

**The effects of the inability for impoverished
/ under-privileged students to access
functional online learning systems during
the national lockdown**

Prepared for:

Eagles Rising Leadership Academy

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Table of Contents

Section 1

Introduction.....	4
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Significance of the study.....	5
Scope of the study.....	5
Methods of the study.....	5
Source of the data.....	5
Sample Selection.....	5
Statistical Methods.....	6
Limitations of the study.....	6

Section 2

Introduction.....	7
Findings.....	7
Age.....	7
Residential areas.....	8
Racial groups.....	8
Monthly income.....	9
NSC passes.....	9
Chosen careers.....	10
Information regarding current technology.....	10
Conclusion.....	11
Recommendations.....	13
Bibliography.....	14
Appendix A.....	15

List of Figures and Tables

Figures

Figure 1: Age groups.....	7
Figure 2: Areas of Residence	8
Figure 3: Racial groups.....	8
Figure 4: Monthly income	9
Figure 5: NSC passes.....	9
Figure 6: Chosen careers	10

Tables

Table 1: Technology currently available	10
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The investigation of the effects that a forced national lockdown, due to COVID-19 pandemic, is having on meaningful education for previously disadvantaged and currently impoverished students.

Section I:

Introduction

In the midst of the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic, many educational institutions around the globe are under pressure to provide quality education to their learners, while adhering to social distancing. According to McCarthy (2020), currently the schooling of 290 million students worldwide is being disrupted. While most of these institutions are turning to technology to keep contact with their students by implementing online learning; such as video clips, podcasts and live feeds to communicate the daily work that needs to be done, there are those who are not able to implement the relevant systems necessary to afford their students the opportunity to partake in such online learning. In actual fact the disruption to schooling has served to worsen the pre-existing inequalities in our education system and our society as a whole. The reality is that a variety of uncontrollable restrictions within our poorer communities is having a negative effect on the opportunities available for the students living within these communities to access online learning. The constraints that are making this impossible need to be identified and systems need to be implemented in order to ensure that all students are given equal opportunity to receive education during this stressful time.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to determine the need for a viable system whereby students from disadvantaged and under-resourced schooling backgrounds could also benefit from having access to technology and relevant resources, in so doing propelling them into the 4th industrial revolution along with their privileged counterparts. The lack of such a system and the resultant further widening of the educational gap between the privileged and non-privileged students due to our current national lockdown, have been clearly highlighted during this time of social distancing. Educational inequity is once again a sobering reality as we are sending a group of undereducated, inexperienced and underprepared young adults into a society where the possibility of them finding poverty-breaking jobs is more challenging than ever, especially now that the country is already suffering from a weak economy.

Significance of the Study

There are three primary groups that may benefit from this study. The first group, is Eagles Rising Leadership Academy. As an institution that exists to prepare impoverished students, (who have received their formal education from under-resourced township schools) with the necessary skills to successfully access and succeed at tertiary education; it is crucial for the future of these students that there is an immediate and comprehensive response to establish a functional online learning system. The need to get it right first time cannot be overemphasized. The second group consists of private companies or individuals, who are passionate about changing lives through education. They are looking to get involved with supporting equal education in South Africa, especially during this stressful time of being in unchartered waters as we fight a pandemic. The third group that may benefit from this study comprises government departments and in particular the Education department, who will be able to use these findings as a valuable guide to inspire and motivate them to develop swift policies, protocols and the urgent will to assist disadvantaged students by providing the necessary means to develop and implement systems that will ensure equal educational opportunities for all.

Scope of the Study

This study was limited to the 24 students currently enrolled at Eagles Rising Leadership Academy, and the access they have to technology during this time of national lockdown.

Methods of the Study

Source of Data

Data for this study was collected using a questionnaire developed by myself, the Head of Academics at Eagles Rising Leadership Academy. The questionnaire was divided into the following categories:

Firstly, questions were asked regarding their ages, ethnic backgrounds, areas in which they reside, gross monthly income and home language. The second part involved questions relating to devices that the students have that can be used to connect with the internet and the specs of these devices to determine to what extent they could be used to download courses and study online. A copy of the questionnaire is contained in Appendix A.

Sample Selection

The respondents involved in this survey were the 24 students enrolled at Eagles Rising Leadership Academy for the 2020 academic year. This is an NPO BEE level 1 organisation that provides an equipping and empowering year program for disadvantaged post-matriculated students, with the aim of equipping them emotionally, socially and academically for success in tertiary education. Due to the national lockdown, questionnaires were distributed via Whatsapp on their cell phones, and the responses were recorded on an Excel Spreadsheet.

