PANDEMIC DISRUPTIONS TO ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: A DREAM DEFERRED?

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic and the shift to emergency remote teaching (ERT) and online learning highlighted issues of social justice, pedagogical inclusion and epistemic access in higher education. The research underlying this article analyses the complexities of access to learning and the effects of the shift to ERT and online learning on the social justice agenda in South Africa, using the case study of the University of Johannesburg.

The article uses the conceptual frameworks of epistemic access, equity and inclusive pedagogy from the theories of Fraser (2008), Mbembe (2016) and Mgqwashu (2016). Pedagogic continuity and inclusion (Motala and Menon 2020; Menon and Motala 2021), hard-won by many institutions during the pandemic, will need to be sustained and secured as the world adapts to a "new normal" in higher education and other spheres of life.

Czerniewicz et al. (2020, 957) refer to the maxim "Anytime, anyplace, anywhere" characterising ERT as a "brutal underestimation of the complexities and entanglement of different inequalities and structural arrangements". Fataar (2020), Czerniewicz et al. (2020) and Hodges et al. (2020) advocate an alternative pedagogy that is "trauma-informed" and offers parity with the pedagogies that prevailed pre-pandemic.

The article concludes that the pre-existing conditions of deep inequality and inequities, and a highly differentiated higher education system with uneven pedagogical practices, were exacerbated by the pandemic. While we acknowledge the achievement of avoiding the loss of the academic year during the pandemic, we argue that it is important to learn lessons from the initial implementation of ERT and the fractures that it highlights in higher education. Heading into an uncertain future, the sector needs explicit equity-driven approaches to ensure pedagogical inclusion beyond physical and epistemic access.

Keywords: access, success, higher education, pandemic disruptions, COVID-19, emergency remote teaching, South Africa, social justice, equity

INTRODUCTION

The inequalities, inequities and asymmetries that characterise access to the South African higher education system have generated a substantial body of literature. While recognising the strides that have been made towards the goal of widening access, the literature asserts that barriers hindering access persist (Badat and Sayed 2014; Mncube, Mutongoza, and Olawale 2021; Cross and Motala 2020). Against the background of persistent structural inequalities in South African society, some see the pivot to online teaching and learning as "the future of higher education" and as the "new normal" (Essop 2021). Face-to-face education is, of course, no guarantee of high-quality teaching and learning; and information and communication technologies (ICT), when appropriately used, can unarguably improve the quality of teaching and learning at contact universities. There is, however, less evidence about the extent to which technology has advanced social justice in South African higher education; whether it has the potential to do this; and, if it has, how this will happen (Baijnath 2021).

This article draws on the seminal research of Fraser (2008, 16) who notes that "overcoming injustice means dismantling institutionalized obstacles that prevent some people from participating on a par with others as full partners in social interaction". Fraser (2008) constructed the "3Rs Framework" which locates *recognition, representation* and *redistribution* as the three factors underpinning a substantive form of justice, inclusive of the social and cultural, the political and the economic dimensions of injustice and inequality. A shift from conceptualising justice in terms of *what it is* to include *who it is for* was required. In the case of higher education, this has necessitated thinking through epistemic and epistemological access as the critical factors underpinning equity in teaching and learning.

EPISTEMIC ACCESS

According to Morrow (2009, 78):

> "Epistemological access cannot be supplied or 'delivered' or 'done' to the learner; nor can it be 'automatically' transmitted to those who pay their fees, or even to those who collect the handouts and attend classes regularly. The reason for this is that epistemological access is learning how to be a successful participant in an academic practice. In the same way in which no one else can do my running for me, no one else can do my learning for me."

Epistemic access is not about cultivating a university space that does the work of learning for students but is about removing obstacles that impede rich learning and engagement and developing strategies to support students in their educational journey. Already a major concern

in the pre-pandemic "old normal", universities developed systems and structures to accommodate the barriers to learning that result from a deeply unequal and asymmetrical apartheid (and post-apartheid) education system. In these circumstances, it is limiting to see access purely in material or administrative terms (Morrow 2009). As the "new normal" became a reality, new challenges to epistemic and physical access were encountered because of the shifts required to continue teaching and learning. "Physical" access has been framed as access to campus itself; during the pandemic, this shifted to physical access being determined by proximity, permission to access campus and whether and how access to the digital space of the university resulting from the pivot to online learning was made possible.

