The Value of Providing Online Students with Dedicated Affective Support, Particularly during Times of Crisis

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ABSTRACT

In addition to academic support, the provision of dedicated affective support during a student's online learning journey has a significant impact on their emotional wellbeing and ability to remain engaged with their studies. This kind of support is even more essential during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, during which students may feel isolated, vulnerable, and overwhelmed by the events taking place around them. This study reports on the value of such support provided by a dedicated affective support mechanism. Within a case study design, 34 participants were purposefully selected to collect data by using focus groups and individual online interviews. The Community of Inquiry framework guided the study. The findings revealed that although students' dependence on emotional support varied, they recognised that feeling the social presence of a dedicated person who was able to support them emotionally played a key role in their sense of connection to their online learning communities. Recommendations include the consideration of institutions offering online and distance education to plan for a dedicated third party focusing on the facilitation of a stronger sense of emotional connectedness and wellbeing.

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INTRODUCTION

"*It helps to know that you are not alone, and you are not the only one*" (DP02). These are the words of an online student reflecting on their academic journey during the COVID-19 pandemic; a student to whom a Programme Success Tutor (PST) had been allocated – an individual whose sole focus is the provision of affective, rather than cognitive or systemic support, to students studying in an open and distance learning (ODL) context.

In March of 2020, the entire world was forced to react to a global pandemic. The South African government responded by putting in place a number of strategic measures for the protection of its citizens. These included, among many others, the closure of contact campuses and moving teaching and learning almost exclusively online. The Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), citing the *Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002*, emphasised that special support programs needed to be in place to "alleviate the impact of unforeseen catastrophes on normal teaching and learning" (DHET, 2021). A private higher tertiary (PHT) institution, whose ODL model provides the context of this study, implemented several policy changes to address the lockdown requirements and the shift in academic delivery. What is interesting to note is that each of these strategies focused on the contingency measures that institutions put in place for the *academic* support of their students. This was done rather than providing any real insight into how an affective support mechanism would be modified or leveraged during times of crisis to ensure that students felt emotionally supported and meaningfully connected to their online learning communities.

The South African PHT institution under study in this paper launched its ODL model in 2016, and central to its development was the role of the PST. The PST is a member of the institution's academic team who is specifically tasked with mediating affective support for the full duration of the student learning journey. Rather than providing academic or subject matter expertise, the role of the PST was created for the sole purpose of providing an emotionally supportive online presence, primarily to address the sense of disconnect and feelings of isolation so often reported on by students studying in an online or distance mode (Farrell & Brunton, 2020; Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Visser & Law-van Wyk, 2021). The PST role is designed to focus on relationship building and includes a personalised introduction during the first two weeks of each semester and, thereafter, the facilitation of regular contact during the academic year (via e-mail, WhatsApp, etc.). The role also mandates the monitoring of student engagement via the institution's Learning Management System (LMS) and the following up on any potentially at-risk students. In 2020, as the PST role entered its fifth iteration, the world was introduced to the novel coronavirus, which causes COVID-19. A year later, in 2021, there was an opportunity to reflect on the PST role and its impact on the student learning journey during the pandemic. We believe that there is value in understanding how the provision of dedicated affective student support is received in an ODL context, and whether having access to this type of support has a significant impact on students' ability to remain engaged with their studies, particularly during times of crisis. Through engaging with the institution's online students, the aim was to better understand the value that students place on such support mechanisms, and how these insights may be used to inform the development of ODL models that promote increased student retention and academic success in times of relative calm, but more importantly during times of crisis.

While a literature review may reveal the potential impact of emotion, either as directly experienced by the student (O'Regan, 2003; Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; Värlander, 2008), or as orchestrated by the online facilitator (Barbalet, 2002; Brookfield, 2006; Eloff, O'Neil & Kanengoni, 2021; Lehman, 2006) in creating a safe and respectful learning environment, it is far more challenging to find literature that speaks to an emotional presence that is intentionally established by a third party – someone external to the student-teacher or peer-to-peer relationship. What also remains elusive is any research that investigates the need for such a third party's affective presence. This study aims to contribute in this regard, and addresses the following research question:

> What value is there in the support provided by a dedicated affective support
> mechanism, such as the PST, during times of crisis?

