODeL is a non-contact-based education that uses technology to deliver teaching and learning. ODeL is an education system in which teachers and students are physically separated. According to Rupande and Nyenya (2014), ODeL education is a type of education system that provides an excellent opportunity for entry and exit, particularly for those who have been denied access to education. This definition is appropriate in the context of the South African education system. During the Apartheid era, African women were

denied access to education, not because of their inability to learn, but because of a system that oppressed them on the basis of their race and gender. This systematic discrimination impoverished millions of African women and its legacy still affects young women today. Different scholars in the ODeL field, including Dalsgaard and Thestrup (2015), suggest that the establishment of ODeL education could have been politically motivated to ensure that all citizens have access to education. Ghosh et al. (2012) explain that ODeL is the type of education system that gives students an opportunity to study regardless of their ethnicity, race, gender, and geographical area because they can study wherever they are and in their own time. In addition, this form of education system reaches out to millions of students, and it embraces modern technology.

In the twenty-first century, African countries have made considerable progress towards ensuring that Africans have access to high-quality education, especially those who have been excluded for decades, namely women and senior citizens. To address illiteracy among women in Africa, a few countries established ODeL institutions to give women in particular the opportunity to further their education. Countries such as Botswana, Nigeria, and South Africa have ODeL institutions (Lacic and Nleya, 2021). ODeL education is important because it provides opportunities for those who are already working to further their education (Kurupparachchi & Karunanayake, 2017). Through the advancement of technology, young women and people in general can study anywhere by simply clicking a button on an internet-connected computer, and

engaging in teaching and learning (O'Malley & McCraw, 1999; Shah, 2016). Additionally, the higher cost of education in traditional education institutions has motivated people to further their education through distance e-learning (Ohene & Essuman, 2014). E-learning also requires the use of systems such as Blackboard, and this has been seen as one of the challenges that students face; it has affected academic performance because students are not motivated to use Blackboard (Ali, 2017).

### **The Problem of e-Learning in the Context of COVID-19**

There is no doubt that COVID-19 has accelerated transformation and the fourth industrial revolution in the higher education sector, both in terms of traditional learning and modern ODeL. However, the adoption of e-learning in the era of COVID-19 has had a negative impact on students. Mahyoob (2020) mentions that students struggle to download study material, and face issues of slow internet connectivity. These challenges confronted both male and female students during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the era of COVID-19, lecturers themselves struggled with the adoption of e-learning. Years of face-to-face teaching contributed to lecturers' digital phobia, which had a considerable impact on students' academic performance.



Zalat et al. (2021) highlight the following barriers that made it hard for the acceptance of e-learning in the context of COVID-19:

- Insufficient/unstable internet connectivity (40%)
- Inadequate computer laboratories (36%)
- Lack of computers/laptops (32%)
- Technical problems (32%)

Furthermore, Maatuk et al. (2022) declare that degrading internet infrastructure and the security of online learning programmes pose a challenge to the implementation of e-learning.

## **Factors Affecting Academic Performance of Female Students in an ODeL**

According to Ogunsanmi and Owuamanam (2014), undergraduate female students in ODeL institutions suffer from stress and psychological problems due to family responsibilities that hamper their academic success when compared to their male counterparts. Moawad (2020) opines that students who studied in ODeL contexts during COVID-19 were always worried about the outcome of their exams and assessments, which affected their academic performance.

Additionally, female students have more family responsibilities than their male counterparts, because while focusing on their studies they were also tasked with looking after members of their families, such as their elders and young children (Orser et al., 2012). Moreover, due to cultural beliefs, a girl child is expected to handle family chores; therefore, young women are burdened with family

responsibilities. Furthermore, parents do not give young women an opportunity to study because in some cultures it is believed that it is an investment that will be wasted once she is married. In addition, COVID-19 exacerbated an already tense home situation for young women, since traditional parents do not believe that students can study online (Pillay et al., 2021).

A qualitative study conducted by Adu-Marfo and Biney (2017) shows that there are a number of female students in ODeL environments whose lack of technological skills contribute to the late submission of their assignments. Additionally, students engaged in ODeL sometimes receive mailed study materials late, and it is expensive for some students to use their own money to download or print out study material (Musingafi et al., 2015). Jackson (2019) revealed that female students studying through ODeL formats in Tanzania, particularly those who reside in remote rural areas, struggle with their studies due to a lack of electricity which makes it hard for them to access the internet. Kollmayer et al. (2018) also indicate that from a young age, the toys of young boys are associated with technology, while the toys of girls are associated with beauty and child rearing. Consequently, young women are left behind in terms of understanding technology from an early age.