THE PANDEMIC, ERT AND INEQUITY

The outbreak of the pandemic in 2020 and the subsequent lockdown restrictions abruptly disrupted higher education teaching and learning (Motala and Menon 2020). Enabling continuity of learning was a priority, with contact universities rapidly turning to ERT. The resulting exclusion of many students from teaching and learning reflected the stark disparities in socio-economic conditions as learning shifted to the home. As Osman and Walton (2020) note, "the online turn illuminated and amplified the existing inequalities in South African society, with the poor, marginalised, precarious and under-resourced disproportionally experiencing its fallout". For impoverished black working class and rural students, online distance learning cannot provide opportunity or success "when students study on sporadically working laptops in unstable Wi-Fi hotspots, with power outages and in congested, noisy home environments" (Osman and Walton 2020, ...). During the pandemic, "the pivoting to online made visible the invisible, or ignored manifestations and mechanisms of inequality", with commentators expressing the hope that the "wake-up" call provided by the pandemic will reshape "the intersections of equity, inequality and teaching online for the better" (Czerniewicz et al. 2020, 2).

To be able to continue the academic year, universities had to act quickly to migrate to ERT and there was insufficient time to consider critical factors such as students' digital fluency, access to devices and bandwidth (Crawford et al. 2020; Motala and Menon 2020; Motala and Cross 2020; Mncube et al. 2021). The shift to ERT and online learning assumed that academics and students were digitally competent and had sufficient access to devices for optimal learning. While noting that technology could be exclusionary, Motala and Menon (2020) describe the extraordinary measures that one university took to enable teaching and learning. However, although it provided devices, data bundles and other aids to enable teaching and learning, the physical and socio-economic sites of learning were beyond the control of the university. Against

this background, academics worked to develop inclusive pedagogical practices – a steep learning curve – as they embraced technology.

ERT narratives which refer to the "pivot" in higher education have reflected on the mechanical precision with which universities made, or failed to make, the move. What these narratives do not make overt is that, although universities had business contingency plans premised on anticipated events, in the case of the move to ERT the approach needed was akin to turning a large vessel in a narrow waterway with limited ability to take account of the contextual pressures, forces and mechanisms on which this relied. The pandemic prompted academics' rapid adoption of online technologies with the aim of ensuring pedagogic continuity.

Reflections on the effects of these sudden changes must include discussion of the extreme nature of the sudden disruptions, the implications for access and success and whether issues of inclusion and injustice were further exacerbated. Just as the pandemic resulted in unforeseen aftershocks in society, so too there were ramifications for higher education; job losses and economic insecurity were a direct consequence, in a country already ravaged by inequality and economic stagnation (Bhorat et al. 2021). These conditions coalesced with a higher education landscape where student success and throughput continue to be skewed by socio-economic status (Van Zyl 2016). Despite increased physical access to higher education, success remains an abiding concern.

How valid was the assumption that the only possibility was to move all teaching to ERT? With the benefit of hindsight, and although there may have been other, if limited, possibilities for contact learning institutions, ERT was the only workable solution. The premise was that, equipped with laptops, access to data and online teaching, students would be able to successfully engage in learning. How the normal signals of teaching and learning interactions, such as the non-verbal cues of confusion or comprehension or the ability to simply raise one's hand, would take place bedevilled the pedagogical encounters. There were some assumptions about ERT which began to equate to the full teaching and learning experience. Conceptions of access to and success in higher education in the period became linked not to the key indicators of student engagement with learning but rather with their interactions in the online space, mediated by a variety of technologies.

One of the advantages of the period can be seen in the reorientation of university teaching and learning and support functions which extended beyond their prior and ordinary ranges of use and into new and complex interrelated functional areas. Developments created a path forward for universities in which the "support" and "academic" functions were aligned so that activities which served the same end were better integrated and more effectively supported

student life. However, while the shift to ERT solved one problem and created a semblance of normality in terms of teaching and learning, there were multiple trade-offs. In Robert Frost's poem *The Road not Taken*, the speaker chooses between a well-travelled and a less-travelled road. For universities during COVID, there was only the less-travelled road.