Statistical Methods

The primary data was analyzed using a percent of response type. To compute the percent of response type, the total of each type of response to each question was divided by the total number of respondents who answered the question. Percentages per response were therefore calculated based on the answers of all 24 students on all questions.

Limitations of the Study

Due to the brief nature of the questionnaires and the fact that they were distributed via Whatsapp, this study is somewhat limited, however responses were purely factual and held no emotional elements, such as personal opinions, beliefs or attitudes.

A further limitation of this study is reflected in the small sample group of only 24 students, chosen for convenience as they were already enrolled at the Academy and had started their academic year in January 2020. Care should therefore be taken in generalizing these findings to all students in the poorer informal settlement areas, although sufficient proof exists that this is a feasible assumption.

All attempts have been made to minimize the effects of these limitations on the study.

Section 2

Introduction

This study was designed to determine the reality and the effects of the lack of a viable system for students in the poorer informal settlements to access vital online learning during times when social distancing is crucial for the sustaining of life. 24 questionnaires were distributed to the 24 students enrolled at Eagles Rising Leadership Academy, and the response rate was 100%. This section includes the Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations.

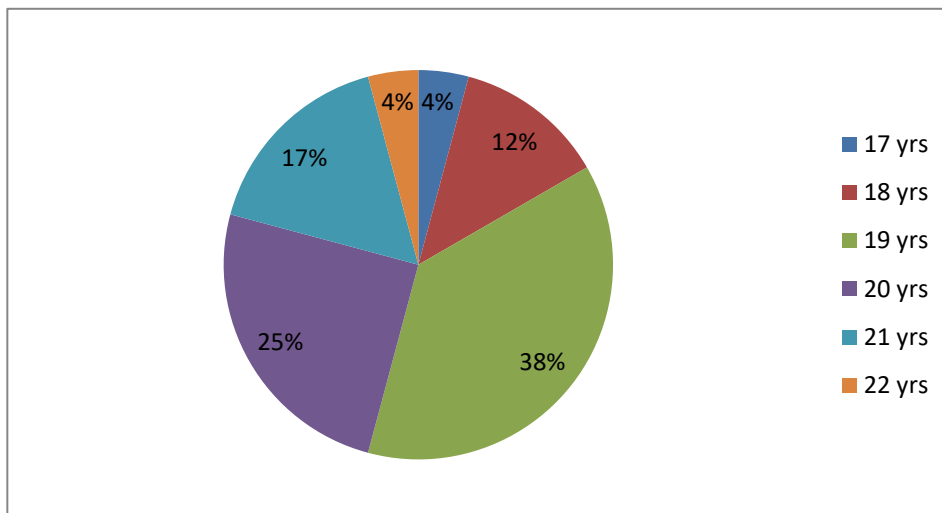
Findings

The findings will be presented according to the following demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the students: Age, racial groupings, area of residence, monthly household income, types of NSC passes and career goals of each student.

Age

The breakdown of their ages is shown in Figure 1.

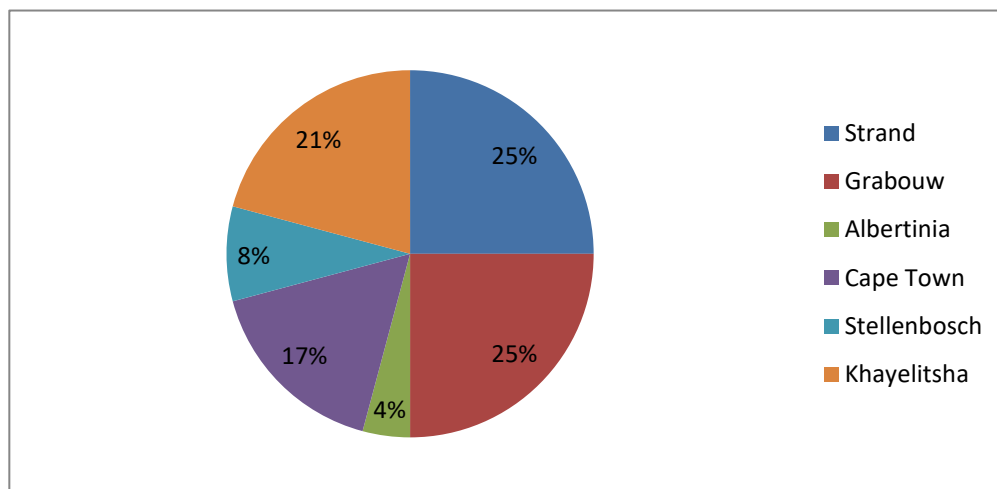
Figure 1: Age groups of the students



Residential Areas of Respondents

The areas within which the 24 students reside are shown in Figure 2.

