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### EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS ON THE USE OF BLENDED LEARNING AND EMERGENCY REMOTE ONLINE LEARNING PRIOR TO AND DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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#### ABSTRACT

The study employed a qualitative research approach and emancipatory framework to explore students' experiences with blended learning and emergency remote online learning (EROL). Two data sets were collected from two projects using focus group discussions and semi-structured individual interviews. The findings highlighted that although technological advancement in universities increased access to information, the needs of the disadvantaged students remain overlooked. EROL and/or blended learning adopted by the universities did not address the fundamentals of access to teaching and learning for the disadvantaged, but focused on institutional needs and saving the academic year. The utilisation of blended learning prior to COVID-19 was excluding some students, and it was unclear how EROL was transformed to ensure that all students accessed education during COVID-19 induced lockdowns. There is thus a need for research to focus on opportunities for student technological advancement not only for ensuring access to education but also for meaningful service delivery during practice.

**Keywords:** blended learning; COVID-19; online learning; social work and students

#### INTRODUCTION

Emergency remote online learning (EROL) can be conceptualised as a response to the pandemic, when contact universities in South Africa and across the world were forced to adopt new ways of teaching and learning. According to Weeden and Cornwell (2020), universities shifted from traditional methods of teaching and learning to emergency online learning. Prior to the coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19), universities in South Africa utilised blended learning methods (such as Moodle and eLearning); however, the content was not taught online (via Zoom or Microsoft teams) as it was in the case of EROL. The adjusted strategies meant that the semesters were delayed as strategic planning was needed to accommodate the new

normal (Mncube, Mutongoza & Olawale, 2021), and to prepare for the implementation of emergency remote learning. Although EROL during COVID-19 promoted the use of technology in the educational sector, which is in line with the precepts of the 4<sup>th</sup> Industrial Revolution (4IR), the pandemic exacerbated inequalities in the already failing systems of higher education.

EROL impacted negatively on social work education and field practice. EROL was introduced at a time when different scholars were questioning students' readiness for blended learning, which was already being practised in South African universities before the COVID-19 pandemic. Some scholars indicated that, although reliance on technology is important when dealing with large numbers of students in social work classes (Simpson, 2015), the varying socio-economic backgrounds of students had an impact on these advancements (Dykes & Green, 2016). Mthethwa (2018) argued that poor students hailing from resource-constrained rural areas remained unprepared to cope with the technological pressures. Hence, the focus of this article is on exploring the experiences of social work students on learning how to use information and communication technology (ICT) tools before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, and ascertain how that impacted on their learning. Scholars such as Bozelek (2011), Crampton (2015), and Gray, Kreitzer and Mupedziswa (2014), highlighted the importance of engagement with South African students to develop alternative approaches to learning and knowledge acquisition through participatory learning and action. This research provided students with opportunities to reflect on transformation in social work education. The aim of the discussions was to create a friendly environment where students' voices could be heard. Guided by principles of equity and equal access, the focus is on the development of inclusive and contextually relevant coping mechanisms in social work education.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) & International Association of Schools of Social Work (2014) defined social work as a

*practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.*

The above definition locates the academic journey of a social work student within a critical, interactive and socially engaged paradigm (Ornellas, Spolander & Engelbrecht, 2018). The emphasis is on how students learn and whether the process facilitates engagement and dialogue. This means that social work education should be liberatory and students' experiences should be at the centre of their education. Several scholars who have recognised the significance of this launched an initiative for a transformed social work education (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Sewpaul, Osthus & Mhone, 2011). This article illustrates a need for blended learning and EROL, beyond the technological advancements, to ensure that teaching and learning are interactive, engaging and critical.

Online learning is not a new phenomenon in South African education. It has been implemented in contact or face-to-face universities as part of blended learning and is the only method of teaching for distance-learning institutions (Kajiita, Nomngcoyiya & Kang'ethe, 2020). However, during COVID-19 institutions that were accustomed to face-to-face methods of teaching and learning needed to implement online learning as means of saving the academic year (Kajiita *et al.*, 2020; Weeden & Cornwell, 2020).

Concerns can still be raised regarding blended learning in South Africa as students continue to experience challenges, given that issues of inequality have been at the forefront (Equality Report, 2018). Some scholars have argued that the institutions of higher learning have been reported as a mirror of these inequalities (Makhanya & Zibane, 2020; Makhanya, 2021). Blended learning has been known to be detrimentally affected by pedagogical issues, especially in social work courses, hence there have been calls for a decolonised curriculum (Makhanya, 2022). This is a key point, because South Africa remains entrenched within historically oppressive systems i.e. slavery, colonization and apartheid (Worden, 2011). Therefore, the education system should be a form of emancipation and a vehicle for transformation, allowing students to move towards equality.