What follows is an outline of the conceptual framework that provided the foundation for this study, and the literature review that guided its focus. Having addressed the methodology, the main findings are shared. We then conclude with our recommendations and acknowledge the limitation of this explorative study.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework for this study centres around non-academic affective support as it exists in an online learning environment. Non-academic support activities are "presumed to encourage success but are not overtly academic" and can occur formally within a class setting or informally through a range of mediators (Karp, 2011, p. 2). In whatever way such support activities are manifest, non-academic support is "distinct from academic [support] in that it addresses different skills and knowledge and encourages student success via different processes" (*ibid*). Macfarlane (2011, cited in Waight & Giordano, 2018, p. 6) suggests that, with "emotional wellbeing now recognised as contributory to academic success, strong student support services… are seen as an essential element of a successful modern institution and a student entitlement". Pearson (2012, cited in Waight & Giordano, 2018, p. 6) posits a strong connection between students' emotional resilience and retention rates, suggesting that academic pressures can influence a student's sense of wellbeing, and pressure on the one can "heighten the burden of the other". Fynn and Janse van Vuuren (2017, 197), referring to the findings of a study conducted at a South African distance institution, explain that "emotional support emerged as one of the predominant needs among the respondents" and that, by "acknowledging emotional support as part of the critical support required to improve resilience", the institution bears a responsibility to provide same. These findings resonate with the work of Cobb (2009) and Garrison (2009), and the importance that they place on nurturing a strong social presence in online learning communities where students feel connected and emotionally supported. *Social* presence is recognised as one of the three presences in the Community of Inquiry (COI) model of Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000), with the other two being *teaching* presence and *cognitive* presence (*ibid*). It is, however, social presence that has evolved most significantly since the initial inception of the model (Garrison, 2009). Social presence, in this COI context, is further broken down into three sub-categories: (i) expression of emotion, (ii) open communication, and (iii) group cohesion (Garrison et al., 2000). Collectively, these three aspects of social presence lend to the facilitation of students being perceived of, and of perceiving others, as 'real' people within an online learning environment (*ibid*). This, in turn, fosters a sense of belonging (Cobb, 2009) to a community that is "thoroughly social and communal" (Lipman, 2003:18). The COI model of Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) is illustrated in Figure 1, along with three sub-categories identified as contributing to a student's sense of emotional wellbeing: expression of emotion, open communication, and group cohesion. According to Visser and Law-van Wyk (2021, p. 230), the concept of emotional wellbeing "describes the presence or absence of emotional difficulties" which may be affected by a range of human experiences, particularly those stressors associated with times of crisis such as a pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

