

# How Covid-19 crisis is demystifying online learning

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*An interview with Natasa Meli, Sacap's Head of Online Campus*

For the past few decades, it has been noted that one of the biggest problems of education in the age of disruption is that, as a global sector, it has mostly, stubbornly resisted being disrupted. The danger of clinging to traditional paradigms is the continuous turning out of graduates who are not well-enough equipped to thrive in the times of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), because they haven't had sufficient opportunity and guidance to develop critical 21st-century skills.



*Natasa Meli, SACAP Head of Online Campus*

It's the nature of crisis to rapidly usher in change, some of it radical, and we have seen the latter in an unprecedented and massive migration to online learning across the world, courtesy of Covid-19. With continuity as the priority in our 'new-normal', resistance to online learning has melted away; and that is going to bring about potentially long-lasting and arguably, long overdue changes in education.

[Sacap](#) (The South African College of Applied Psychology) was one of the country's first educational institutions to close its physical campuses pre-lockdown and quickly migrate all of its students online. It had the advantage of an already well-established Online Campus with an experienced online educator component of its faculty and proven tech infrastructure. Educators from the physical campuses were trained, and students were enabled with data packages. It was a remarkably agile response in a notoriously slow-moving sector.

"During lockdown, online education has been demystified for many people," says Natasa Meli, Sacap's Head of Online Campus. "While distance learning has been available in South Africa for a long time, online education, which is very different, is

still an emerging field in comparison to other countries. It is generally popular for the flexibility to manage your time and workload while balancing other responsibilities. For some, it may be the only option if they are geographically far from a physical campus. However, Covid-19 has made online learning a necessity, and this may not be just a short-term emergency solution. My sense is that most schools and universities across the country won't necessarily be returning to mass face-to-face teaching in even the medium term. Online education is now part of a longer-term 'new normal' in South Africa that ultimately becomes a critical part of teaching and learning strategies into the future."

Natasa points out beyond ensuring continuity of education, many more South Africans now have a growing awareness of the other benefits of online education. "When it is done well, online education is not simply a virtual alternative to face-to-face teaching. Instead, it's a field of expertise in its own right, informed by its own pedagogical principles, so that learning experiences can be *intentionally designed* towards the achievement of specific learning outcomes, within a technology mediated environment. In other words, online education can, and should be a rich, immersive and engaging experience, where students feel connected to their educators, their classmates and their course content."

Online education offers certain unmatched advantages, including:

- Students, regardless of where they are located in the world, have access to possibly any institution and its associated faculty, anywhere in the world. This means students are not just limited to the institutions and programmes that are either offered in close proximity to them; or else would require a significant (and possibly prohibitive) financial investment in terms of travel, housing and other related expenses to study away from where they live.
- This democratisation of education also means that it's not necessarily just the 'best and the brightest', who get those

coveted spots in a competitive university programme, which can sometimes only accommodate a certain number of students, due to limited physical resources, space and facilities.

- And, the relative flexibility that online education affords means that any student, regardless of life-stage, can manage their schedules to accommodate full- or part-time work commitments, thereby minimising student debt.

Perhaps, the greatest asset that online education has to offer is related to its 'newness'. It's a field of education uniquely fashioned by its times, and therefore freer of the traditional constrictors that have caused such stagnation in education. For the younger generations it is highly relatable, not only in its tech platforms but in equipping them with 4IR skills to fulfil their unique aspirations of life and work.

"In a rapidly changing world with its associated changing needs, your greatest asset will be your ability to adapt and to adequately respond to those needs," says Natasa. "Education is no longer a once-off event that you mark off as complete once you graduate from university. Similarly, one's career is now rarely any one fixed, unchanging definition of 'what one does for a living'. At best, working professionals are likely to change careers multiple times throughout their lifetimes, and with 'millennial multi-careerism' becoming an increasingly growing trend, this calls for a lifelong, ongoing process where you continuously build on what you already know; learn entirely new things that are seemingly unrelated to what you already know; and maybe even forget things that you once thought you knew.

The world of online education makes it possible for you to do just that, at any stage of your life or career journey, so that you too can continue to grow and evolve with the changing world around you - and you can do this without being tied down to any one particular geographical location. However, Covid-19 has also highlighted the fault-lines in South African society, and we are seeing a significant number of South African learners and students unable to experience the benefits of online education at this time. As a country, we still have a way to go in this respect, but if properly addressed, we have an incredible opportunity to leverage the transformative power of online education to upskill and educate our nation."

The Covid-19 world is new, but you can still start your studies at Sacap in June on its existing robust online platform and shift to your campus later. The class size stays small, we help lighten your data load, and you'll be led through the material by your educator. You also get face-to-face support from the student services teams.

For anyone who is interested in the field of Psychology, Counselling, Human Resource Management or Business Management, Sacap offers a wide range of qualifications, including Higher Certificate, Diploma, BAppSocSci (Majoring in Psychology and Counselling), BAppSocSci (Majoring in Psychology and Human Resource Management), BAppSocSci (Majoring in Psychology and Business Management) and BPsych.

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