
University Students' Perceptions in Using Social Media for Teaching and Learning in the Midst of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the investigation of the use of social media for academic purposes by students at institutions of higher learning. This qualitative study seeks to explore university students' perceptions in using social media for academic purposes in the midst of the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and beyond. Convenience sampling technique under a non-probability sampling method was employed to select students from one of the rural universities in Limpopo Province of South Africa. Focus groups were employed as a data collection tool, and thematic analysis has been used as a method to analyse the data. Couldry's Practice theory and Uses and gratifications theory have been used as lenses for this study. The study revealed that few students are using social media platforms for educational purposes. Some postgraduate students use YouTube to access academic-related content. There are several challenges that students encounter regarding the use of social media for academic purposes. Such challenges include the struggle to integrate social media into the academic field. Students also highlighted the lack of support and encouragement from academics in using social media for academic purposes; poor internet connection; lack of internet data; and lack of training on how to use these platforms as academic tools.

Keywords: *Internet, social media, students, learning platform, COVID-19*

INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of post-matric education, almost all South African institutions of higher learning have been using traditional methods (contact mode) in delivering teaching and learning (Mgqwashu, 2017; Mpungose, 2020a). According to Waghid (2018, p. 4), "face-to-face learning is considered traditional and ignores students' experiences because it occurs in the presence of a lecturer presenting knowledge in a classroom, using traditional methods (lecturer-centred) and traditional resources such as textbooks, chalkboards, and others." Nevertheless, in the event of a challenge, such as student protests or pandemic outbreaks, these physical classrooms are inaccessible. It goes without a doubt that, on one hand, face-to-face learning affords real-time interaction amongst students and academics; it takes place within a

specifically allocated time, and it also affords quick feedback to students (Mpungose, 2020b). On the other hand, electronic-learning is education that takes place over the internet, also known as online learning. This is a concept that encapsulates any learning that takes place through technology (Anderson, 2016).

Moreover, Choudhury and Pattnaik (2020) emphasise that the description of e-learning develops with the advancement of the Web from Web 0 to 4.0. Accordingly, "the world was introduced to Internet-based learning with Web 0, which was a read-only site. Thereon, the Web (2.0) and Web (3.0) allowed real-time interaction and connected intelligence, respectively. We now witness Web 4.0 where machines and the human brain can directly interact" (Choudhury & Pattnaik, 2020, p. 2). The models of online learning, open distance education, and web-based education are all linked with learning

using technology. Rodrigues, Almeida, Figueiredo, and Lopes (2019) assert that these models share the mutual feature that they are a procedure of teaching which takes place between a student and an instructor and that they take place at different times and places, through numerous forms of material. Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) describe e-learning as the use of educational technologies to provide online access to learning and teaching materials. As a result, the importance of e-learning via the internet in 21st-century university education is undeniable, particularly for today's students who are digital natives (Bennett, Maton & Kervin, 2008). Likewise, Khoza (2019b) submits that online learning is proficient in making academic material available online through the extensive use of hardware technologies including computers, laptops, and smartphones, among others, and software resources including learning management systems and social media sites, among others. Teo (2019) describes social media as a conformation of activities that comprise socialising using texts, pictures, and videos. It is a mode of digital communication that allows users to interact, share, and arrange virtual rooms to circulate content through the internet (Pan, 2019). Thus, students are at liberty to access academic materials anywhere in the comfort of their own time, regardless of difficulties brought on by the pandemic outbreak.

Some scholars (Liu & Long, 2014; Nikoubakht & Kiamanesh, 2019) claim that contact learning is nonpareil and is the foundation of all institutions of higher learning, even if the present dialogue and technological insurgence propel the use of online learning. The latter scholars submit that there exists a challenge between face-to-face and e-learning. Other scholars (Anderson, 2016; Bates, 2018) submit that multimodal learning, which integrates online and traditional learning, is the way forward to permit students to learn and

access academic material according to their strengths and limitations. Nonetheless, there are compelling situations that can push students and academics alike to opt for online over traditional learning; this includes the Coronavirus pandemic in the context of this study. Accordingly, the World Health Organization (2020) indicated that Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) is a new virus discovered in the year 2019, which results in illnesses ranging from cold to more extreme sicknesses which could lead to death. The virus is transferred between people and animals. Some of the easy symptoms to identify include cough, fever, respiratory symptoms, and shortness of breath. The 2021 worldwide statistics by the World Health Organization (WHO) show that more than four million people died from COVID-19 complications. In other words, the pandemic has brought a serious threat to contact methods of learning globally, and South Africa is no exception.