ACKNOWLEDGING THE ROLE OF EMOTION IN ONLINE LEARNING

Rather than being antithetical to thinking or reasoning, research would suggest that emotion has a critical role to play in the teaching and learning process – especially in an online context (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012). In the last two decades, there has been increased interest in emotion and the role it plays in the online learning environment (Brookfield, 2006; Eloff, O'Neil & Kanengoni, 2021; Lehman, 2006; Lipman, 2003). While some have focused on the *negative* emotions experienced by distance students, such as stress (O'Regan, 2003; Weiss, 2000), anxiety (Christie et al., 2007, cited in Bharuthram, 2018), shame and anger (Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; You & Kang, 2014) or even alienation (Wegerif, 1998; Zembylas, 2008), others have investigated the impact of *positive* emotions, such as experiencing a "sense of achievement" (Pekrun & Stephens, 2010), stability and motivation (O'Regan, 2003; Williams, 2017), and even joy (Zembylas, 2008). According to Zembylas et al. (2008:108), there is ample research that "refers to the existence and importance of learners' emotions during the online
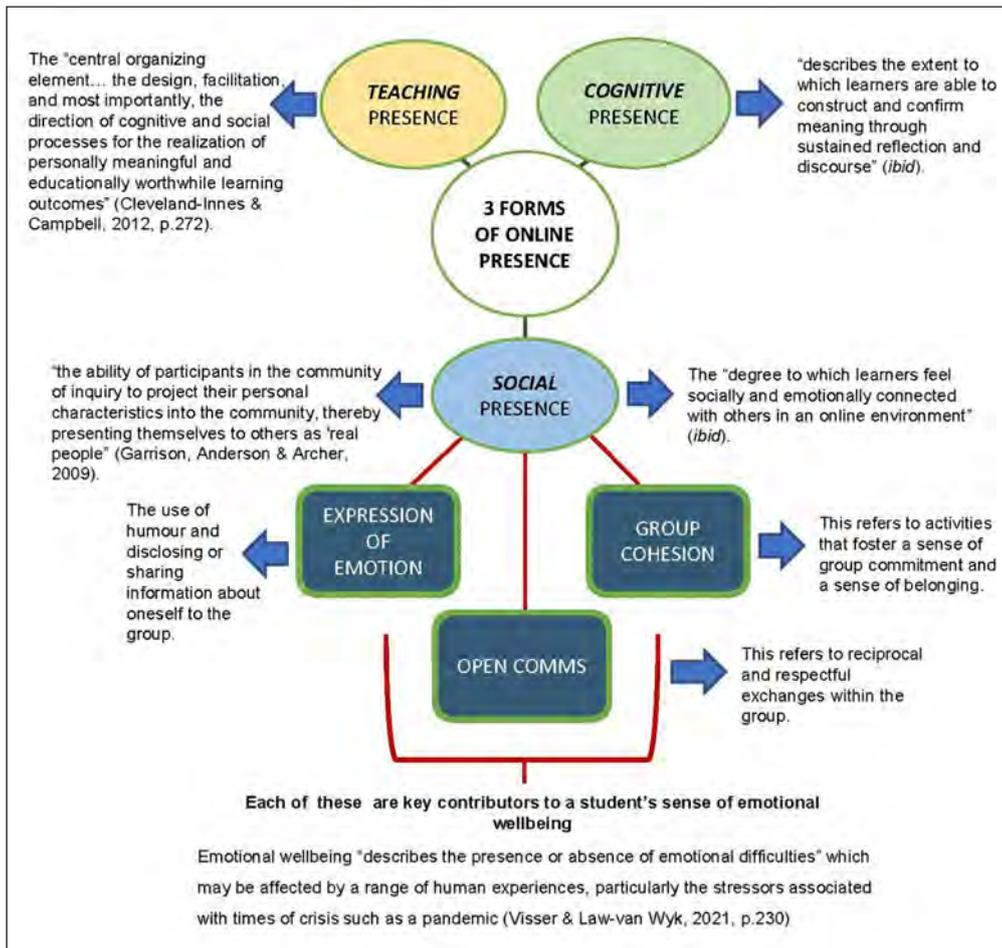
learning process". Most of these studies, however, focus more on aspects of social presence rather than specifically looking at *emotion* itself and how this impacts the student learning journey (*ibid*). Studies investigating social presence, such as those by Richardson (2001) and Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (1999), suggest a clear link between the perceived level of social presence in an online context and the learning outcomes, but these studies do not specifically identify any emotions or how these should be supported.

EMOTION WITHIN A COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

Emotion has also been explored as it pertains to the sense of community that students speak of having experienced through peer-to-peer engagement in the online environment (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012; Eloff, O'Neil & Kanengoni, 2021; Majeski, Stover & Valais, 2018). A review of the literature reveals that research has begun to focus more intently on the importance of learners' feelings in relation to their sense of community, as well as on the impact that both positive and negative emotions can have on a student's online learning experience (O'Regan, 2003, p. 79). Spitzer (2001, cited in Zembylas et al., 2008) concurs and suggests that, until the affective aspects of web-based learning are properly acknowledged, the potential of this medium will never be fully realised. Galusha (1997, cited in McInnerney & Roberts, 2004:74) adds to the discussion by pointing out that what students want is the sense that they are "part of a larger learning community". Shea (2006, p. 35) expands on this notion, defining an online learning community as "groups of people, connected via technology-mediated communication, who actively engage one another in collaborative, learner-centred activities to intentionally foster the creation of knowledge, while sharing a number of values and practices". Research would further suggest that understanding the emotional impact on students studying online, as well as the source of that emotion, warrants further investigation (Daniels & Stupnisky, 2012; Lehman, 2006; Pekrun & Stephens, 2010; You & Kang, 2014).

