

Peer Review

Review of: "Higher Education Institutions' Preparedness for the Digital Era: Lessons from COVID-19 in South Africa"

Filzah Md Isa¹

1. School of Management and Marketing, Taylor's Education Group, Subang Jaya, Malaysia

Comments

Higher Education Institutions' Preparedness for the Digital Era: Lessons from COVID-19 in South Africa

Title & Abstract

- The title is clear, timely, and relevant. The abstract provides a strong overview of purpose, method, and findings. Here are a few suggestions:
- **Suggestions:**
- Consider including an explicit research gap in the abstract (what previous work missed, and how your study contributes).
- Add implications for practice/policy in the last sentence for a stronger conference impact.

1. Introduction

- The context of COVID-19 and the digital shift is well-explained; references are relevant.
- **Suggestions:**
- The introduction is long; streamline by focusing on why this study is necessary (gap in South African higher education preparedness).
- Clarify objectives and research questions in one clear paragraph at the end of this section.
- Ensure consistency in terms like digital literacy vs. digital access, which are sometimes blurred.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Intergenerational technology, gaps, and literacy

- Provides a strong conceptual grounding with “digital natives” and the intergenerational divide.
- **Suggestions:**
- Strengthen the link between this debate and the South African higher education context.
- Avoid repetition of terms like “digital divide”; condense for clarity.

2.2 Digital Literacy

- Very comprehensive, covering “New Literacies” and theoretical debates.
- **Suggestions:**
- This section could be condensed to focus only on key frameworks that informed your study.
- Highlight which definitions/theory your study adopts (uppercase vs. lowercase literacies).

2.3 Digital Access, Skills, and the Digital Divide

- Good connection to COVID-19 realities.
- **Suggestions:**
- Add a short conceptual framework figure summarizing relationships between digital literacy, access, and higher education outcomes.
- Emphasize South African-specific studies more strongly.

3. Method and Approach

- Use of mixed-methods and case studies is a strength.
- **Suggestions:**
- Clarify the sampling approach: how were participants selected? Were they representative?
- Explain why both qualitative and quantitative methods were necessary (justify the design).
- Briefly mention data analysis techniques (e.g., thematic coding, descriptive statistics).

4. Case Studies: Barriers to Full Digital Access

- Case studies add richness; student quotes are impactful.
- **Suggestions:**
- Reduce redundancy; some quotes overlap (e.g., electricity/internet problems).
- Consider grouping sub-sections (Residential Status, Tools & Skills, Cost, Internet Dependence, Institutional Support) under a framework/table for clarity.

5. Enhancing Digital Connectivity and Education through Infrastructure Development

- Shows a forward-looking perspective.
- **Suggestions:**
- Be more critical: is 5G realistic given structural inequalities?
- Discuss policy implications (government, HEIs, telecom providers) instead of mainly student perceptions.

6. Discussion

- Shows a strong integration of findings and literature. Good use of the Triple Helix model.
- **Suggestions:**
- Explicitly link the discussion back to research questions/objectives.
- Highlight what is novel in your findings (what lessons are new vs. already known in the literature).
- Make the discussion more concise for presentation, e.g., focus on 3–4 key themes.

7. Conclusion

- A good summary of key lessons.
- **Suggestions:**
- Add concrete recommendations for policy, HEIs, and future crises.
- Include a note on limitations (e.g., focus on one municipality, reliance on self-reported data).
- Suggest future research directions (e.g., cross-country comparison, longitudinal studies).

Declarations

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.