

Experiences of University Students and Lecturers with the Modularisation System at the Midlands State University, Zimbabwe

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Abstract

This study is an exploration of the experiences of university students and lecturers within the modularisation model at Midlands State University, a Zimbabwean state university. Modularisation is an innovative practice that has been implemented for more than a year to date within the tertiary education sector of Zimbabwe. However, as far as the researchers are aware, no study yet has investigated how the system has been experienced by the students and lecturers at Midlands State University. The current study was a descriptive phenomenological study that employed interviews on six lecturers and eight students. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Findings showed that both lecturers and students have encountered more challenges than benefits indicating a need for refinement in conditions such as assessment and feedback, support, engagement, and expectations.

Key words: Modularisation, University, Students, Zimbabwe

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Résumé

Cette étude explore les expériences des étudiants et des enseignants universitaires dans le cadre du modèle de modularisation mis en place à l'Université d'État des Midlands, une université publique zimbabwéenne. La modularisation est une pratique innovante mise en œuvre depuis plus d'un an dans le secteur de l'enseignement supérieur au Zimbabwe. Cependant, à la connaissance des chercheurs, aucune étude n'a encore examiné la manière dont ce système a été vécu par les étudiants et les enseignants de l'Université d'État des Midlands. La présente étude est une étude phénoménologique descriptive qui s'est appuyée sur des entretiens menés auprès de six enseignants et de huit étudiants. Une analyse thématique a été utilisée pour analyser les données. Les résultats ont montré que tant les enseignants que les étudiants ont rencontré plus de difficultés que d'avantages, ce qui indique un besoin d'amélioration dans des domaines tels que l'évaluation et le retour d'information, le soutien, l'engagement et les attentes.

Mots-clés : Modularisation, Université, Étudiants, Zimbabwe.

Introduction

The semester system is the most common in tertiary education globally. The origins of the semester system date back to the medieval age in Europe in the Bologna process, which was aimed at harmonizing and standardizing tertiary education institutions. In the semester system, the academic year was divided into two 16-week sessions (Bostwick, Fischer & Lang, 2022; Malone, 1946), which allowed for an organized and structured approaches to the delivery of modules. The unit of measurement in a semester system that is commonly accepted in academia is the Semester Credit Hour (SCH) (Wellman, 2005). Each credit hour translates to an hour of classroom instruction with two hours of independent studying, typically spread over a 15–16-week course (McMillan & Barber III, 2020).

Studies have found limitations to the semester system in tertiary education in the 21st century (Esgate et al., 1996; Maqsood, 2019; Rummell, 2015; Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003; Wlodkowski & Westover, 1999; Zafar & Iqbal, 2008). For instance, Wlodkowski and Westover (1999) compared the outcomes and experiences of students who participated in an intensive program with those who participated in the traditional semester program. Intensive courses, also known as time-compressed or accelerated courses, are rigorous individual studies that aim to achieve maximum learning progress in a short period (Scott, 2003). The researchers found that those in intensive programs led to better retention rates and higher levels of students'

satisfaction. However, they noted challenges with ensuring academic rigour and quality within the intensive program.

The student demographic details have shifted with growth in non-traditional students. To accommodate the demand from non-traditional students, some universities that follow the semester-based system have been offering non-standard length courses during the semester breaks (DeVeney et al., 2015). Yet other universities have begun to offer time-compressed/ accelerated courses (Tinto, 2012) to not only meet the student demand and address enrolment challenges, but also to ensure student success (c.f. Daniel, 2000).

A semester period may range from 14 to 16 weeks long, whereas a time-compressed course may range between 4 and 12 weeks. The semester credit hours are usually maintained as those for a standard 16-week course. These time-compressed courses aid in increasing revenue for the universities while also providing the students and staff members with flexibility (Holzweiss et al., 2019; Lutes & Davies, 2018).

The origins of the time-compressed or modular scheduling are accredited to Colorado College and date back to 1955, under the then Colorado University President, Louis Benezet (Brooks, n.d.; Freeman et al., 2020; Hayward, 2023; The Block Plan on Vimeo, n.d.; The Story of the Block Plan: The Podcast - Colorado College, n.d.). It is a unique approach that deviates from the traditional semester system. The Block Plan structure, as it was termed then, was such that students would only take one module at a time during a block with a duration of three and a half weeks. Students would be fully immersed in the module during the block as they engaged in active and experiential learning.