What has yet to be explored in any real detail, however, is the intentional nurturing of online students' sense of emotional wellbeing. This should be done via a means where the primary focus is to understand the individual student context and to provide students with an affective

support mechanism specifically aimed at helping them cope with the demands of ODL. This should be applied not only during the day-to-day demands of a "normal" academic year, but also during times of crisis. The PST designation offers precisely this; a role that is dedicated to student emotional wellbeing, rather than the provision of systemic or cognitive support. The aim of this exploratory study was to interrogate the PST role as it exists in the ODL model of the selected PHT institution in order to determine whether access to a dedicated affective support mechanism played any significant role in the student learning journey during the COVID-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

DESIGN AND METHODS

The students who participated in this study brought with them their individual realities; sharing their subjective views and insights into the value that each placed on the emotional support they had experienced through PST engagement. As such, only students who had experienced the PST role for themselves were in a position to provide the data relevant to this study. In this instance, adopting an *interpretivist* paradigm made the most sense. This paradigm enables the researcher to consider "certain behavioural aspects based on the experiences of the participants" ethical previously unspecified concepts", guided by their own "cultural assumptions as well as the data" while seeking to achieve personalised insights into the world of the participants (*ibid*).

Within a qualitative approach, a case study was used since it facilitated "an intensive study of a single unit for the purpose of understanding a larger class of (similar) units" (Gerring, 2004, p. 342). By investigating the nature and impact of the PST role in this study, the aim was to interrogate whether such a support mechanism might potentially be suggested as standard practice for similar models.

A central component of the ODL model of the PHT institution in this study, is the PST role. An invitation to participate was sent to all students registered during 2020/2021 as well as those on the 2020 graduation list. To ensure that the participants in this study met the necessary criteria, purposive sampling was required. From the responses received, 34 students who met the criteria were selected: 30 participants were selected based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study and having been registered as an ODL student with the organisation during 2020/2021. Four participants were selected, again based on their willingness and availability to participate in the study and having completed their qualification in 2019 – prior to the pandemic. The four participants, who then made up the total group of 34, served as the quota sample. Quota sampling was used to gain some insight into whether the support provided by the PST role was perhaps experienced in a different way by students who had concluded their studies prior to the 2020 pandemic.

Because the 34 participants were based at various locations across the country, all engagement was conducted fully online using a secure digital platform with which the participants were already familiar. The questions that would be used to initiate the discussion and facilitate the engagement were shared ahead of time. Data was collected using 12 one-on-one, semi-structured interviews (SSI) and five focus groups comprising between four and five participants. Both SSIs and focus groups were selected because, while the SSI allows for the discovery of, or elaboration on, information that is important to participants – but that the interviewer may not have initially considered – focus groups generate information on "collective views, and the meanings that lie behind those views" (Gill, Steward, Treasure & Chadwick, 2008, p. 292).

The six-phase thematic analysis (TA) of Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012) was selected for the analysis and interpretation of the data. "Thematic analysis is a method for systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning and [themes] across a data set" (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), the mainstay of ethical research is informed consent. In order to ensure that participants were informed, they were provided with detailed information

regarding the focus and purpose of this study; they were also given access to the questions that would be asked during the SSIs and focus group sessions. Students were made aware that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without reprisal. The necessary ethical clearance was obtained from the PHT institution (reference R15519). The study was further guided by the three fundamental principles at the core of ethical research: beneficence, respect for persons, and justice.

TRUSTWORTHINESS

Cope (2014), citing the work of Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Whittemore, Chase and Mandle (2001), identifies the most common criteria used to evaluate qualitative research as *credibility* (truth); *transferability* (applicability); *dependability* (consistency); and *confirmability* (neutrality).

To establish credibility the following approaches were used: triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking. To achieve triangulation the data and the questions that were to be used in both the semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions were shared with all the participants ahead of time. These same questions were used to guide the conversation in each of the engagements that took place. A member of the PHT institution's academic team served as the "impartial peer" (Terrell, 2015, p.174), reviewing the research methodology that was used, interrogating the transcripts once personal details had been redacted, and providing feedback once this process was complete. Member checking involved sharing the link to the recorded sessions with the relevant participants as well as the final transcript. All participants were then invited to comment on same.

Transferability demonstrates that it is possible to apply the findings to other contexts outside of a particular study (Terrell, 2015, p. 173). The aim of conducting this study was for people, or organisations, outside of the study to find meaning in the results and to use the findings to improve the learning experience of students enrolled in their distance programmes through the targeted provision of non-academic or affective support (Cope, 2014). "Dependability refers to the constancy of the data over similar conditions", which is something that can be replicated by following the same processes and descriptions (Cope, 2014, p. 89, citing Polit & Beck, 2012). For the purpose of this study, dependability was ensured by documenting the research process that was followed and carefully reporting on all aspects of the research design and research methods that were used. Finally, it is essential that "other researchers [are] able to replicate the results" and in so doing, providing evidence that the "results are a product of independent research methods and not of conscious or unconscious bias" (Lincoln & Gruba, 1985, np).