Social workers are compelled to apply their minds critically as they work in environments with high levels of human suffering and social ills exacerbated by previous oppressive systems of education (Casimir & Samuel, 2013). For social workers to be effective in practice they need to acquire an emancipatory education to ensure that they maintain the standards of anti-oppressive social work principles (Dominelli & Campling, 2002). Education tailor-made for social work students should be emancipatory, empowering and offer human freedom (Dube, 2020; Freire, 1970; Gaddafi, 1975; Sewpaul, 2013). But questions about blended and online learning, given the documented challenges in South Africa, raise concerns about the application and effectiveness of emancipatory education.

Various studies have been conducted to examine the progress made in technological advancement in South African institutions of higher learning. For example, Mhlanga and Molo (2020) argued that South Africa has great excellence in the area of technological advancement, as became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Mahaye (2020) argued that online learning enhanced learning despite the physical distance between educators and students. On the other hand, in a study conducted in a rural South African university it emerged that professionals struggled with technological methods of teaching (Mncube, Mutongoza & Olawale, 2021). There are concerns about the effectiveness of socially distant methods and the ability of academics to advance students' understanding. Dube (2020) argues that rural students struggle to use online methods of teaching and learning because of the lack of resources. In Africa "only 24% of the population has access to the internet, and poor connectivity, exorbitant costs, and frequent power interruptions are serious challenges" (Tamrat & Teferra, 2020:2). While addressing the arguments about lecturers' understanding of the technological resources used prior to and during the era of COVID-19 are beyond the scope of this article, readers should be cognizant of these issues as they impact directly on the learning of social work students. Evident from the arguments above, there are differences among various scholars on online learning, the extent to which it offers equal access, and whether South Africa is ready

for this transformation. This article reflects on the discourses and experiences of students on blended learning and EROL. The goal is to analyse the impact of these two systems in social work education in South Africa.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

This study adopted the theory of liberatory/emancipatory pedagogy. Emancipatory theory is rooted in the work of Paulo Freire (1970). There are further contributions from various scholars such as McLaren (1995) and Nouri and Sajjadi (2014). Freire is considered the father of the liberatory pedagogy. His main idea on emancipatory pedagogy was centred on the idea that education should be transformative in the light of the struggles that students encounter as a result of past oppressive structures. The main focus of the theory of emancipatory pedagogy is on humanising society through education, creating a space where students become critical thinkers, hence the rejection of the ‘banking’ system of depositing knowledge into students (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). This article adopts the various building blocks of the liberatory pedagogy namely humanisation, critical conscientisation and rejection of the banking system.

The principles of humanisation entail that educators should assist students to find freedom against injustices, inequalities and racism, and break away from the image of the oppressor (Freire, 1970). Critical conscientisation requires students to learn not only about the sociological implications of oppressive systems, such as injustices, racism and inequality, but also to develop a critical awareness and adopt a stance opposed to authoritarian principles of governance (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). Gramsci (1971) conceptualised this process as transforming “common sense” into “good sense”.

The banking system of knowledge acquisition should be rejected in the quest to transform education. Freire (1970) rejected the notion of best-practice and technocratic approaches. Rather, he proposed content knowledge education, which is fundamental for students’ learning (Dale & Hyslop-Margison, 2010). This statement is the basis for the rejection of uniform methods of education that consider teachers as the experts. The banking system of knowledge acquisition not only undermines the students’ creative powers, but feeds into and serves the interests of the oppressor, be it policymakers, curriculum developers or the elite (Freire, 1970). Reflection on the modes of teaching and learning adopted was vital before and during COVID-19, i.e. whether students were viewed as subjects or objects in the education process.

The theory of emancipatory pedagogy allows one to understand how methods of learning (blended and online) within higher institutions can facilitate the process of knowledge development, critical thinking and praxis in social work education. It offers a space where students can critically reflect on their educational experiences, embedded in societal structures. The theory is thus crucial in understanding how social/structural systems influence the learning of social work students.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted at a university located in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, which will be referred to as Hibiscus University (HU) here. The first data set emanated from a broader study that focused on the (de)colonial experiences of African social work students in higher education. Although this broader topic does not relate to the focus of this article, it is the account of participants' experiences of blended learning that resonated with the current discussion. It was these findings that conveyed the students' perspectives on and experiences of blended learning (BL) before the COVID-19 pandemic. The data-collection methods used were focus groups and in-depth individual interviews. The data were collected in June 2018 with twenty-two (22) social work graduates. graduates,

The second data set was collected through semi-structured individual interviews in a study that explored social work students' experiences of EROL during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were collected in June 2021 from nine (9) participants who were doing their undergraduate degrees in the Social Work Department at a University during COVID-19 lockdown. Interviews were conducted on social media and online platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp, as well as in one-on-one office interviews.