The Modular System

Modularization is a method of delivering courses in a shorter and more concentrated time frames such as up to three modules in two to four weeks, instead of the traditional semester-long format. It has been adopted by many universities around the world for various reasons such as flexibility and choice, effectively responding to the needs of employers, encouraging more efficient use of resources and boosting opportunities for curricula breadth (French, 2015).

In many cases, the modular system is offered in addition to the traditional system. Some universities pursue whole programs exclusively as a modular system, as in, for example Lynn University, Randolph College (USA) (Gilde, 2023), Victoria University (Australia) (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021) and Quest University (Canada) (Warren, 2023). There are considerable

variations of the modular system with different structures. In this context, one rendition of the modular program is the unit of Montana Western Block Plan, during which students take one class at a time for 18 instructional days (three-hour class /day) within three and half weeks (McCall et al., 2020). Another is the Colorado College Block plan, which consists of eight blocks per academic year, with each one also lasting three and half weeks. Students take one course per block, meeting three hours per day, five days a week. Classes are small, interactive, and experiential as they also take advantage of off-campus study opportunities such as internships, study abroad programs, and field trips, among others.

The modular system also has its benefits and shortcomings, depending on a number of different factors. Some of the major benefits of modularisation include coverage of a larger amount of content in a short period of time. One problematic issue is that students undertake an unusually large number of assessments to measure each small credit-bearing unit and need to carefully juggle and manage their summative assessment loads across several concurrent modules (Jessop & Tomas, 2017; Tomas & Jessop, 2019). This can lead to fatigue, frustration, information overload as well as reduced depth and quality of learning.

Modularization at Midlands State University (MSU)

Universities in Zimbabwe had been following the semester-based system with two semesters in a year, where each semester was approximately 16 weeks long. Recently, universities have shifted completely to a modularisation/modular scheduling for both the conventional and visiting modes of entry. A change from the semester-based system in terms of registration of students is minimal.

Students still register six modules at the beginning of the semester for both modes of entry. Although the contact number of hours for lectures did not change, the semesters were split into two quarters each, where each quarter is four weeks long. In each quarter, students, from both modes of entry, attend classes of three modules. However, the conventional students attend lectures throughout the 4-week block whereas the visiting students attend a 1-week block. Assessments continue to be done during their respective blocks with examinations taking place at the end of each quarter during week 5.

Theoretical Framework

Tinto's (2012) theory of student success influenced and guided the work in this study. Tinto described four conditions for student success: (a) expectations, (b) support, (c) assessment and feedback, and (d) engagement. The theory

emphasizes the importance of clear and consistent expectations stated to students by their lecturers as their behaviours is shaped by their perceptions of what is expected of them. Tinto further argues effective engagement as the most prominent attribute which enables students to interact with their peers and their lecturers socially and academically.

To ensure student success, the intensive structure of the modular system necessitates implementation of Tinto's four conditions. Thus, this framework provides a comprehensive lens through which to explore the experiences of university students and lecturers in a modularization system, which may present both challenges and opportunities for student success. Whereas modularization allows student's deeper engagement and focused learning, its intensity could be a barrier to the support system.

Statement of the Problem

Midlands State University (MSU) implemented the modular system in 2023. However, no study, as far as the researchers are aware, has explored the experiences of students and lecturers with this new system in their learning and teaching. Thus, exploring the university students' and lecturers' attitudes to the modular scheduling format and its perceived benefits and challenges is important. As students and lecturers are key university stakeholders, their experiences are of considerable importance to ensure that the modularisation system meets their needs. Gaining insight into how they are experiencing the modularisation system in the early phase of implementation is crucial as it allows for tailored adjustments to the modularisation system offering practical interventions for improving the models and teaching designs. This study intends to contribute to the existing literature on innovative teaching and learning initiatives, particularly on the still limited but growing literature on modularization system in universities.

Research Questions

The following specific questions of the study led the research process, in conjunction with Tinto's (2012) four conditions for student success: (a) expectations, (b) support, (c) assessment and feedback, and (d) engagement:

1. What are the benefits of the modularization model in learning and teaching as experienced by university students and lecturers?
2. What are the challenges of the modularization model faced by university students and lecturers ?
3. How can the modularization model be improved to enhance the learning and teaching experiences of the university students and lecturers?