Addressing the equity gap has been a priority in South African higher education since the advent of democracy and there has been progress in expanding access to historically under-represented groups as well as putting in place interventions that can help students to succeed (Van Zyl 2016; Essop 2021). This priority has been framed in higher education policy as the "crucial social purposes" (Menon and Castrillon 2019) of higher education in society: producing critical and responsible citizens; addressing the development and economic needs of society; contributing to the production of new knowledge; and progress in public and intellectual life. Social justice and combating injustice are integral to the realisation of these social purposes.

In responding to the pandemic, universities had to ensure that students had access to laptops and tablets, data packages and equipment. There was also a need to support students with food parcels and vouchers for themselves and often their families (UJ 2020); for students who would otherwise have lived in university residence with access to meals or to support networks that could share meals and other necessities, the transition to ERT was therefore not only about shifting to a different learning environment. It was also a move to an unanticipated and precarious financial and personal situation.

Issues of physical access were paralleled by those of epistemic access; physical and social barriers compromised students' ability to learn and engage, not least because they were no longer able to make use of supports such as libraries, information services and writing centres. As Gleason (2018) has shown, these can be powerful elements of diversity and inclusion policy. The combination of synchronous and asynchronous learning (teaching and learning taking place together or separately/individually) reflected the diversity of students' and teachers' academic lives when outside the structured space of the university.

While institutions acted in various ways to overcome these differences, the rapid shift to online teaching and learning complicated these efforts (Zhu and Liu 2020). Once students were supported to participate, the relational challenge of pedagogic inclusion emerged. How could teaching and learning through ERT also ensure that diverse students, living and learning in unequal home environments, were included in the negotiation of knowledge through these new modalities? While ERT held the potential to democratise participation (for example: through noticeboards and virtual polls), it also showed up the many fault lines of exclusion: direct, such as access and quality of devices and network, and less immediately apparent, such as digital

literacies (UJ 2020).

Universities' choice of technologies to address the sudden need to provide ERT also played an important role in diminishing or sustaining barriers to learning. It is here that epistemic access and equity dovetail with the notion of pedagogic inclusion. Inclusion is not only about attending to the specific but widening the scope of the general or universal (Stentiford and Koutsoris 2021). In countries such as Cameroon (Beché 2020) and Ghana (Agormedah et al. 2020), interventions such as televised classes, chat-based learning, posting course-packs and notes and baseline technology such as Unstructured Supplementary Service Data (USSD) services could be used to support the transition to ERT by offering learning, resources and information at reduced cost and complexity.

Amir et al. (2020) found that lecturers and educational planners had to consider an array of issues in deciding which platforms to use to continue teaching and learning under ERT conditions, as well as the potential barriers to entry for students and staff. In Bangladesh, this meant recognising that data costs and internet speed would be a hindrance for many students, especially those in rural areas, with the result that lecturers opted to use Facebook social learning groups as a feasible alternative, both for the platform's zero-rating options as well as its ubiquity as a social network in the country. Lecturers had to find new ways to maintain students' interest and deliver the depth of content using a new platform. Landa, Zhou and Marongwe (2021), writing on the experience of two rural universities in South Africa's Eastern Cape province, argue that students in rural or peri-urban settings had additional learning constraints such as poor ICT and physical infrastructure (roads and electricity) and low economic status.

By considering the breadth of student experience in both the design and content of changing learning spaces, particularly under crisis conditions, it was possible to take new directions in the scholarship of teaching and learning that have broadly transformative potential.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The research underlying this article is located in this context where epistemic access and success, equity and inclusive pedagogy are increasingly urgent priorities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, generating new teaching and learning modalities, practices and pedagogies critical to future educational development (Le Grange 2020). Research since 2020 has drawn attention to fault-lines in access and success highlighted by the pandemic. As indicated above, these include access to devices, data, the internet and reliable electricity. Added to these are challenging home circumstances, uneven support from universities and mental wellness (Bishop-Monroe et al. 2021; Nasir, Ramli, and Som 2021; Motala and Menon

2020).