After careful consideration and advice from health experts, WHO affirmed COVID-19 as a pandemic, and subsequently, everybody was advised to evade close contact with somebody displaying the symptoms (WHO, 2020). Consequently, the education sector across the world was forced to close. In the South African perspective, the president of the republic called on all schools to shut down and establish other modes to render teaching and learning online from March 2020 as a protective way to avoid infection (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2020). This measure triggered many questions regarding the practicality of e-learning, particularly in many former disadvantaged universities in the country, including the selected university, because of the magnitude of disparities in the South African setting.

Institutions of higher learning were forced to halt physical academic activities. Thus, students and academics alike were required to stay away from lecture halls,

and administrators, together with academics, faced difficulties in converting teaching materials into an online format within a few days or weeks (McMurtrie, 2020). Even though many institutions were not prepared, online teaching and learning were adopted. To effectively provide the online content, universities enhanced the adoption of learning management systems like Blackboard, Moodle, and other established websites and other methods of continuing with teaching and learning.

Khan, Ashraf, Seinen, Khan, and Laar (2021) submit that during a COVID-19 pandemic, people tend to spend much time on social networking sites as a way of avoiding being in contact with other people. Social media has become dominant and impacted the whole world in every facet, particularly students. Accessibility of the internet and social media is crucial to students at present. Since students are continuing with their studies under the new normal, through online methods, it is undoubtedly that social networking sites affect their academic life in one way or the other. Khan, et al. (2021) also note that the use of social media assists students in their academic performance through enhancing their skills in socialising, accessing, and sharing knowledge and information.

Social media as a medium of communication affords academics and students a platform to communicate and share study materials while observing the COVID-19 social distancing regulations as announced by the government (Vordos, Gkika, Maliaris, Tilkeridis, Antoniou & Bandekas, 2020). Likewise, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have spurred the rise in the use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs), the internet, and social media platforms for educational purposes, since it improves connectivity and affords collaborative opportunities amongst students and academics who have started to take advantage of these platforms (Islam, Laato, Talukder & Sutinen, 2020). With the

evolution of social networks and the ever-increasing online existence of many universities, students take advantage of live streaming services through social media where they attend classes and also keep in touch with their classmates and lecturers via online platforms (Abi-Rafah & Azzi, 2020). As a result, it is important to investigate students' perceptions in using social media for teaching and learning at a rural university in Limpopo Province.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced several sectors, ranging from social, government, and business institutions, to change the way they operate, and education sector was no exception. This propelled institutions of higher learning to adopt new ways of delivering teaching and learning to students. The use of ICT for teaching and learning started to receive more attention as multimodal learning was adopted. With adoption of Learning Management Systems (LMS) for teaching and learning being expensive and moving at a slow pace for the higher education sector, and with poor ICT infrastructure especially in rural universities, social media platforms as an alternative platform could be appreciated. This prompted the researchers to explore the students' perceptions in using social media for academic purposes. The study seeks to respond to the following questions:

- What are the university students' perceptions in using social media for academic purposes?
- Do social media provide an alternative as a platform for teaching and learning purposes?
- What are the opportunities and challenges in using social media for academic purposes?

REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE

The literature focuses on the integration of social media into education

and the use of YouTube and Facebook for educational purposes.