Majority of participants came from disadvantaged backgrounds, only three came from middle class and attended multiracial basic schools. Participants ages ranged from 20 to 38 years old, they comprise of 11 males and 20 females.

Both studies obtained ethical clearance from the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Protocol reference numbers: HSSREC/000003191/2021 and HSS/0680/018D). A qualitative research method guided the collection and analysis of data for both studies. Although the two data sets were conducted for different purposes, the drastic changes in the findings regarding BL and EROL before and during the COVID-19 pandemic motivated the decision to advance the argument of this article. The data presented are based on the combined findings of the two studies but with two cohorts of different participants. Two groups of interviews were conducted and analysed to get a broader and more diverse range of interpretations and opinions.

The first study used both purposive and snowball sampling to select participants. Snowball sampling was used to identify prospective participants through referrals. This sampling technique focused on hard-to-locate participants (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Rubin & Babbie, 1993). Snowball sampling was ideal for social work graduates who were furthering their studies in other disciplines. Thus, the recruitment of participants for this study was not a straightforward process. Different professional networks, as well as peers, were used to help in the process of recruiting participants. The research participants for the second study were recruited through purposive sampling (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). Purposive sampling was undertaken by selecting participants who met the sampling criteria and who would provide information and insight into the research problem (Babbie & Mouton, 2001; Rubin & Babbie, 1993).

Focus groups and in-depth individual interviews were conducted after ethical clearance was obtained and consent was given by the participants. Once all the participants were recruited,

an information session was held where the aims and nature of the study were discussed, and the prospective participants were given a chance to ask questions before data-collection process began. Soft copies of transcripts are kept in a password-protected folder while hard copies are kept in a lockable cupboard in the office of one of the researchers. The data will be kept for a period of five years, after which the material will be destroyed by permanent deletion and shredding of hard copies.

Throughout the interviews, all the participants were respected and their anonymity was assured. The research participants were treated as subjects during the discussions rather than as objects of inquiry (Acocella, 2012). Their perspectives were at the centre of the study. The interview tool also created an environment that “gave a voice” (Zibane, 2017:6) to the participants and treated them as active agents in matters concerning their lives. Pseudonyms are used to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Thematic content analysis was used to analyse and arrange data. Thematic content analysis interprets data through identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within the collected data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic content analysis was used in this study to describe the data in relation to the research topic in rich detail by identifying patterns within collected data (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Emerging themes in the data were identified in the interview transcripts to facilitate understanding of the communicated experiences of the participants.

The interviews were conducted in both isiZulu and English. The choice of these two languages was based on the researchers’ first language and, more importantly, the first language of the participants, which was predominantly isiZulu. Practically, isiZulu was the dominant language during data collection. However, the transcriptions were written in English.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Social work by definition focuses on emancipation and empowerment. Thus, the training of social workers is structured to promote liberation, social justice and critical reflection. But the profession in South Africa also inherited the historical contexts of colonialism and apartheid, and higher education institutions throughout Africa are still trying to get rid of the injustices of the past. This is necessary for the true nature of the profession to flourish through inclusive, transformed and emancipatory education (Sewpaul, 2013; Sewpaul, Osthus & Mhone, 2011). Mbembe (2016) lamented that despite the transformative policies that allow the inclusion of all students in the new dispensations of higher education institutions, poor students that come from disadvantaged backgrounds still suffer from academic exclusion in South African universities, particularly with regards to online learning. For instance, participants in this study indicated that although some teaching philosophies, modules and other university activities reflected a positive attempt toward transformation, exclusions in the online and technological pedagogies of learning negatively influenced students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Participants thus expressed how pedagogical teaching methods and learning in education remained embedded in colonial patterns, with one consequence being that the interests of poor and marginalised students were neglected (Kreitzer, 2013).

The technological advancements encouraged by 4IR allowed schools of social work to redeem the academic programme during the years of the COVID-19 pandemic. Blended learning (BL) allowed education to be offered through contact learning and online lectures, but the COVID-19 pandemic meant that the entire content had to be offered online. The discussion of findings below focuses on participants' experiences with BL prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and their experiences of BL and/or EROL during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is to understand whether BL and EROL allowed for emancipatory pedagogy in social work education. Although other institutions adopted both BL and EROL during the COVID-19 pandemic, Hibiscus University – the study site – opted to adopt EROL only.