This research follows earlier work (Motala and Menon 2020; Menon and Motala 202) on the experiences of the transition to ERT at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and, more broadly, South African higher education. In those articles, it was argued that the gains made through the rapid adoption of new and emerging education technologies and practices must be seen in the light of how this shift overlaid existing inequalities and challenges in higher education. Ouma and Kupe (2021) argue that public higher education should advance the public good; contribute to re-imagining a new society and its sustainability; be responsive to the diverse and multiple needs of the economy and society; and tackle the technological, environmental, and social disruptions of the 21st century. In their analysis of the cuts to the budget allocations for higher education in 2020-2021, Ouma and Kupe show that these cuts were made because of reprioritisation due to the pandemic. The infrastructure allocation for universities was reduced by R500 million while the block grant was reduced by R382.59 million or 1.07 per cent (South African National Treasury 2021). These reductions have massive implications for the higher education system that is already constrained financially.

The pandemic provided a critical moment in which to examine the relationship between technology, social justice and teaching and learning and particularly the extent to which technology can be leveraged to promote a more socially just and inclusive higher education. With education offering the "most consistent lifeline out of poverty, in our society as in many others" and university education offering to many "an opportunity to break out of the low income and low education cycle" (Van der Berg 2013, 2), it becomes even more pressing to understand the many and varied ways in which technology may both undermine and enable students' prospects of success.

Instrumentalist views on ERT and online learning have it as a success. Academics saw the online mode as limiting their pedagogical interactions and engagements. However, as they had to contend with additional administration and increasing workloads, it is not clear how far their reaction to ERT was influenced by the harshness of the pandemic itself as lockdown, social distancing, physical distancing and other terms entered our lexicon. More also remains to be learned about students' use of ERT as a mechanism of contact and interaction in ways that they may not have done while on campus.

Inequalities between institutions, which both mirror and transcend their apartheid and post-apartheid origins, meant that the transition to ERT was context-dependent and had limitations that intersected with the challenges faced by students and staff (Mncube et al. 2021). Following the model of Design: Enhance: Optimise, O'Keefe et al. (2020) produced a resource (*The Faculty Playbook*) to support university staff to shift towards ERT in response to the

pandemic, where institutions moved from immediate implementation of ERT through to a process of fine-tuning and sophisticating those initial offerings. They argue that ERT is distinguished from other teaching and learning modalities by its haphazard and often unstable nature where staff and student support is limited, changes are *ad hoc* and sometimes reactive, trial-and-error guides the planning and design process and there is little room for developing a nuanced response to the needs of a diverse student population and a staff cohort with varying familiarity with learning technologies (O'Keefe et al. 2020). By contrast, online learning (or blended learning, which combines contact and online modalities within the design of a course) is characterised by organised, well-designed and clear principles, activities and structures.

While institutions were able to develop cohesive structures to oversee the implementation of ERT, drawing on local and international frameworks, guidelines and best practice, equity barriers were an essential challenge to overcome. Stability in implementation is therefore not only about what institutions put in place but also what staff, students and researchers are able to achieve in the context of their own resources and resource limitations. Where these emerge from legacies of structural inequality and discrimination, there is a moral and a practical imperative to ensure appropriate supports that address the problems arising from the new conditions (Czerniewicz et al. 2020) and to secure "participatory parity" (Leibowitz and Bozalek 2016). By framing and identifying subjects of injustice and, by extension, affirming their status of belonging to the space in which they seek justice, the intention in this article is to broaden the understanding of what institutions need to do in order to dismantle barriers to equity.

DECOLONISATION OF THE CURRICULUM

The work of Mgqwashu (2016) and Mbembe (2016) on decolonisation of the curriculum, highlighted by the South African student movement of 2015, is part of the debate in higher education that emphasises the interrelation between epistemic access, equity and pedagogic inclusion and how this continues to exclude marginalised students. The array of issues raised by students at the time, from material challenges such as access to residences, laptops and books, to the nature of knowledge and the curriculum itself, points to how universities are constituted as an ecology of interweaving processes and relationships that are not divorced from the features of the societies in which they are located (Mbembe 2016).

For Mgqwashu (2016), at least two forms of decolonisation of the curriculum should be understood: the curriculum as *context* and the curriculum as *praxis* (the processual and ongoing nature of transformation and negotiation, inclusive of diverse voices and responsive to the existing and potential contours of exclusion). Understanding the curriculum in context enables

universities to consider how the education that students receive may reproduce "unequal social relations" (Mgqwashu 2016, n.p.). At the level of *praxis*, Mgqwashu argues for the importance of creating the conditions for democratising and disrupting the *status quo* of how teaching and learning take place.