Students in ODeL institutions experience difficulties with network connectivity which affects their learning process (UNESCO, 2021). Female students, just like their male counterparts, have access to technology; however, this does not mean that students always have access to adequate internet

coverage. In addition to the aforementioned mitigating factors, a lack of internet coverage poses a huge risk to the academic success of female students (Armstrong-Mensah et al., 2020). Young women studying by means of ODeL struggle to submit their assignments in time due to certain African beliefs that reduce women to childbearing vessels. Gudhlanga et al. (2012) indicate that young female students who are furthering their education through ODeL are denied the opportunity to participate in study group discussions by their husbands who expect them to look after the children. In addition, this form of treatment affects a young woman's academic performance, since they fail to attend tutorial sessions and submit their assignments late. The brunt of childrearing tends to disproportionately affect female students; thus, their academic performance suffers as a consequence (Dzakiria, 2013).

According to Niwaz et al. (2019), regardless of any personal circumstances in which teachers find themselves, they strive hard to support all their students. However, it has been reported that female students studying in ODeL institutions do not receive any assistance from teachers on how to navigate technology issues, either owing to the teachers' professional incompetence or intentional ignorance and work avoidance. In addition, teachers do not offer students advice on how to navigate studying through ODeL formats. Furthermore, a lack of support in the institution contributes to female students' stress (Ogunsanmi & Owuamanam, 2014).

## **Theoretical Framework**

In this study, the socialist feminist theory was adopted. This theory came into existence around the 1960s as a result of a group of women who wanted to develop a creative synthesis with regard to the liberation of women. The socialist feminist theory argues that to understand the factors that oppress women in society, people must look at multiple factors such as nationality, location, age, race, social class, gender, and sexuality. This means that dealing with only one form of oppression cannot liberate women (Graf, 2012). The authors adopted the socialist feminist theory for this study to explain how more than one factor affects the academic performance of young female students in ODeL. Therefore, to make sure that these intersectional factors are addressed, the issues at hand must be tackled holistically.

Importantly, the socialist feminist theory rejects the notion that patriarchy is the biggest problem oppressing women within the community. On the contrary, there is a vast array of factors which include social, political, and economic issues, that create barriers to the academic success of female students. In the context of the present study, the authors argue that young female students engaged in ODeL struggle with their studies because some depend on their husbands for economic assistance, which includes requesting their spouses to buy them data to access the internet. In addition, there are other intersectional factors such as cultural beliefs, where cultural systems oppress women and relegate family duties and chores to them. With reference

to the socialist feminist theory, Karl Max argues that women will be freed from oppression when they confront injustices within the family system and society. Against this backdrop, it is essential that mass awareness be created in developing countries to encourage young women to confront the injustices within the family system and society that hamper them from attaining academic success, which include being relegated to childbearing and family responsibilities that consequently create barriers to furthering their studies.

## **Material and Methods**

### **Research Design**

To enable a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences, the researchers used a qualitative approach. The research design was selected as empirical research on the factors affecting the academic performance of female students in an ODeL environment; it was not limited geographically. This design allowed the researchers to develop a complex and holistic picture of the experiences of the participants and give a detailed report of their views (Busetto et al., 2020). The researchers chose qualitative research since it applies human experiences against a particular phenomenon. An interpretive paradigm was used to better understand and make meaning of the participants' explanations. The researchers' ontological and epistemological view of reality is that it is constructed and subject to the individual person's understanding.

## Sampling

An ODeL institution in South Africa was used as the sample frame from which participants were drawn. Female students from an ODeL institution were sampled as the participants of this study. Purposive and convenience sampling was used to ensure that rich and relevant information is gathered from ideal participants; that is, female students between the ages of 21 and 35 registered at an ODeL institution during COVID-19, specifically in 2020 and 2021. The inclusion criteria were that students should be between the ages of 21 and 35, have already experienced studying at an ODeL institution before COVID-19, and be able to share their experience of learning at an ODeL institution during COVID-19. Students younger than 21 may still be new in the institution, and those who are older than 35 might have measures in place for dealing with whatever obstacles they may come across. This study intends to find honest learning experiences shared solely by female students. Students younger than 21 or older than 35 who were registered in 2022 in an ODeL institution were excluded from participating in this study. The participants were conveniently sampled because of their accessibility from two departments of an ODeL institution within the College of Education. Eight female students from the Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies, and the Department of Adult, Community and Continuing Education in the College of Education formed the sample population. DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) suggest that between 8 to 12 participants should be sampled for meaningful conversations through semi-structured