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed to explore the experiences of university students and lecturers with the modular system. The approach allows for a deep exploration of the students' and lecturers' experiences, perceptions, and attitudes towards modular scheduling, providing rich and detailed data that can inform future educational practices (Creswell, 2014; Mayoh & Onwuegbuzie, 2015).

The target population for this study comprised university students and lecturers in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Midlands State University, Gweru Campus. It was conducted during a period of online learning, when both the students and the lecturers were mostly absent from campus. The Social Science Faculty Email Group was used to invite potential participants from four departments, i.e., Applied Psychology, Governance and Public Management, Human Resources, and Community Studies which attracted six participants. A survey tool, LimeSurvey, was used to draw six students. Semi-structured interviews were also employed.

Data Presentation

Demographic Profile

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of the student participants, and Table 2, those of the lecturers. Table 1 indicates that the participation of the students was evenly distributed with regards to gender and level of study and while all were conventional students, one was a visiting student. Of the lecturers, all of them were entry level, with two male and two female

Table 1: Student Participants Demographics

Pseudo name	Sex	Level of study	Mode of Entry
Tatenda	M	2.2	Conventional
Grace	F	4.2	Conventional
Siya	M	4.1	Conventional
Thanks	F	2.1	Conventional
Tinotenda	M	1.1	Conventional
Thobile	F	1.2	Visiting

Table 2: Lecturer Participants Demographics

Pseudo name	Sex	Occupation
Marbel	F	Lecturer
Cain	M	Lecturer
Isabel	F	Lecturer
Abel	M	Lecturer

Challenges of the Modularisation Model as Experienced by University Students and Lecturers

The student participants shared that they did not consistently find the four conditions of success, i.e. expectations, support, engagement, assessment and feedback, with the introduction of the modularisation system. In general, the students' reports were not consistent with the commonly cited forms of pedagogical practices conducive for modularisation. The students also reported as being overwhelmed with the transition to modularisation. The findings are presented below, in tandem with Tinto's (2012) four conditions of pedagogical success.

Expectations

All students expected the modularised semester to ease their workload and time management which appears to be based on misinformation or lack of information as presented here.

"I once heard those at UZ (the University of Zimbabwe) talking about it...but for them they do one module then write the exam, do one module then write... so I thought it was going to be the same for us...but no we are doing 3 modules...We didn't receive communication from MSU." (Thanks, 2.1)

"Expectations were not communicated through the right channels...we were just told 'okay fine, you are doing 3 modules for a month then write exams...they posted on our portals, but nothing was communicated directly..." (Siya, 4.1)

"We were just given a summary that we are doing 3 modules in 6 weeks then write exams...to facilitate our own learning..." (Grace, 2.2)

Assessment

Tinto (2012) posits assessments as a valuable tool for countering attrition by enhancing engagement, motivation, and academic success. For instance, assignments keep students actively involved in coursework, enhancing engagement, which is a major predictor of dropout rates.

Participants in this study however revealed that they received the same type of assessments as the semester-based mode of teaching. These were described as typically consisting of individual assignments which are usually in the form of essays, in-class tests, group assignments and/or presentations. However, the frequency of the assessments had increased beyond the students' abilities to cope with the entailing workload.

"...typically we are given in-class tests, individual assignments and presentations, ...a lot more presentations this time actually... and before modularisation, most lecturers would have delegated one member to present our work but this time, every member had to say something..." (Tatenda, 4.2)

Some students also expressed frustration as they only received their feedback towards the time of examinations or not at all.

"...aaah some lecturers they just put a mark...then you find it's a fail ...but it's too late because I have to write exams the following week... it was really tricky ...it's difficult because I don't know what I did wrong ...at least some lecturers leave detailed comments...not just a mark ..." (Thobile, 1.2)

For visiting class students, the negative impact of the delayed feedback was exacerbated by the limited time they had for lectures before sitting for examinations.