For Mbembe (2016), this includes balancing and responding to the changing nature of the university within the global knowledge economy where, he argues, measurable outcomes are traded above more substantive (and harder to measure) indicators of quality, relevance and redress at the different levels of university operation. Drawing on Fraser's (2008) work, Mbembe argues that implementation of steps towards equity and access still fall short of securing a sense of belonging and meaningful participation of marginalised students in universities in ways that affirm their humanity and the epistemic value of their life-worlds (Mbembe 2016). Fataar (2020) has pointed out that the pandemic presented a novel opportunity to engage this challenge.

METHODOLOGY

The data informing this qualitative case study derives from open-ended interviews with 15 senior academic staff from a range of disciplines, from seven faculties and with direct management responsibility for teaching and learning at UJ. The research drew on the rich data on participants' views on ERT; their experiences and challenges as academics during the pandemic; and their observations on the future of teaching and learning. It is acknowledged that the academics' views are not representative of the entire faculty but derive from their specific environments and university contexts as academic leaders. The interviews took place online, in three focus groups.

The university's response to the pandemic and lockdown was rapid and multi-layered and focused on ensuring that the academic year would not be lost. A detailed account of the "new normal", in the form of a case study, reflects on the sequence of activities, actions, policy shifts and progress at UJ as it navigated the transition to ERT (Motala and Menon 2020). In examining the consequences of the pandemic and the impact on higher education's response, distinct phases can be discerned. These begin with the initial rapid shift to ERT in March-July 2020 which coincided with the first semester and was followed by a second semester (July–December 2020) when ERT was implemented with more planning and drawing on key lessons from the first phase. By 2021, the university was using more cohesively planned, hybrid models of teaching and learning; these were largely online but included some limited face-to-face interactions for practicals and other essential activities that could not be successfully carried out online.

The period post-2020 has allowed for reflection on and refinement of strategies in relation to the academic project. Using UJ as a research site of enquiry and with the required ethical clearance and consent of the participants, the researchers probed pedagogical and social justice issues in relation to the impact of the pandemic on teaching and learning. The questions posed were:

1. How did the transition from face-to-face to ERT go in 2020 and to blended teaching in 2021?
2. What were the challenges in ERT in terms of curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment with reference to specific disciplines in the pandemic peak phase?
3. Were there major gains and new learnings that can impact on the way teaching and learning is conceptualised going into the future?
4. How has the pandemic shaped your planning for teaching and learning for 2022; what will you do differently in the faculty?

Focus group discussions were recorded and analysed according to themes relating to the research questions. These were underpinned by theories of pedagogical continuity, epistemic disruption and social justice in higher education.

ANALYSIS OF THE DATA AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The transition to ERT and blended learning

The uncertain and *ad hoc* nature of ERT has been noted earlier in this discussion and it is useful to reflect on how lecturers were able to "steady the ship" so that teaching and learning to proceed while also engaging in an ongoing process of reflection, redirection and planning. This process was especially complicated as the political, economic and medical dynamics of the pandemic were still unfolding. In reflecting on ERT in the midst of the pandemic, one academic highlighted the dilemma of academics and students in terms of the emotional trauma. What is revealing is the students who "disappeared off the radar" with consequent disruption to their teaching and learning experiences. This accentuates the precarious conditions that affected access to learning:

> "So, I think last year we lost a few students who went totally dark, and we spent a lot of time trying to figure out where they were, where they went, why they did it and they just fell off of our radar entirely. But I think we put so much effort into finding those students and helping those students ... I think this year we might not have really taken into consideration that our students are also very

exhausted and anxious. If I just speak about my own experience, I'm feeling quite flabbergasted with the amount of our colleagues that we've lost and that has had an impact on me, and I think we need to also remember that our students might be in the same in the same boat that they've lost a lot of their friends and family members. That layer of uncertainty, worry and heartache is something that we shouldn't forget."

Landa et al. (2021) found through their research that some university lecturers were concerned about the transition to online teaching and learning due to their own lack of familiarity with the tools and platforms in use. Developing digital literacy was important for staff and students alike, meaning that any examination of the "transition" must also take into account staff experiences of having to migrate to a vastly different world of teaching so that learning could continue.