FINDINGS

CONTEXT AND GENERAL PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

The South African PHT institution, whose ODL model provides the case study for this paper, was founded in 1991 and includes eight contact campuses spread across the country offering tuition to approximately 18 500 students. In 2016, the organisation launched its distance offering for the first time and introduced the PST role as an affective support mechanism available to its ODL students. In March of 2020, the organisation chose to intensify the PST efforts in recognition of the inevitable impact the pandemic would have on students' emotional wellbeing, regardless of whether they had already made the choice to study online prior to the lockdown regulations coming into effect.

As noted, 34 participants were included in this study: 30 were enrolled as ODL students with the institution during 2020 and 2021, and four had completed their studies in 2019, prior to the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, thus serving as the quota sample. Figure 2 provides an overview of the participants and includes their pseudonyms (indicating their initials and the sequential number allocated to each), the sessions in which they participated (either an SSI or a focus group session), as well as their status as either a current student (at the time of data collection) or one who had completed their qualification in 2019. Sessions were recorded with the consent of the participants.

STUDENT PARTICIPANTS				
Pseudonym	Completed Studies 2019	Registered during 2020 / 2021	Semi-structured Interview	Focus Groups
ST01				FG1
DP02				FG1
AG03				FG1
MS04				FG1
AC05				FG1
SST06		YES	YES	
BK07	**YES (Quota 1)**		**YES**	
EM08		YES	YES	
EP09		YES	YES	
MT10	**YES (Quota 2)**		**YES**	
AR11		YES	YES	
TC12		YES	YES	
NG13		YES	YES	
CK14		YES	YES	
GA15	**YES (Quota 3)**		**YES**	
SG16		YES		FG2
QT17		YES		FG2
BZ18		YES		FG2
AA19		YES		FG2
MVV20		YES		FG3
DB21		YES		FG3
AN22		YES		FG3
AA23		YES		FG3
SVR24		YES	YES	
SL25	**YES (Quota 4)**		**YES**	
JCC26		YES		FG4
TS27		YES		FG4
TD28		YES		FG4
JC29		YES		FG4
JR30		YES		FG4
MH31		YES		FG5
RF32		YES		FG5
MD33		YES		FG5
TN34		YES		FG5

Figure 2 General participant information.

MAIN THEME AND SUB-THEMES

During the collection and analysis of the data set, the following sub-themes emerged to support the main theme of determining the value of affective PST support during times of crisis:

- Sub-theme 1: The effect of the pandemic on participants' studies
- Sub-theme 2: Opposing views of affective PST support
- Sub-theme 3: Reflecting on the role of the PST since the pandemic

Based on a general introductory question to determine how the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown had impacted participants' studies, we found that all participants (excluding those who had completed their studies in 2019) indicated that COVID-19 had affected their studies, and that "some days were easier than others" (JC29). These responses led to our first sub-theme.

Sub-theme 1: The effect of the pandemic on participants' studies

Participants tended to reflect on the impact of the pandemic in two distinctly different ways: 14 indicated that the lockdown regulations had benefitted their studies to some extent while 11 said that the stressors associated with the pandemic had had a negative impact. The remaining five participants felt that, while their studies had remained on track during the lockdown, the reality of what was happening in the world around them did sometimes leave them feeling anxious or overwhelmed. There were those participants who, because of the lockdown restrictions on travel, and subsequent work-from-home provisions made by their employers, were able to spend more time on their studies. It was within this context that they spoke of COVID-19 as "a huge benefit" or of 2020 as having been "a good year".

When two of the participants were asked how COVID-19 had impacted their learning journey, they replied:

> **AR11**: *So weirdly enough, it was a huge benefit (hesitant laugh) hope it's ok to even say that... let me rather say that in the sense that prior to Covid I had to travel every second week, and obviously that came to a halt. So, in essence, all the travel time and being away from home, etc. just stopped and that made it a whole lot easier for me. So, my final year was really, really good.*

> **AC05**: *"...Covid started, and lockdown started, and we were alone in lockdown. Under lockdown my wife and I could manage to get through all the assignments, which was nice, there was nothing bad about it. I actually enjoyed 2020".*

Other participants were less able to separate the reality of the pandemic from their studies, referring to the impact as "huge", "daunting" and "overwhelming".