interviews. The other researcher in this paper, who is a lecturer in the Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies in the College of Education, was the gatekeeper and played an important role in identifying female students to participate in the present study.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Semi-structured interviews were held with the participants. They shared their experiences as female students registered at an ODeL institution during COVID-19. The researchers used semi-structured interviews to elicit rich information from the participants. The interview questions were semi-structured for flexibility and to allow the participants to freely express themselves, thus providing rich data. This allowed the researchers to have conversations with the participants and to probe where necessary to get valuable information for this study. The interviews were conducted in English. The semi-structured interviews were conducted online using Microsoft Teams to eliminate delays and travelling costs. The semi-structured interviews took 30–40 minutes each. Permission to record the interviews was sought from all participants.

Transcriptions were downloaded from Microsoft Teams and analysed thematically. The groups of data collected to address the research question were analysed to bring meaning to the data. Classification and indexing of data were done to simplify the analysis process. Each interview was read four times by the researchers, actively and critically to understand the entire data. Codes

were included at key points and grouped; the codes were further combined to form categories. Data collected that conveyed similar meanings was grouped into themes. An emergent strategy ensured that the analysis follows the data collected from the participants. The reviewed and identified themes were then given names. Thereafter, the final report was prepared.

## **Ethical Consideration**

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the College of Education Ethics Review Committee at the University of South Africa with the resolution reference 2023/02/08/90505123/01/AM. All the participants were informed through emails about the study, and their consent was sought before conducting the interview. Participants were informed that their participation is voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time should they wish to do so. Participants were ensured that their real identity will not be shared with the public.

## **Findings**

Data collected from the interviews were thematically analysed and organised into themes. The yielded themes are a lack of resources, a lack of support, and an overcrowded home. The themes are presented below.



## Theme 1: Lack of Resources

All the interviewed participants live in rural areas. Rural areas are characterised by high levels of poverty, where people struggle to buy essential goods and prioritise getting food over everything because people cannot survive without food. Living in a rural area had not been a mitigating factor with regards to education until the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced teaching and learning strictly online. The participants complained about a lack of resources such as computers, which made it difficult for them to study during the pandemic. Participants mentioned that they did not have personal computers and that before COVID-19, they would go to internet cafes for access to computers and the internet. Participant 6 stated:

*I don't own a computer, I went to town if I needed to use it, and during COVID-19 I couldn't go because of how the virus spread and the restrictions that were put in place.*

The participants said that accessing Moodle, their learning management system for teaching and learning in their institution, was hard for them during COVID-19 because they did not have access to a computer. Participants added that using their smartphone did not help much because they still encountered challenges with their phones. Participant 5 added:

*I had to do my assignments and submit. Because there was no computer access, I had to use my phone. The problem with using*

*my phone is that it is small, and it took me a long time to write on it.*

Other participants were fortunate enough to get assistance from friends and family who had the needed hardware. Participant 3 explained:

*I don't have a computer or a laptop, but I was lucky to secure one through a friend of mine who has finished studying. She completed her studies in 2018 and is now looking for a job; she borrowed me her laptop. I don't know what I would have done without her help as I carry this bhopopo [dumbphone].*

Participant 8 also shared the help she received:

*I used my brother's laptop during COVID-19. I would borrow it to access Moodle and to write my assignments. Sometimes when I [needed to] borrow it, he would say that he is also using it and I should wait. Because I had no alternative, I waited until he was finished.*

Reflecting on information obtained from Participant 8 above reveals that not having access to the right hardware, in this case a laptop, affected her academic performance during COVID-19 since she had to work around her brother's schedule to use the laptop to upload her assignments.

## **Theme 2: Lack of Family Support**

The participants in this study are predominantly African and come from rural areas where the communities still believe in traditional gender roles. They still believe that a woman's place is in the kitchen. Parents of students from rural

areas are generally uneducated or have received little education. The participants shared how unsupported they felt studying during COVID-19. This is what Participant 2 had to say:

*They have never believed in me studying at home. They say that it is a waste of time; it is no use because maybe I will find a partner that doesn't want me to work . . . When my father had some money, he prioritised my little brother's new school uniform over buying me a laptop.*

Participant 1 shared the same sentiment:

*When I finished high school, my mother said that she got me a job as a maid in one of the flats in the complex she works at. They basically wanted me to work instead of continuing with my studies.*

Other participants shared how they had to be awake all night, working on their studies because they could not do it during the day as they were busy.