At UJ, the institution's focus on the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) meant that work was already underway to incorporate blended learning into the courses and modules on offer and there were dedicated services to support lecturers and students in the use of computer and information technologies (UJ 2020). Despite this, there remained mixed attitudes to the use of a blended approach before the pandemic struck. The discussions with the academics revealed the following views:

> "Our department had not done any blended learning prior to the lockdown. I had done some training with our staff on how to create PowerPoint videos and how to create tutorial videos ... at the end of 2019. In 2020, I'd contracted that ... at least one of their lectures ... had to be a recorded lecture or a blended lecture. That was like one class not a module, just a class. I remember everyone was pulling their hair out because they didn't want to do this. Then of course the lockdown happened. So, I personally was in a fortunate position in that I taught the first term of last year, and I taught it fully blended, so I pre-recorded all of my lectures."

> "So, I think our initial plan with the first three weeks of lockdown we were very optimistic that it would only last three weeks. I don't know what we were thinking at that stage, but we said alright, let's focus on the theory. We use Blackboard but we did not really engage with our content on Blackboard and so it became a tool to disseminate information and not necessarily a teaching tool. So, that had to be learnt quite quickly ... and then obviously the lockdown went on and on and we realised that we cannot then not do the practical component. So, there were, I think various strategies, to be able to assist our students."

These respondents indicate that readiness for the shift to ERT was not uniform. Staff readiness was impacted by the extent to which the department or faculty had incorporated blended learning into the existing programmes. It would be incorrect to assume that the response to, and level of skills for, online teaching/learning were homogenous. While training and workshops were provided as part of the initial transition to ERT (and at a more refined level as blended learning became "the new normal"), this was occurring alongside a more informal and personal process of adapting to a different ontological reality for teaching and learning that displaced

existing and established modes of practice.

The notion of a "learning curve" was highlighted in the data, with staff needing to participate in increased professional learning and curriculum planning that incorporated available and emergent learning platforms and resources. As described in Amir et al. (2020), often the tools that faculty planned around turned out to be incompatible with what students had available, meaning that adjustments regularly needed to be made to expand the opportunities available for learning and to find effective ways to track that this was taking place.

Harnessing existing support services on offer was essential to this transition both because it offered students and staff the necessary resources to navigate the change and because it provided the entire institution with touchpoints to access standardised and specialised instruction in the different aspects of ERT and later blended learning models (UJ 2020). Landa et al. (2021) argue that the effectiveness of institutional communication and support services became acutely important to the overall success of the transition to ERT because of the potential of these services either to increase participatory parity or to confuse and further alienate students.

Challenges of ERT

While communication was crucial to the successful transition to ERT, the implications for teaching and learning remained at the core of lecturers' work. Challenges were experienced at the level of curriculum, teaching and learning and assessment, with faculties and departments adapting in a variety of ways. This was especially complicated for those courses with mandatory practical components, whether work-integrated learning, laboratory sessions or practical classes where specialised equipment and resources were needed and were not easily accessed from home.

> "I think the third term for students and staff was extremely heavy because the students not only had doubled lectures in addition to the other subjects that they take, but we were all teaching double. Some staff ... were teaching four classes a week, so it was very intensive."

As it became evident that the pandemic was just beginning, completing the 2020 academic year became urgent. This increased the workload for students and staff as they worked to make use of the time remaining. Solutions were found to ensure that deep learning continued, with a clear acknowledgement that a focus on theory and rote learning would be unsatisfactory and would leave students at an educational disadvantage.

> "How do we make a jewelry piece by not having access to the equipment or the resources?"

"Staff picked up and figured it out and moved on and some were using Zoom, or Collaborate, some used Teams and some people taught entirely on WhatsApp using just text. They would have a WhatsApp group with the whole group and would use voice notes and they share a PDF or something like that ...."

"... students couldn't access campus and they weren't able to access other biokinetics practices (in Health Sciences) where they could go to get their hours. So, that was quite a major issue that needed some huge intervention, not only from the faculty in the department but also with the professional bodies ... what we tried within the Biokinetics domain was the use of very limited telemedicine. So, we would have online sessions with patients and then get the patients' permission to get the students to observe what the biokineticist was giving the patient in terms of the exercises and correcting the form and function and all of that online. That was something that we tried in order to ensure that we enhanced the online environment as much as possible, but of course that cannot take away that actual face-to-face contact with the patient. Learning those soft skills, working with a qualified biokineticist where you know you have the opportunity right there and then to ask questions."