Integrating social media in higher education

The adoption of social media platforms into teaching and learning has attracted various scholars recently. In the new normal learning environment, social media has been regarded as the dominant platform for enhancing students' learning, facilitating communication between academics and students, and among students themselves (Castro-Romero, 2015; Sobaih & Moustafa, 2016; Manca, 2020). Literature shows that academics also use social media for socialising and teaching purposes (Awidi, Paynter & Vujosevic, 2019). Moreover, Klein, Junior, Barbosa, and Baldasso (2018) reported that YouTube, WhatsApp, and Facebook are the most used social networking sites for academic communication amongst academics and students. Manca (2020) has also revealed that Facebook and WhatsApp are the most used tools for various academic-related purposes in a higher education setting. Numerous scholars (Durak, 2020; Manca, 2020) have paid much attention to the extensive benefits of using social media at institutions of higher learning. Sobaih, Hasanein and Elnasr (2020) submit that these studies have appreciated the significance of social media platforms for academic-related purposes, including communication, virtual meetings, sharing of information, and platform for discussions among students and academics. Thus, Makafane and Chere-Masopha (2021) have highlighted several advantages of online learning, which include, amongst others, inspiring students and improving their self-esteem; improving the efficiency of teaching and learning; improving students' academic performance; assisting in creating virtual communities among students, enabling them to participate in group meetings and projects.

Sobaih, Hasanein and Elnasr (2020) also expose that social networking sites such as Facebook and WhatsApp have been effectively used to sustain formal teaching and learning at institutions of higher learning with a lack of ICT platforms and formal online learning management systems during the COVID-19 shutdown. The study reveals that some academics employed Facebook and/or WhatsApp as the main tools for academic interaction with students since online forums including Google meet, Google classroom, and Zoom were unacquainted to students since there was no proper training provided. According to Alalwan (2017), social media improves students' reading skills and subsequently enhances their general knowledge of a specific subject through their online group discussions. Moreover, Voorveld (2018) discovers that students who tend to participate in social media-based academic activities often perform better educationally than those with limited exposure.

Use of YouTube for academic purposes

YouTube is the most popular platform for user-generated content, with over a billion users (Camm, Russell, Xu & Rajappan, 2018). It is considered as a source of online material which can prove to be significant for teaching and learning. It has become more popular, especially amongst youth. The website can afford students access to daily videos that may help them improve their learning. The use of YouTube for academic purposes benefits both students and academics (Alkhudaydi, 2018). Some of these advantages range from enticing students' attention, focusing students' attentiveness, generating interest in the subject, improving content assertiveness; establishing connection amongst students; nurturing creativity; reducing anxiety in students about the so-called difficult subjects; and lastly, increasing understanding amongst others.

YouTube is considered the best platform for digital students and the Net

Generation (students raised since the introduction of the World Wide Web) and is an effective method to get into their aptitudes and learning styles (Buzetto-More, 2015). The use of online platforms for teaching and learning has been considered to improve dialogue, cooperation, and engagement. YouTube videos should be incorporated into learning management systems and integrated into lectures and tutorials (Maziriri, Gapa & Chuchu, 2020). Also, they can be used to encourage self-learning and tutoring. Although some scholars have discovered that YouTube is effective in improving full online courses (Jordaan & Jordaan, 2017). Some have submitted that this platform is most effective when used to supplement instead of replacing the hybrid or traditional ways of delivering lectures (Maziriri, Gapa & Chuchu, 2020). As observed by Almurashi (2016), students can positively gain from watching authentic academic-related videos when studying (Almurashi, 2016). Using YouTube videos as complementary material affords students with a good understanding and knowledge of their studies. Furthermore, YouTube academic videos have the potential to bring enjoyment to the learning process.

Use of Facebook for academic purposes

Several scholars have investigated the efficiency of social media platforms for enhancing students' learning in higher education (Cuesta, Eklund, Rydin & Witt, 2016; Awidi, Paynter & Vujosevic, 2019). Literature indicates that Facebook is considered an essential platform for enhancing students' performance (Lambic, 2016; Bowman & Akcaoglu, 2016), improving students' engagement, and enhancing students' awareness of their learning experience. Likewise, Lambic (2016) submits that there is a notable connection between the students' performance and the utilisation proportion of Facebook for academic purposes. Nonetheless, Klein et al. (2018) exposed that Facebook has for a long time been

linked with students' poor academic performance. Students' excessive use of Facebook has negative consequences for their academic performance (Junco, 2015). However, with careful and deep exploration, the use of Facebook mainly for academic purposes has produced positive student learning practices.