"...sometimes you get an assignment back and you are shocked by the low mark... then you are worried because you have a few days before exams..." (Tinotenda, 1.1)

"...yes one of my lecturers gave me feedback in all my assignments, presentations and in-classes...and it helped me to correct my mistakes and improve my understanding of the topics...but other lecturers didn't give feedback and it stressed me out because this whole thing of modularisation needs one to have a quick and solid grasp of the concepts ...otherwise you fail your exams..." (Grace, 2.2)

One student expressed frustration due to the lack of feedback:

"...you know...at one point I frequently tried to contact Mr X (Name anonymised) to ask him what I did wrong ...umm....why I got such a low mark or how I was supposed to tackle the question....but I never got hold of him...aargh it's annoying you know... at least give me feedback because ...4 weeks is very short..." (Thanks, 2.1)

The observations above are also consistent with the findings from the interviews with lecturers as they reported challenges with providing adequate feedback. Lecturers also expressed that assessment and feedback varied unsteadily among their classes. They noted that these erratic variations as dependent on the module size and complexity, and also on the restricted time available in modularised system.

“...some of my modules are very large in terms of content required to be covered ...you see previously we had over 5 months to cover a module but now it's just about 4 weeks...and you not only have to prepare teaching and assessment material, but you have to mark...over 90 assignments...there is just no time...so you just mark...” (Cain, lecturer)

“Yeah imagine having to give 6 or so assignments to a class of 100 students and marking and writing comments on each of those...its time consuming and exhausting...” (Isabel, lecturer)

Overall, the data shows that assessment and feedback received by students from their lecturers were neither consistent nor adequate. There were variations within and between lecturers with some lecturers not providing feedback or providing it too late, which the lecturers attributed it to time limitations that came with modularisation.

Engagement

The study also explored students' levels of academic engagements with lecturers as well as their peers in their learning process. Participants stated that they found it difficult to develop relationships or interact with most of their lecturers both inside and outside classroom.

“For me it was difficult to interact with some of my lecturers as they would not come to class as often as they should have...there is also the issue of lecturers skipping classes in the first week...so I don't know who is at fault because they do not communicate with us to say 'I want to come but I can't come because of other commitments or something'...” (Tatenda, 4.2)

“...some teachers don't come to classes...for example there is this one teacher whom I only saw maybe 2 times in the month so I don't really know him...” (Thanks, 2.1)

“...aaah most of them they are not available after class...I tried WhatsApp and emails but no luck...so I interact with them in class only ...” (Tinotenda 1.1)

Further, a marked reduction in the students' participation in university activities such as clubs due to the increased academic pressure was reported:

“It's a lot of pressure,...3 modules in 4 weeks...then we write 3 exams in one week...it's a lot...since the modularization began, I haven't been able to do any extra-curricular activities because I am always so tired ... there is a lot more to do now...” (Grace, 2.2)

The interviews with lecturers indicated that they made efforts to keep students engaged with content rather than nurturing lecturer-student relations due to standing practice and limited time limitations in class.

“...to maintain boundaries we have to keep our distance...some students do not communicate appropriately. They are too informal especially on WhatsApp... but besides that we have very limited time as we are teaching and marking assignments at the same time. Then we have research on the other hand... there's very little time to attend to all students individually” (Marbel, lecturer)

“Some students call you or send messages in the middle of the night despite having communicated your contact hours...I do give academic assistance outside of class as well to those who contact me during my contact hours” (Abel, lecturer)

“I try to create a warm but stern relationship with my students in class... sometimes we laugh at shared stories or jokes but not too much because I don't want them to see me as their equal...[or else] they won't respect you...” (Cain, lecturer)

Overall, the observations indicated that lecturers had very little time to actively engage with students, which left them feeling somewhat alienated. This was exacerbated by the lecturers' tendency to keep their distance to maintain their relationships with students formal and professional. However, as indicated under the subheading of assessment above, students seemed to cover the gap through more robust engagement amongst themselves facilitated by the increased group and presentation assignments.

Support

Student participants expressed their support experiences of the modularised sessions, as one noted here:

“...we had to get help from other departments like the Counselling Department ...some of us failed to cope with the pressure... you would find that in a day, 8am-4:30pm, we have marathon lectures...then assignments ...” (Siya, 4.1).