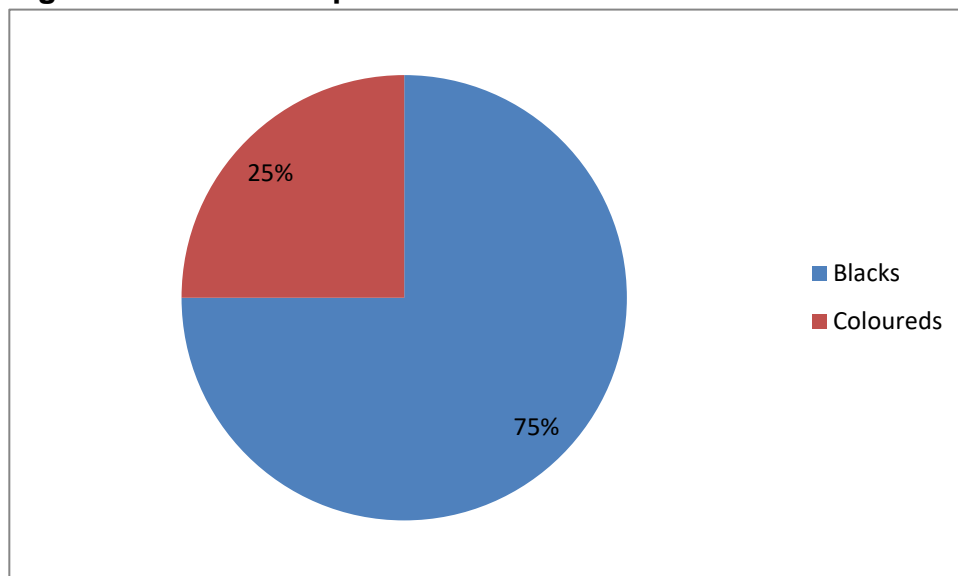
Figure 2: Areas of Residence



Racial Groupings of Students

These 24 students only represent the black and coloured communities as shown in Figure 3. Xhosa is the home language of 16 students, 5 students speak Afrikaans at home, 1 student is English and Sesotho is the home language of 2 students.