> **EP09**: *"Oh, the impact was huge. It was mind-blowing just how much, because those two or three hours a day that I had were suddenly gone. And you think, well hold on, you are sitting at home, surely you have **more** time not less? And the short answer is no... not now that those work versus home boundaries are totally gone".*

> **AG03**: *"I just wanted to say, that last year I actually went through hell because, I was working from home, and you do work harder, and you do end up working in the evenings... so it was like really, really tough, just totally overwhelming".*

We would argue that how participants evaluated the impact and importance of the support provided by their PST during 2020, and on into 2021, was invariably linked to how they had experienced the pandemic, and their initial responses led to our second sub-theme.

Sub-theme 2: Opposing views of affective PST support

For participants who had viewed the regulation to stay at home as an opportunity to focus on their studies – thereby turning the need for isolation to their advantage – any stress or anxiety they may have been experiencing did not seem to translate into their academic pursuits. By their own account, contact with their PST, or reliance on affective support, was not a priority for them. As an example, a participant stated:

> **MH31:** *For me? No. I really wasn't interested. I had my plan, I had my access to the platforms I needed, and thanks to lockdown, I had the time to do what needed to be done. So, no, I didn't really think about what my PST could offer me.*

Student views, such as the one above, are supported by a country-wide study on the impact of the pandemic on education in India, showing students' improved time management skills as one of the positive results of the pandemic (Jenna, 2020). Another example of a participant statement confirmed that the student was aware that the PST was available, but that he did not play an important role in his/her life:

> **CK14:** *So, we knew (redacted) was there. He kept in touch through the WhatsApp group and encouraged us to contact him if we needed to. I guess some people must have, but for me, it really wasn't a priority.*

The opposite was true for participants who experienced a real sense of loneliness, isolation, or anxiety during this period where access to the support provided by the PST role was seen as far more critical. The following quotes serve as examples:

> **EP09:** *Oh, huge! Absolutely huge. For me, Covid has really proved... the value of emotional wellness, and the need for that. The need to feel supported, the need to feel that there is a support mechanism because burnout is real. Burnout emotionally, not physically because you are sitting at your ... desk for 10 hours per day, but emotionally it is huge.*

> **TC12:** *When the lockdown happened, my husband was away and couldn't get back, it was really terrible. I mean, I wasn't sick or anything, but I just felt really vulnerable you know? My PST was such a lifesaver. She knew my situation and made sure that she*

checked in really often. We wouldn't even talk about my studies, sometimes it was just to say hi… and that honestly meant the world. I was feeling so isolated, and she was like my link to a bit of reality if you know what I mean?

Students' need for emotional connection as indicated by this participant is supported by the study of Fynn and Janse Van Rensburg (2017), and resonates well with the need to share emotions and experience a sense of belonging as part of social presence in online learning communities (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). In times of crisis, this need might increase, as has been confirmed in a large-scale study with 1 335 students at 20 universities in Egypt conducted in 2020. The results indicate that 70.5% experienced depression, 53.6% noted feelings of anxiety, and 47.8% referred to increased levels of stress brought about by the pandemic. This study would suggest that there is a need for psychologically oriented services and emotional support to be made available to students during times of crisis (Ghazawy et al., 2021).

The 34 participants in this study were divided into how they experienced the COVID-19 pandemic: while 13 viewed the resultant need to minimise travel and avoid social gatherings as an opportunity to spend more time on their studies, 11 indicated that there were times when they felt overwhelmed by events and could not separate what was happening in the world at large from their academic pursuits. For the former group, the non-academic support offered by the PST was not something they actively sought out. The predominant response from these participants was that they felt, because they had access to the resources they needed, a clear idea of the work that was required, and the time available to meet the demands of their studies, they did not need any additional or external support. We did consider whether this apparent high level of planning, focus and organisation was not perhaps their way of attempting to control their immediate environment in a time when so much seemed beyond anyone's control. When this question was directly posed to four of the participants, however, none was able to provide a definitive answer.