Another student also expressed her orientation experience:

"I attended orientation at the start of the semester...or quarter which was run by the university for all new students and I got to meet other students and staff. We were told about the various departments that we can get support from ...for example the Counselling Department and the Library..." (Thobile, 1.2)

Benefits of the Modularisation Model as Experienced by University Students and Lecturers

Assessment

Overall, the observations indicated that participants shared their mixed feelings towards changes in assessment methods. Some had positive sentiments and attitudes towards the opportunities as this one:

"...presentations were a lot this time around so everyone had a chance to present on a concept we had learnt... I benefited a lot from this because I am a shy person I now learnt to speak in front of people more..." (Siya, 4.1)

Engagement

Although students' experiences of academic engagement were impacted by the inability to connect with their lecturers in a largely negative manner, they however felt that they were more active in their learning due to the modularisation. They reported taking a more participatory and active role in their learning compared to what they used to do during the semester system.

"You know as a student, if you know you are doing 6 modules in 5 or 6 months, you relax and your level of engagement is reduced... now you have 4 weeks to do 3 modules, so you are pushed to be more engaged..." (Siya, 4.1)

"... for me, my level of engagement is higher than before modularisation because I have to make sure I understand the concepts ...topics ...so yeah it's very high now..." (Tatenda, 4.1)

In summary, students and lecturers expressed considerable challenges due to a variety of factors such as the restricted time due to the nature of the modularisation model. Assessment and feedback were both negatively affected as both students and lecturers reported inconsistencies in classroom feedback with variations between lecturers and within lecturer. However, peer engagement was found to have increased as a coping mechanism to the reduced academic support. In essence, students stated that they benefitted from the increased opportunities of participation and active engagement in their learning.

Strategies to Improve the Teaching and Learning in the Context of Modularisation

Students proposed a few strategies to improve the teaching and learning outcomes in the context of the modularisation regimen operating at the Midlands State University. Some called for greater use of infographics in the lecturers' presentations such as drawings, pictures, videos or audios to enhance comprehension, retention, and critical thinking. As one noted:

"We are often given loads of text material which is hard to understand. It could be good if lecturers provided videos, or voice notes, on WhatsApp or Google classroom to aid the understanding of the notes and handouts given in class." (Thobile, 1.2)

Another one pointed:

"Powerpoint presentations given by lecturers are better with more visualisations than being full of notes." (Tinotenda, 1.1)

The students also called for greater use of social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Google Classroom to enhance learning. They pointed out that these platforms were widely used and found them particularly useful during the COVID-19 lockdown periods. Some expressed dismay that they had suddenly been dropped in favour of an all-out modularisation system.

"Lecturers don't like to use WhatsApp, which is a very cheap and otherwise convenient way of communicating with students, even for providing course material. It worked very well during the lockdowns, and can work even better if used properly and professionally under the modularisation system." (Tatenda, 2.2)

"If lecturers fail to attend their lectures for some reason, it would be prudent if they supply the material expeditiously in the form of videos and or lecture notes on Google classroom." (Grace, 4.2)

Importantly, the students also called for lectures to incorporate blended learning in lessons. As one observed:

"Online learning gives students operating under a modularisation system greater access to classroom material whenever it's most convenient for them." (Thanks, 2.1)

As another one noted:

"Blended learning allows students to attend to some of the classroom tasks using online platforms, saving time which is a scarce resource under the ongoing

modularisation system. It can be useful especially for us visiting students.” (Thobile, 1.2.)

Discussion

Both lecturers and students experienced challenges with the modularisation model as it was not always possible for them to experience the four conditions conducive for student success, as advanced by Tinto (2012). As they join tertiary institutions, students hold varying beliefs about their abilities to successfully complete their studies. Returning students also maintain certain expectations of the teaching and learning process within the tertiary learning environment, perhaps based on past experiences or from information gathered from various other sources.

Students in the current study expected that their academic burden would be minimized under the modular system due to the reduced number of modules needed to be taken at a time, and also expectations to get feedback on time. When these expectations failed to materialize, they sought academic support from their lecturers, though in vain, owing to their heavy workload.

What is immediately apparent in these observations is the unbearable pressure on both the students and the lecturers, which leave both groups unsatisfied, burnt out and/or disillusioned (Zimmermann, Rösler, Möller & Köller, 2018). For instance, Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2005) observed that lecturers tend to give out a multiplicity of assessments halfway through modular teaching blocks with consequences of overburdening the students and diminishing their capacity to give proper grading and feedback on time.

