

Navigating disaster-driven changes in occupational therapy education: Lessons from a South African response during the COVID-19 pandemic

NDABAN, GOVENDER P, NAIDOO D
Discipline of Occupational Therapy, School of Health Sciences
University of KwaZulu Natal (Westville Campus), South Africa
ndaban1@ukzn.ac.za



Introduction

- COVID-19 prompted major shifts in OT education at a South African university.
- Innovations were implemented to maintain learning continuity.
- Disruption revealed challenges and opportunities.
- Insights inform responses to future disruptions.

Objectives

- Explored educator and student experiences.
- Evaluated educational adaptations.
- Proposed strategies for future teaching, learning and assessment disruptions.

2020

2021

2022

2023

2024

COVID-19 PANDEMIC
Disruptions to HEIs
Remote and Online learning
Blended Learning

POST-PANDEMIC
Return to Campus
Predominant return to traditional teaching, learning and assessment

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL STUDENT PROTESTS

Minor to moderate disruptions to HEIs
Educator and student occupations, well-being affected

KWA-ZULU NATAL FLOODING

Disruptive floods (Natural Disaster)
Severe disruptions to HEIs, educators and students

KWA-ZULU NATAL FLOODING

Intermittent Flooding (Natural Disaster)
Minor to moderate disruptions to HEIs, educators and students

JULY 2021

SOCIAL UNREST

Riots
Increased Violence
Disruption to HEIs
Educators and students affected

Ndaba, N., Govender, P., & Naidoo, D. (2025). Occupational Performance in the Discipline of Occupational Therapy During COVID-19 at a Public University in KwaZulu-Natal. *Occupational Therapy International*, 2025(1), 8801110.

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Methods

- Qualitative explorative study at a South African public institution.
- Purposive sampling of key stakeholders (n=54)
- Virtual semi-structured interviews; data analysed using Nvivo.
- Content analysis with trustworthiness and ethical rigour ensured.

Results

- Two frameworks were developed:
 - The Framework for Supporting Occupational Performance in Educators and Students advocates a flexible, student-centred approach to online learning
 - The Framework for Disaster Management for occupational Therapy Education offers a tailored approach to disaster preparedness based on South Africa's unique socioeconomic, political, and healthcare context.

Context

KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

- KZN is SA's second most populous province (~12.3 million people).
- Multiple crises since 2020 have severely disrupted higher education.
- HEIs rapidly shifted to online learning.
- Inequality and infrastructure gaps limited equitable access.

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL

- UKZN was established in 2004 through a merger of two universities.
- It is one of South Africa's largest universities, spanning five campuses in KZN.
- The student population reflects wide socio-economic diversity.
- Many students come from rural and historically disadvantaged backgrounds, which affects access to resources and technology.



HPCSA



- Registration of Health Professionals
- Setting and Maintaining Standards
- Accrediting Education and Training Programmes
- Continuing Professional Development
- Disciplinary Functions
- Promoting Public Safety
- Advocacy for Healthcare Quality

OTASA



- Promoting the Profession
- Advocating for Occupational Therapy Practice and Policies
- Providing Professional Development Opportunities
- Supporting Research and Evidence-Based Practice
- Ensuring Ethical Standards and Practice
- Facilitating Networking and Collaboration at National and International Levels

OCCUPATIONAL THERAPY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA



- 4-Year Undergraduate Degree
- Honours Degree (NQF Level 8)
- Curriculum Focus on Theory and Practice
- Practical Training and Clinical Placements
- Accreditation by the HPCSA

Conclusion

- The post-pandemic era presents an opportunity to transform South African occupational therapy education through sustainable, blended learning models that foster flexibility, accessibility, and student autonomy.

Significance

- Strengthening disaster preparedness and promoting equitable educational practices will ensure that core competencies and professional standards are maintained in diverse learning environments.