Some participants shared that the pandemic had resulted in them experiencing heightened levels of stress and anxiety, leaving them feeling "overwhelmed", "isolated" and "afraid". For these participants, the affective presence of their PST was regarded as being important or meaningful. Participants who had been ill or separated from family members, who were front-line workers, or who were caught up in this extraordinary situation, spoke of the PST presence in a significantly different way. When engaging with these participants, it seemed that any form of contact was viewed as being affective in nature. As an example, a participant said:

ST01: *She stuck with me, she said to me that everything was going to be fine, she helped me with everything. And, I mean, that is all you need, just somebody to check-in, to say that it's going to be ok.*

The question then remained: Did those participants who had an established relationship with their PST prior to 2020 – experience the support they received during the pandemic any differently? The question led to our third sub-theme.

Sub-theme 3: Reflecting on the role of the PST since the pandemic

Reading through the transcripts we realised that there was very little to substantiate a comparable difference in the *nature* of the support sought from or provided by the PSTs during the timeframe of the pandemic. What was evident, however, was that the *importance* placed on that support differed. As examples, two participants shared their views when asked to reflect on the role of their PST since the pandemic:

QT17: *I have had (redacted) as my PST for 3 years now. She has always been pretty involved with our group, so I can't say that I noticed anything really different during Covid, but maybe that's just because of who she is. For me though, I think I could say that I relied on her help a bit more during Covid than I did before, you know, just for small things, and maybe it's weird, but I felt like having her there was quite important last year.*

The above comment confirmed the importance of the social and emotional support provided by the PST during the COVID-19 pandemic. The fact that the PST provided a reliable and constant

presence during this time was something that this student clearly valued. Referring to reaching out to her PST during the lockdown, participant AG03 shared the following:

> **AG03**: *… but I feel silly, am I being silly, am I being weak because I'm moaning about this silly thing to my PST when other people have got more serious things going on. I don't even know what I want (redacted) to say to make it better. I mean, I didn't expect this kind of thing from her before Covid.*

The above quotations suggested that, although participants might well have been aware of the PST role prior to 2020, it was not until they found themselves in the midst of a pandemic that the importance of, or the need for, emotional support was more acutely felt. We interpreted this as being context-driven: participants who felt particularly vulnerable during 2020 were far more receptive to offers of support and appreciative of someone who took the time to check in on them than they might have been prior to this event. With people having to live in comparative isolation, contact – even virtual or telephonic – seemed to take on far more value than it otherwise might have.

Regardless of how the PST role was understood, 32 of the 34 participants who were asked whether the PST role should be retained or done away with by the organisation indicated that it should be retained. The two participants who indicated that the role need not be retained based their recommendation on their having understood the PST role as offering *generic* rather than *affective* support.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to determine the value of affective support provided by a dedicated support mechanism such as a PST during times of crisis. It became clear that how the COVID-19 pandemic was experienced by students was not the same for everyone. While the impact of the subsequent lockdown was experienced by some as being positive – in that it provided the opportunity for more focused time to study – other students expressed feeling overwhelmed by the pressures of having to remain focused on their studies while also dealing with the responsibilities of home and family life under pandemic regulations. The way in which the students experienced the crisis they were facing directly informed their opinions on the value of the affective support provided by the PST during the pandemic. Those who felt confident that their access to the organisation's LMS, and relevant course content, was sufficient to ensure their ability to remain on track academically, did not prioritise the need for any additional support mechanisms. In direct contrast to this were those students who experienced heightened levels of anxiety or loneliness during this time and found that the affective presence of the PST played a central role in their sense of emotional wellbeing and ability to cope. Although the PST role was an established component of the organisation's ODL model four years prior to the events of 2020, the need for this dedicated affective support – and the importance students placed thereon – intensified during the pandemic. While the majority of participants were already familiar with the PST role, it was not until they found themselves in a time of crisis that they began to recognise and appreciate the link between the PST presence and the provision of an affective support system.

This study revealed that, although students' dependence on the affective support provided by the PST varied, there was recognition that feeling emotionally supported played a key role in their experiencing a more meaningful connection to their online learning communities. We would argue then that the value of a social presence – one that is also intentionally affective in nature – cannot be underestimated in an online COI, especially during times of crisis. Furthermore, based on the findings, we recommend that institutions with online and distance education modes of delivery consider the inclusion of a third party, external to the student-teacher or peer-to-peer relationship, whose primary focus is the facilitation of a stronger sense of emotional connectedness and wellbeing. As this study found, the notion of being part of a community, something larger than just themselves, has a critical role to play in the entire student learning journey, and ultimately in their potential to achieve academic success. Finally, we acknowledge that this paper reports on a single case, and trust that it will inspire researchers to investigate the importance of affective support across a range of ODL contexts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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