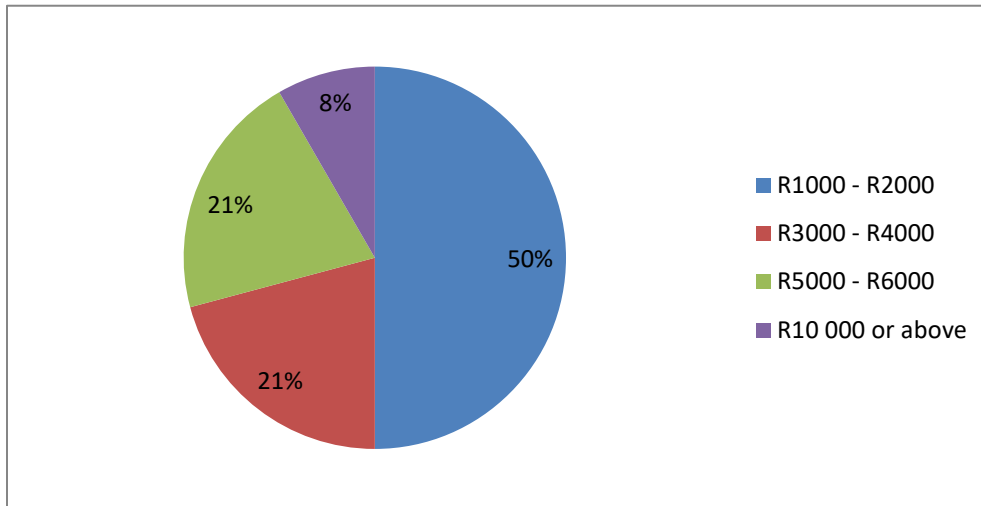
Figure 3: Racial Groups



Monthly income per student family

The current monthly income per students' family is shown in Figure 4

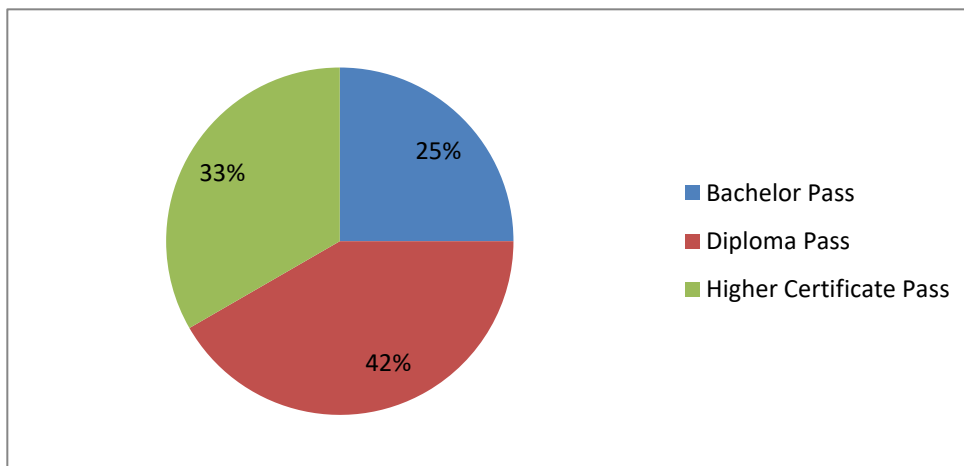
Figure 4: Monthly Income



National Senior Certificate passes

The type of National Senior Certificate passes as obtained by each respondent is shown in Figure 5. Students with a Bachelor pass qualify to apply to universities in SA, students with a Diploma pass are able to apply to colleges and students with just a higher certificate are able to apply to study online. All of these students are registered to rewrite some of their grade 12 subjects in November 2020, with the intention of improving their type of NSC pass.

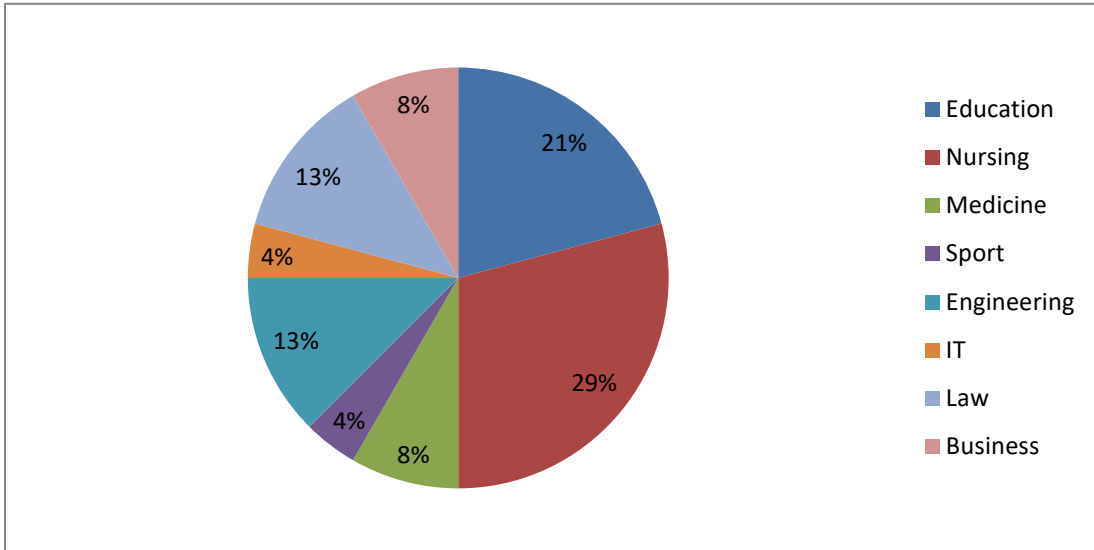
Figure 5: Types of NSC passes



Chosen careers

Figure 6 shows the types of careers that the respondents would like to pursue should they successfully register at a tertiary institution in 2021.

Figure 6: Types of careers



The following table shows the results of the survey questionnaire regarding the technology available to them.

Table 1: Information regarding technology currently available to the students

Students with laptops	0
Students with cell phones + able to load an online learning app + data	4
Students with cell phones + able to load an online learning app - NO data	12
Students with cell phones NOT able to load an online learning app	5
Students without access to working cell phones	3

From the table above it is clear that of the 24 students, none of them are able to connect with online learning via laptops. Only 4 of them have cell phones capable of downloading an online learning platform with sufficient data to make use of it. Most of the students do have cell phones that can manage an online learning platform; however that do not have the finances needed to upload on their data. Five of the students do not have the minimum requirements on their cell phones in order to download any app for online learning and three of them have no access to a functional cell phone at all.