Studies have exposed that Facebook contains features to support academic activities by enabling collaboration, interaction, vigorous participation, and material sharing in the virtual environment (Bowman & Akcaoglu, 2016). Students have started to enjoy more independence, self-learning, connectivity, and socio-practical learning prospects within their learning environments. Facebook also promotes communication and actively involves students in their own learning process through sharing comments, asking questions of their peers, and academics, among others (Sarapin, & Morris, 2015).

Integrating Facebook into academia permits content to be easily available for students, which improves the quality of learning. It is significant for academics to harness students' engagement in academic activities that work in concurrence with their educational philosophies and learning objectives. It is undoubtedly that online learning permits flexibility and variation to students; but, these elements can be achieved when courses are constructed in asynchronous manner (Giannikas, 2020). The study also shows that Facebook is progressively being considered as an academic tool, as it is assumed to critically increase communication and improve collaborative learning within a virtual learning environment.

It is worth noting that Daher and Shahbari (2020) acknowledged that to improve the use of social media for academic purposes, academics and policymakers at institutions of higher learning should include instructional support, ICT support and students to help in

integrating various social media platforms into teaching since they are considered to be effective in creating cooperative learning settings and experience among students to improve their academic performance (Manickam, Selvam, & Ahrumugam, 2020). Academics should deliberate on technologies and platforms that are best for their students since it has been established that employing diverse ICT tools, including social media, is appreciated by many scholars. Avila and Lavadia (2019) revealed that Facebook, Twitter, Messenger, and Instagram are amongst the most used social networking sites by students.

Theoretical framework

For this study, two theories are used as lenses, namely Practice theory and uses and gratifications theory.

Practice theory

Nick Couldry's practice theory aims to eschew previous debates over the political economy, the philosophical nature of the media, and active versus inactive viewers (Couldry, 2004; Fourie, 2010). Instead, the theory aims to focus on the media as it is used in daily life and how this practice serves to organize and anchor other human practices (Couldry, 2004). According to practice theory, media research should start with what people are doing with media and what the media are essentially doing with people across a variety of institutions and viewpoints rather than with media texts or institutions (Fourie, 2010). Some of the key questions tried to be answered by this theory are as follows:

- What does it mean to be a part of a media-saturated world?
- What exactly does the term mediation imply?
- How does the spread and infiltration of media affect traditional life and culture in Africa and other developing regions?

Practice theory is relevant to this study because it explains the use of media, which in this study relates to the students' use of social media for academic purposes. The answers to the above-mentioned questions fulfil the purpose of this study, which is to explore university students' perceptions in using social media for academic purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. Answering these questions may help with the purpose of this study, which is to explore students' perceptions in using social media for academic purposes at a selected rural university in Limpopo Province of South Africa.

Uses and gratifications theory

The use of the internet and social media has been studied using the uses and gratifications theory (Musa, Azmi, & Ismail, 2015, and Malatji, 2019). The primary functions of the media are, among other things, to inform, entertain, and educate (Khalid & Ahmed, 2014). The Uses and gratifications theory (UGT) explains the concept of media consumption, which describes why people use certain media and the gratifications that result from usage and access. According to this theory, media consumption is purposeful, and users actively seek to meet their needs through a variety of uses. Personal identity is explored, challenged, adjusted, or confirmed using media content. The media meets the need for information about the near and far worlds and circumstances. Students, as media users, learn about issues that may affect them directly or indirectly (Fourie, 2007). Furthermore, Fourie (2007) emphasises that the central questions of this theory are: what do people do with media and how do they use media? The answers to these questions are relevant to the study's purpose, which was to discover how students use social media for academic purposes, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data were gathered to obtain answers to the questions, and the results were presented in the results and discussions section.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

Design

An exploratory research design within qualitative research methodology was adopted for this study. The study explores the students' use of social media for academic purposes during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. The focus was to investigate their perceptions and attitudes towards using social media for teaching and learning. The exploratory design is associated with phenomenology that focuses on qualitative investigations addressing a phenomenon particularly in the field of social sciences (Goddard & Melville, 2012). The study is qualitative since (rich) data from the students' perceptions and knowledge on the use of social media for academic purposes was collected through the focus group discussions.