Communication with professional and statutory bodies and professional communities was integral to ensuring that knowledge-practice gaps would be limited. Students requiring work and practicum placements faced challenges as social distancing compromised practical blocks and existing curriculum planning. Different solutions were trialled and refined. Social Work students conducted some practical work through peer-to-peer WhatsApp video calls and the department designed a protocol for technology-mediated counselling and social work to enable it to offer the skills and capacities for students to complete their training inclusive of new counselling modalities. *Ad hoc* solutions were found to ensure that students had experience of internships and fieldwork to sufficiently ground their theoretical learning.

Assessment practices

Assessing student progress online emerged as another challenge. Staff were increasingly able to find novel ways to address the limitations although they noted that reduced opportunities for assessment compromised their ability to track student progress effectively:

"We cut the numbers of assessments, we usually have two assessments per term per module and we pretty much cut all of that back to one which I think eased the workload, but I don't think it's in the interests of students because most of our assessments are our assessment for learning but more than just assessment for marks."

The response above highlights that lecturers were aware of the changed learning environment and that it was not only encounters with expert knowledge that students lost but also the ability to connect and learn through their peers. The individualisation of teaching and learning in the spatial settings of lecturers' and students' homes made it important to reconstitute the space of

learning ontologically as the basis on which epistemic inclusion could be developed. As new contours of inclusion and exclusion developed in the online space, staff needed to seek out new pedagogical strategies to offset the physical distance and disruption of the epistemic community of the classroom and, as Fataar (2020) describes, the sociality of the pedagogic encounter. The following section considers this in more detail.

Gains and lessons learned

The impact of the shift to ERT on student participation was of critical concern to staff who noted that despite an overall improvement in online attendance there was a tendency for students to fall through the cracks without the routine and structure offered by physical class attendance.

Increased efforts were made to draw these students back into the learning space but it was recognised that there needed to be awareness of the fatigue and anxiety that students and staff shared in their personal experiences of the pandemic. Other respondents described a high level of stress, exhaustion and burnout among staff as well as the emotional impact of the loss of colleagues and relatives. This shared experience served as a valuable point of connection as lecturers came to understand the personal and systemic challenges that students were encountering in the course of their education:

> "We'd always thought we were student centred but ... I think this has forced us to think far more about the student as a person and how we create flexible learning spaces."

Another lecturer added:

> "I also missed the energy in the room, the levels of energy that you don't get from the online space. That energy is something that I couldn't quite mimic in the online space, and I really missed that."

Two of the main critiques of ERT emerging from the data are 1) that exclusion is physical, technological and social and 2) that effective pedagogical tools for successful learning cannot emerge without being appropriately tailored to context. As the university entered 2021 and hybrid learning became a more settled reality, the institution's focus shifted to addressing the frames of exclusion that emerged and those contextual factors that acted against inclusion and epistemic access. As an academic from the Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture said:

> "Our best-case scenario is to be back in the studio, so if you need to do a painting or make a chair or a jewelry piece or a garment for that matter. You need to be able to make that and to have equal and fair learning happening to all our students, who do need access to our facilities. We've ... built

those facilities to be able to accommodate a range of skills and knowledge transfer. So, [what] I hope is that we can incorporate a lot of the lessons that we learned with regarding doing some things ... we found that in some cases our students became a lot more resourceful and learning independently than they did in the past. We hope that what can be a lesson learned that we could take forward is that there is a lot more self-directed learning that can take place."

Balancing the different learning styles and needs of students entailed recognising that, under a range of circumstances, epistemic access was predicated on physical access to the facilities available at campus, whether dedicated spaces in which to work, specialised equipment or guided practicals with lecturers. Even as addressing deeply rooted inequalities remains a challenge within universities, the potential for inclusion and equalising the learning experience can also only, paradoxically, be unlocked by the ongoing process of bringing diverse experiences, needs and learning opportunities together so that personal and social development occurs in tandem with the process of formal education. The frameworks described by Fraser (2008) and Novelli, Lopes, and Smith (2015) are relevant here: new processes of redistribution, representation and recognition needed to unfold for the university to address and manage teaching and learning through ERT and hybrid learning. A significant opportunity emerged to address existing frames of pedagogic and epistemic exclusion while developing an understanding of the ways that the boundaries between inclusion and exclusion could shift under future circumstances.