The observations suggest that when lecturers feel overwhelmed with both teaching and assessment, they resort to giving group assignments which are delivered in class in the form of oral presentations. This may explain why the students reported an unusually large number of group assignments/oral presentations, for which they were usually given timely feedback, suggesting that group assignments reduce the workload for lecturers. Whereas this may give a reprieve to the lecturers, and enable the full coverage of module material, this may also tend to overburden the students and even reduce the quality of the material delivered in class. However, if there is an advantage to this and similar approaches, it is that they enhance learner autonomy (Nardo, 2017), which saw the students owning their learning more.

It is also important to note that the lecturers maintained other forms of assessments such as essays and in-class tests to which the students reported delayed or offered little feedback. Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2020) advanced that successful implementation of the modularised type

of instruction goes in tandem with regular assessment and timely provision of feedback on students' performance. The inconsistency and delay of the feedback were a major challenge for students which often led some students feeling stressed and frustrated. Further, the lack of feedback left the students with a sense of confusion in terms of where they stood and the direction of their academic success. And yet, studies show that a lack of feedback to students on their quizzes, tests and assignments was often a reflection of overburdened lecturers, due mostly to unbearably large class sizes (Hernández, 2012).

Bailie (2014) found that students benefit from knowing their lecturers' schedule for feedback in advance. Constructive feedback provided in a timely manner gives students the impetus and capacity to work on required adjustments and seek assistance from their lecturer and /or peers. However, the current study reveals students lacking timely feedback and lecturers lacking adequate time to do so—the two main nagging challenges the modularisation system needs to address. Challenges that maybe faced by students in this pedagogical approach could be mitigated by the right support from lecturers and peers. The current study reported students as not coping with the overwhelming workload pressure and also not receiving adequate support from their lecturers while similarly strenuous demands are placed on the lecturers with this model of teaching as pointed out by Kops (2014) and Mckie (2022), who highlighted how such a curriculum usually tends to be packed and distractingly busy. Thus, this calls for lecturers to adapt their teaching methods accordingly and also secure training to deal with the different challenges that may come about with modularisation (Brown, 1992; Wlodkowski & Kasworm, 2003).

In this study students also expressed motivation to be actively engaged in their learning process. Some students highlighted the importance of attending all lectures as key to their understanding of the module content as corroborated by a study which found better attendance in block-scheduled modules (Swain, 2016). Participants reported that the intensity of the modular format of learning motivated them to attend each class, although Dixon and O’Gorman (2020) found contrasting results.

This study indicates that social engagement was limited to academic support due to fatigue. And this view is supported by Welsh (2012), who posited that the majority of both students and staff get fatigued due to the intensive teaching.

Despite these challenges, students called for a few strategies that can potentially be employed to reduce the challenges associated with the

modularisation system through, among others, enhanced use of infographics, social media platforms such as WhatsApp and Google Classroom, as well as blended learning. Infographics in education give textual knowledge a visual representation, increase comprehension, sharpen memory, and foster creativity and critical thinking (Naparín & Saad, 2017). With fast and ubiquitous advancements in technology, use of infographics can have a remarkable impact on students' educational life (Kaya-Hamza & Beheshti-Fezile, 2017).

Scholars have lauded blended learning as more favourable than either mere e-learning or face-to-face learning in so far as it can be used to blend the advantages of both the traditional learning approach and ICT supported learning (Ma & Lee, 2021; Tong et al., 2022). In essence, it has the scope for collaborative, constructive and computer-assisted learning, which can counter the effects of the fact-tracked modularisation systems of learning (Dangwal, 2017).

Conclusion

The study presented in this article was a phenomenological study on university students' and lecturers' experiences with the modularisation model through the lens of Tinto's (2012) four conditions of student success. The findings revealed that both students and lecturers had challenging experiences in their learning and teaching, with some limited advantages. Challenges posed include workload management, communication difficulties, and limited interaction. Advantages include enhanced student motivation, behavioural engagement, collaboration and counselling. This study has implications for educators and institutions who intend to pursue and enhance teaching and learning in the modularised model.

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