Population and Sampling

Students from a selected rural university in Limpopo Province participated in this study. The convenience sampling technique, also known as accidental sampling, was used under the non-probability sampling method to sample 48 students who participated in focus group interviews.

The convenience sampling technique is defined by Remler and Van Ryzin (2015, p. 12) as "a situation in which a researcher takes advantage of a natural gathering or easy access to people who can be recruited into a study". Because the nature of the study affects all students at institutions of higher learning, this sampling technique is appropriate for this study. The study was open to any student, regardless of age, gender, or field of study.

There were 26 (54%) males and 22 (46%) females, indicating that the number of males was marginally higher than that of females. Nineteen participants (40%) were between 21 and 25 years of age, followed by 17 (35%) who were between 26 and 30 years of age, and 12 (25%) were between 31 and 35 years of age. The respondents were comprised of 23 students (48%) who were doing their third level of study, 17(35%) were doing their second year, and 8(17%) were postgraduate students.

Data Collection

Focus group interviews were employed as a data collection instrument to explore university students' perceptions in using social media for academic purposes. A focus group interview is a data collection instrument for understanding people's behaviour and attitudes (Wimmer & Dominick, 2014; Creswell, 2013). Six focus groups were administered for this study. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown regulations, the data were collected virtually through Google meet to avoid contact and the risk of contracting the virus. With the permission of the participants, sessions were recorded to ensure precise data collection. Sessions lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was adopted to analyse the data. Six steps of thematic analysis were employed to analyse the data (Braun & Clarke, 2013; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). These steps include familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining themes, and writing up.

Ethical Considerations

This study is part of the bigger study, which was approved by Turfloop Research Ethical Committee (TREC) and the clearance certificate number was allocated as TREC/57/2019: PG. Researchers ensured that the confidentiality and privacy of the

participants were protected through the use of codes instead of their names.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysed data below has been divided into themes based on the thematic analysis conducted for the study.

#Theme 1: Use of social media for teaching and learning purposes

Students expressed their support for the use of social networking sites for academic purposes. YouTube is a popular social media platform for academic purposes. This is user-generated content, in which people create audio and video content and share it with others. Students stated that they occasionally watched academic-related videos on YouTube to supplement what they had learned during their lecture sessions. Some participants stated that YouTube videos were extremely helpful, particularly when it came to calculations and formulae.

This is how some of the participants expressed themselves:

"I think YouTube is very helpful. Normally I collaborate the information I access from Google, together with the one I watch from YouTube, especially when I'm studying Mathematics" (Respondent C3).

"Yeah, watching videos in the internet helps a lot, for me most of the things need calculations, so demonstrations from YouTube help a lot" (Respondent D6).

"Sometimes I don't understand what the lecturer was saying, so I get the clarity by watching related videos on YouTube. Facebook can work because friends can exchange information which they have accessed from different sources" (Respondent E2).

#Theme 2: Enhancement of dialogue and sharing of information and knowledge

Participants also acknowledged that social media helped them to share academic content amongst themselves. Social media help students to create virtual communities, sharing the same values and having the same goals to achieve academically. Students also indicated that since the university adopted remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic, some of the lecturers have adopted the use of WhatsApp to conduct their lectures. Students, together with lecturers, have created the WhatsApp groups to communicate any academic-related information, share lecture notes and other notices with students. This enables students to join sessions in the comfort of their own time and place. Students can also revisit and listen to what has been covered at a later stage. One of the participants demonstrated his/her view in this way:

"In our class, we have created a WhatsApp group chats, sometimes our lecturer would upload voice notes for us and we would just listen and also use them for revision" (Respondent E2).

These results are supported by (Van Den Beemt, Thurlings & Willems, 2020) who described social media as user-friendly platforms, particularly when equated with some learning management systems such as Blackboard and Moodle. Social Networking Sites were described as collaborative and easy to use for interactions and discussion amongst students.

However, participants have also indicated that they have not yet adopted the use of Facebook for academic purposes. According to one of the participants, it is difficult for them to adopt Facebook for academic purposes because the strength of Facebook is based on the number 'friends' one has on the platform.