Participant 8 stated:

*As the only girl in the house, I have three brothers. I had to make sure that everyone eats, [and] the house is clean. That left me with no time to do my assignments during the day.*

Participant 4 added:

*When I woke up, I had to make breakfast for everyone, [and] wash the dishes afterwards. [I then had to] Clean the house, prepare lunch, dish for everyone, wash the dishes, cook supper, dish for everyone, wash the dishes, bath my nieces and nephews, and then when everyone was sleeping, I did my schoolwork. But I worked*

*very well at night since I prefer a very peaceful and quiet environment when working on my schoolwork.*

With everyone at home due to COVID-19 restrictions, the participants were busy with household chores, leaving them only with time to work at night. In the morning, they had to be up early to prepare breakfast for everyone and continue the cycle of household chores. Not getting time for studying during the day seemed to work well for some participants, as they stated that the study environment was better at night because there is little disturbance from young children and parents.

### **Theme 3: Overcrowded Home**

The environment changed during COVID-19 through the restrictions put in place by the government. People had to stay at home to prevent the spread of the virus. With more people at home, there was little space for peace and quiet because shared rooms are common in rural areas. Having many people at home can be both an advantage and a disadvantage to a student. People can help the student with schoolwork, but they can also be a distraction and make the student lose focus. Unfortunately for the participants, it was the latter; their families disturbed their studies which resulted in poor academic performance.

Participant 1 shared:

*I share my room with my two sisters: one is in Grade 10 and the other is in Grade 5. With schools closed, everyone was at home; I did not have my personal space to do my schoolwork as I would*

*normally have when they are at school. They just disturbed me because they also didn't have anywhere else to go to because of the fear of COVID-19 and its spread, and people were not allowed to travel. I just knew that I wasn't going to do well that year, and I didn't. Out of the ten modules I registered for, I only passed three, and it was [in the] 50s. I was very close to failing.*

COVID-19 made people sick; studying when sick can be a challenge.

Participant 2 shared:

*On top of the many challenges I was already faced with, I got infected with COVID-19, and I was very sick. I got very, very weak. I could not concentrate on my studies; all I cared about was surviving. I did not care if I failed. I just forgot about schoolwork for the month I got COVID; it was bad. I am still not 100% healed because I am still suffering [from the] after-effect[s], but I am happy to be alive when many people died.*

Participant 7 stated:

*In the first semester, I think it was in June, I got sick. I remember that I was going to write an exam the following week, but I didn't. I was too sick. I was coughing and I had difficulty breathing. On the day of the exam, I was in the hospital fighting for my life. Luckily, it was the only module that I was doing that semester; otherwise, I was gonna be in trouble.*

COVID-19 killed many people, leaving a huge impact on those left behind.

Participant 5 shared:

*I didn't do well because my father was sick during COVID; he had a stroke and I had to help my mother to take care of him. It was*

*hard to watch him sick and it made me very sad. I made time to study at night, but I couldn't concentrate; the thought of losing my father was unbearable. Thank God, he survived, but he is still paralyzed on one side. I think that is what resulted in my poor performance in 2020.*

The findings show that during COVID-19, female students had their academic performance negatively affected since they had to assist with providing health care to their loved ones at home, which limited their ability to focus on their studies.

## **Discussion**

This study explored the factors that affected the academic performance of young female students in an ODeL environment during COVID-19. When the COVID-19 pandemic made its way onto South African soil in March 2020, there were disruptions in all aspects of life, including in institutions of teaching and learning. And although all students were affected, female students were impacted the most. The pandemic meant that teaching and learning was done solely online, and this required online learning resources. Rural areas, where the participants live, are characterised by high levels of poverty, and communities struggling to buy essential goods. These communities prioritise food over everything else because one cannot survive without food. Female students in this study revealed that they lacked some of the resources needed to fully partake in online learning; and that they relied on borrowed hardware from friends and family. The finding of this study agrees with the study which

comprised of 362 students across 26 South African universities that revealed that the majority of students lack the critical resources needed to study remotely such as data and laptops (Jordaan, 2020). For students to be able to learn online, they need computing hardware. Some students compromise by using smartphones, but they report facing challenges when using these ill-suited devices. In a study by Dube (2020), the participants (learners and teachers) revealed that they did not have correct gadgets and devices needed for online learning in basic education. Not much changes when these learners get into universities because they cannot afford the needed devices. The unavailability of the devices needed to study online inhibits students from taking advantage of the learning platforms and from accessing all the support available to them, which limits their chances of performing well in school.