Planning teaching and learning for the future

As hybrid learning cemented as a new reality, focus also shifted to how limited, but available, opportunities for contact learning could be used in ways that maximised learning. This included shared practical learning sessions, seminars and small group classes. At the core of these approaches was the recognition that campus time provides a valuable opportunity to focus on the practical and experiential aspects of learning; for theoretical knowledge to be consolidated; and for students to make use of the resources and facilities that support their learning:

> "I think that in the end it'll just mean a more dynamic overall experience that will be more effective. A combination of the two going forward and we just we kind of pick and choose what we feel is best for us in our own specific situations, and that this will be a beneficial thing in the long run."

This view was balanced by another respondent who flagged that, if hybrid teaching and learning are to continue, given the disparities in living and learning conditions there will be a greater need for emotional and psychosocial support for students.

"I think you know the mental health and even the physical health of our students is something that's perhaps lacking in terms of the provision of assistance that we can give to our students, and it might be something that we need to really pay a lot more attention to."

"Now we realise there's all kinds of other ways that we can facilitate learning some through online contact, self-study and self-directed learning. I feel like our repertoire of learning or pedagogies has really grown and become more flexible, and I think that we have also really made a shift in our paradigm around student centeredness .... Our students should be able to kind of check into a learning opportunity when they have the time and in the right headspace according to their program and calendar, not just according to ours. So, I think those sorts of shifts in the way that we think about our role as educators that I really hope that we can continue to take that into the post-COVID era."

A meaningful shift is identifiable in these responses. Reflecting on the changes to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic, lecturers saw, as Fraser (2008) did, the importance of the *how*, *who* and *why* of teaching coming to occupy greater focus than the *what*. In line with Morrow's (2009) views, they saw addressing the barriers to social justice, through pedagogy and practice, becoming the thread by which epistemic access could be realised.

The University of Johannesburg took the opportunity to reconstitute the notion of the university in terms of its role in a changing national and global context where decolonisation and the 4IR are twin imperatives at the intersection of the changing contours of inequality and exclusion. Fostering pedagogic inclusion requires deft management of a growing variety of learning tools, spaces and needs, with students developing the capabilities that support their personal and academic growth without losing out on either the richness of the learning material or the opportunities for learning interactions that consolidate what they know. This is what one lecturer described as "the next learning curve".

CONCLUSION

Presciently, Jensen warns of the cost of neglecting social justice and the responsibility that therefore devolves on HEIs (Jensen 2019). He argues that "knowledge divides", excluding the underprivileged from active roles in society, are more significant than "digital divides". "Higher education institutions are at the heart of knowledge creation and dissemination; it is therefore only natural that higher education takes an active part in shaping a knowledge society" (Jensen 2019, 53). Returning to Fraser's (2008) "3Rs Framework", which locates recognition, representation and redistribution as the three factors underpinning a substantive form of justice, epistemic and epistemological access must be considered the critical factors underpinning equity in teaching and learning. Access, without resulting success in terms of completion of studies, attainment of the desired outcomes and future prospects such as employment, further studies or similar achievements, will be meaningless.

A number of challenges persist in higher education. One is to determine whether, in terms of redistribution, the digital divide can be addressed on the scale required so that no one is left behind (Baijnath 2021). Redistribution in all its forms is critical to both access and success. A second challenge is to understand whether technology itself can help to mitigate existing disparities and in doing so promote progress towards a more socially just higher education system. Technology alone will not achieve either meaningful access or success. Thirdly, can pedagogies of equity, dignity and justice emerge in a context of persistent economic and social deprivation? How will universities prepare for what, it is to be hoped, will be a largely post-COVID-19 world and for the 4IR without relinquishing the big debates on decolonisation and the inclusion of multiple epistemologies in curricula and acknowledging the ontological foundations? Adapting their pedagogies to take maximum advantage of the opportunities presented by online teaching in the "new normal" may determine how the "spaces for learning" can be reshaped to make them more effective and better able teach for an "unknown future".

Locating pedagogies within these massive shifts, as both academics and students experience discomfort and unease, requires informed and pro-active responses at state, sectoral and institutional levels. The digital turn is inevitable and is sweeping higher education into its scope. It is essential that this is not uncritically adopted, running the risk yet again of reneging on the social justice agenda, making it yet another dream deferred.

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