Conclusions

On the basis of the findings, several conclusions concerning the effects of the absence of a viable system for underprivileged students to embrace online learning can be drawn.

Firstly, 67% of these students received a NSC pass that entitles them to apply for tertiary education at either a university or college, while the remaining 33% may pursue online distance education. 100% of these students are rewriting selected NSC subjects in November 2020, with the aim of improving their NSC results. This could increase the percentage of students who are entitled to apply at tertiary institutions. However, with 100% of them not having access to laptops and only 16% having access to cellular devices that enable online learning with sufficient data, it is going to be a challenge for these students to adequately prepare for these exams, during a national lockdown.

Secondly, 100% of these students have attainable career choices which they intend pursuing once they have completed their equipping and empowering year at the Academy. It is interesting to see that 50% of the students are interested in careers in education and nursing, both of which are very service orientated, very necessary in our post-apartheid society and not very highly paid. This speaks volumes of the kind of positive attitudes that these young men and women have towards uplifting their communities in service. With the current laws regarding social distancing, it has become almost impossible for the academic staff at Eagles Rising Leadership Academy to continue with any form of academic contact with these students. Again their lack of sufficient finances and technical devices is prohibiting access to relevant and important lessons that are available online that could be of immeasurable benefit to them in the pursuit of their chosen career paths.

Thirdly, 100% of these students live in townships or informal settlements where there is little or no access to technology, where sometimes even accessing electricity is a challenge. Where, according to Mahlobogwane (2020), the Gauteng Secretary of the Educator's Union of SA, most parents are illiterate and / or have to go out to work, leaving these students with little or no support in their endeavors of pursuing a tertiary education. Mahlobogwane, in a recent online interview also comments on the stress and anxiety that these young students are facing due to the little or no access to learning materials, fearing that they are once again being left behind. It is clear that social inequalities are also exacerbating education inequalities.

Fourthly, 92% of the selected group of students' families earn a gross monthly income of less than R6000, with 50% earning less than R2000 a month. Often the breadwinners in these families are financially responsible for more than 3 dependents and in most families, putting food on the table takes preference over self-actualisation and the buying of data. Our survey also shows that no student in our sample group has access to a

laptop. In actual fact, according to the 2018 General Household Survey, only 10.4% of South African households have access to the internet at home (Mohamed, 2020). Nearly 90% therefore, do not.

From this study, it can be concluded that most students who are living in the informal settlements and townships of South Africa are negatively affected by the absence of proper technological infrastructures, devices, finances and lack of experience in these difficult and stressful times when social distancing is enforced and where the global move is towards online learning. Access to the necessary technology in order to alleviate this problem has, up until now, not been addressed by any government policies (Brodie, et.al.,2020).

“Our education system was not designed to be run from home”, are the words spoken by Mahlobogwane (2020) in a cyber interview held earlier this month. And in our attempts to do so, we are creating a breeding ground for students to lose their motivation and drop out. Our students are young and motivated to embrace the challenges required to take on tertiary education, but if institutions like Eagles Rising Leadership Academy are prohibited, due to the lack of technology, from being able to adequately prepare them for these challenges, they are being set up for failure and again we are widening the educational gap.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions in this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Providing students with entry level laptops with internet access
2. Providing students with cellular phones that are able to download online learning apps
3. Providing students with sufficient data, while also investigating the option of zero-data charges for specific learning websites
4. Employing a courier service to deliver course material
5. Ensuring students gain the experience necessary to confidently navigate online learning systems
6. Developing a mentoring process in support of the initial learning challenges that students will face when transitioning into such a learning environment
7. Attracting the funding such a crucial endeavour requires
8. Investigating the possibility of partnering with existing academic institutions who are further ahead with online learning systems

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Questionnaire

1. How old are you?
2. What is your home language?
3. In which year did you write the National Senior Certificate?
4. What type of pass did you receive? Bachelor / Diploma / Higher Certificate
5. Where do you live?
6. What is the gross monthly salary for your family?
7. What career would you like to pursue after your year at Eagles Rising?
8. Do you have access to a laptop at home?
9. Do you have your own personal cell phone?
10. If yes, are you able to load an online learning app on your phone?
11. If you are able to download an online learning app on your phone, do you have access to funds in order to purchase data for online learning?

Thank you for taking time to complete this questionnaire