Most students from rural areas are the first-generation of university students in their families (Letseka & Pitsoe, 2012; Makoe, 2012). The study further revealed that during the pandemic, female students were home with people who did not understand how much time and dedication one needs to succeed at university, and as a result, parents expected them to do the amount of household chores they normally would during university holidays even during the school term when they needed time to study. This left the students with little time for studies and reduced their chances of doing well academically. Female students have to work twice as hard as their male counterparts because they also do household chores such as cleaning, washing, and cooking on top of their

studies. Some families, particularly in rural areas, still have a negative attitude towards the education of women; they believe that education is useless because when women get married, they will have to stay home and look after their children, husband, and home. As a result, most female students from rural areas do not get much support from their families because the family elders are either too occupied with fending for the family or they are not aware of the importance in their girl child's education (Schrijner & Smits, 2018). Generally, rural parents do not take an active interest in the education of their female children. The lack of support from the family can be seen even with the failure to provide their children a safe and conducive environment in which to study because as the participants reported, they share their bedroom with their siblings (eLearning Africa/EdTech Hub, 2020).

The study further revealed that due to the travel restrictions of that period, female students were forced to stay in crowded homes where there was not enough space for them to focus on their studies, which affected their academic performance. This finding is consistent with the work of Basson et al. (2022) who argue that studying at home in overcrowded conditions during COVID-19 impacted students' psychological well-being and negatively affected their academic performance.

In agreement with the socialist feminist theory, the study findings indicate that there is more than one factor within the society that negatively affects women empowerment. It was noted in the present study that patriarchy is not



the biggest oppressive force in the community, and other factors such as living in an overcrowded home and a lack of family support also negatively affect women empowerment. This study provides an insight into the mitigating factors that affected the academic performance of young female students in an ODeL environment during COVID-19. This study will provide information on areas of improvement for ODeL institutions and other stakeholders to assist young female students post-pandemic. Moreover, the results of the study will enable the ODeL institutions to know which factors affected the academic performance of young female students, and what types of student support or interventions can be introduced during future pandemics to alleviate these pressures. A major limitation of the study is that only eight young female students participated. A quantitative study in this area with more participants should therefore be conducted. Additionally, the study was conducted in one ODeL institution in South Africa; therefore, the study findings cannot be generalised to other countries in Africa.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This paper reported on the factors that affected the academic performance of young female students studying in an ODeL environment during COVID-19. Young female students reported significant experiences of lack of family support, living in overcrowded homes, and a lack of necessary online learning resources hardware. Extensive research has been conducted on the challenges faced by young female students in higher education; the majority of

these studies were conducted in the pre-COVID-19 era. Against this backdrop, there is a need for a future study to be conducted using mixed-research methods to understand this social phenomenon with the aim of proposing solutions. The University of South Africa, as a leader in ODeL in South Africa, should partner with the Commission for Gender Equality to develop long-term strategies that will see both institutions offering free data to young female students studying through ODeL methods, particularly for those who come from remote and rural areas, or from poor socioeconomic backgrounds. This will enable young female students to obtain access to the internet. Technological advancement requires that citizens should have the skills needed in the digital era. Therefore, there is a need for the University of South Africa to profile students, which will give the university opportunities to develop a digital skills programme intervention for female students. There is a need for non-governmental organisations to have more community awareness projects that will educate men on sharing responsibilities with women at home. This will give female students an opportunity to focus on their studies since taking care of domestic family responsibilities was noted as one of the intersectional factors that affected their academic performance during COVID-19. Local municipalities in rural areas where these students reside should have at least one community hub or centre with working computers that have stable access to the internet to enable female students to access their study information. Accordingly, there is a

need for ODeL institutions in Africa to design curricula and content that seeks to empower the girl child.

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## **Authors**

**Thulani Andrew Chauke** is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of Adult Community and Continuing Education in the College of Education at the University of South Africa, South Africa. His research interest is the intersection of youth studies, youth work, student support, positive youth development, and sociology of youth. Chauke obtained his PhD in Education from Tshwane University of Technology, South Africa.

**Dr. Ntandokamenzi Penelope Dlamini** is an academic in the Department of Curriculum and Instructional Studies, College of Education at the University of South Africa. She currently teaches Geography Education, but she has research interests in educational technology, pedagogy improvement, gender education, and mentoring. Holding qualifications in both science and education, she has focused on finding innovative teaching methods to enhance the understanding of geography education among students. Her advocacy for gender equality and technology in education is reflected in her published research in various journals over the past years. Her work is on pedagogy improvement, technology in education, and gender education. She is dedicated to improving pedagogy and nurturing the next generation of teachers.