Some studies (Gupta & Irwin, 2016) took students' different behaviours into consideration. Students who spend more time on Facebook achieve lower grades compared with those who spend less time on this platform (Junco, 2015). Thus, it is worth mentioning that proper self-regulation in using social media is needed, and it can lead to less distraction, which ultimately contributes positively to students' academic performance.

#Theme 3: Challenges of using social media for teaching and learning

Participants have highlighted integrating social media into education as one of the challenges they face when adopting these platforms for educational purposes. Some of the participants indicated that it is difficult for them to trust the information they get from YouTube and other online platforms because the materials are not prescribed by their lecturers. They also indicate that most of their lecturers have not adopted the use of social media platforms for educational purposes.

"It's minimal, because we use books and PowerPoint slides, and we interact with our lecturers, and again, the material on YouTube is not prescribed materials for reading and teaching and learning within your school" (Respondent B4).

"With YouTube, it's very difficult because someone is reading or interpreting for you, for instance, I can give an example, yesterday I wanted to number my assignment, so I went to YouTube and then I wanted the tutorials which took so long" (Respondent A5)

Manca and Ranieri (2016) reported that some of the academics at institutions of higher learning are worried about the effects of social media on education. Users should strike a balance between private use

and professional duties when using social media for academic purposes. In addition to the lack of experience and of acquaintance with social media, students are worried about the lack of integration regarding social media and academia (Goktalay, 2013). Students feel that academics lack experience in integrating social networking sites into the existing online learning environments.

#Theme 4: Recommendations on using social media for teaching and learning

Participants came up with a handful recommendations on how to maximise the use of social media for educational purposes. Some of the students highlighted that academics should familiarise themselves with social media platforms to easily integrate them into education. Students also indicate that the university should prioritise this by creating YouTube channels for all the courses and training academics on how to use them. This will enhance the sharing of information in different formats, including YouTube videos. Some of the respondents expressed their views in this manner:

"I would suggest that our lecturers should familiarise themselves with these platforms like your Facebook, Twitter and other social media networks, and start taking them seriously, then it will be easy to use them for educational purposes" (Responded D5)

"I think our lecturers should record videos and create maybe YouTube channels for different courses, then upload videos for us. These videos would be there forever and would just visit the channel whenever we want to revise or maybe something we didn't understand during the session" (Responded C3)

"The university should be this serious, I mean most of us are always on WhatsApp, Facebook,

and YouTube, meaning we can easily attend classes without excuses” (Responded F6)

It is worth noting that students appreciate the use of social media for academic purposes. Some of the highlighted factors include the sharing of information, easy discussions amongst students and academics. They acknowledge that the presence of social media could be useful provided the university takes a firm position on introducing these platforms as official learning platforms. Thus, students also highlight that it is difficult to trust information from social media platforms if academics have not issued a directive or adopted these platforms for educational purposes. Makki and Bali (2021) submit that institutions of higher learning should provide training courses for both academics and students in using social media for academic purposes and improve the infrastructure of the universities' agenda.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has found that students acknowledge and appreciate the presence of social media for educational purposes. Students seem to be acquainted with using certain social media platforms like YouTube and WhatsApp for academic purposes. The study discovered a lack of proper integration of social media and academia. Many students have pages on various social networking sites, but few have used them for academic purposes. The study did discover, however, that the few students who used social media for academic purposes benefited from their use. Few participants viewed academic-related content on YouTube. These students benefited from additional lessons made available through social media. Students also stated that they enjoyed watching academic-related content on YouTube because they were not limited by time, space, or the volume of content available online. Those students also stated that they

perform better academically since beginning to supplement the content they received during lecture sessions with content from social media, as opposed to when they relied solely on the content received in class. Nonetheless, the study also discovered that the university has not taken advantage of social media availability to close the gap that has been created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Students highlight that most lecturers are not well conversant with using social media for academic purposes. Thus, there is a need for proper integration of these platforms into education. With the world already grappling to cope with the 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR), the use of advanced technology and media platforms for academic purposes should be taken into consideration if academia is to continue playing a significant part in the national and global economy.

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