### **Participants' experiences of BL prior the COVID-19 pandemic**

Most students in social work education at HU come from disadvantaged basic education backgrounds. The use of technological tools during their learning was not a norm, but instead physical contact learning was the only means of teaching and learning. This was a result of the lack of resources and infrastructure at schools in poor communities (Maree, 2022). It thus made sense that participants coming from poor backgrounds appreciated contact class learning at the university more than online engagements. This was the traditional method of teaching, the norm even in their basic education. However, differences based on diverse basic educational backgrounds emerged during engagements with participants. This reflected the inequalities evident in South African society (Equality Report, 2018). The minority group of participants indicated that they did not encounter any hardship in their learning when the online component of BL was introduced and adopted. Those were middle-class students who had attended multiracial schools that were technologically well resourced. During the interviews some participants referred to the latter group as “*coconuts*” (a derogatory term meaning that they adopted the attitudes, values and behaviours of the middle-class white society than their African heritage). Generally, poor students who had been taught in the rural areas struggled with the use of technology, which made the online component of learning difficult for them. Landa, Zhou and Marongwe (2021) made the point that students from poor communities find it difficult to adjust to the use of technology in higher education. Those participants spoke of their learning experiences at the university as characterised by a sense of alienation in the classroom because of the learning barriers created by their lack of digital skills. This in turn led to poor or no class participation and understanding of content. The section below is a further reflection based on these experiences.

### ***Blended learning and the technological discourse***

The demand for quality higher education has increased the reliance on technology as a way of enhancing the academic progress of students and interaction with the university community (BrckaLorenz, Haeger, Nailos & Rouborn, 2013). Technology has become the main teaching and learning instrument in higher education institutions, and HU is no exception. Reliance on technology is important when dealing with a large number of students in social work classes (Simpson, 2015). Some students reflected on their academic improvement because of the inclusion of technological tools in their education. For example, although most of the participants complained about their struggle with IT technology because of their lack of prior training, a minority group of middle/upper-class participants who had attended multiracial

schools indicated that their prior exposure to and training in information technology was of great benefit to their transition to BL. One of these participants expressed herself as follows:

*In my high school, there were LANS and internet. It was compulsory for every learner to take a computer subject. There were so many computers in such a way that I would not stand in the queue for a computer as we are doing here at Hibiscus University. For me, there was nothing new when I came to university regarding computers and the use of internet. (Laughing) I knew my story. Instead, I felt like I come from the place of abundance (of computers) to the place of lack due to limited computers at Hibiscus University.*

On the contrary, poor students who came from rural areas remain unprepared to deal with such technological pressures (Mthethwa, 2018). In one of the focus group discussions, the participants reflected on how they were academically alienated in their first-year course because of their poor digital skills. Some participants expressed this through the following discussion:

*In high school it was only the learners doing commerce subjects that were allowed in the computer labs and they were trained on the use of computers. So, these learners had the privilege of having access to computers and developing IT skills.*

*What about the Physics class and others?*

*...They [teachers] did not allow us to attend computer trainings. So, I was not familiar with the computer. The worst part is that I was accepted and registered late here at Hibiscus University. So, I did not even attend the first-year students' orientation. I was honestly clueless.*

*Clueless about what? (Researcher)*

*About computers, LANS, use of the internet...*

*That's the sad part. Although the university accept students to register late but these students are not catered for in terms of orientation, use of LANS and what not.*

*Yes, and I was among those who were unfortunate. So, I registered around March. I registered manually at the Faculty office and no one told me what next... I knew nothing about mentors and obtaining information online.*

*I hear you; how did that impact on your learning? (Researcher)*

*...There was a lecture that I was supposed to attend in the morning, my first lecture. I heard students saying that it was cancelled. And I was like, why or how did you know it was cancelled? And they advised that I was supposed to check my emails. Remember I did not attend the Orientation, so I was clueless. I was saying to myself... where can I check emails? I did not know. I asked myself, what is an email my God...?*



*How or when did you discover about emails? (Researcher)*

*I asked around, asking people where I can check emails. They told me about the LAN and I was like what is that? So, like I had to learn all these things at the university and it was not easy. Getting into the LAN and not knowing anything about the computer. So, like the whole process was so difficult for me because I did not know how to interface with a computer. I literally had to learn to type at the university. I just couldn't master all the technological requirement until I literally just learned the typing and the computer from other students. So, I think that was the main challenge for me.*

*Mmh, I hear you and thank you for sharing with us. Did anyone have a similar or different experience? (Researcher)*

*I think most of us who come from rural areas had no computer exposure prior to the university, so it was difficult. But it was better for us who registered online during the registration period because mentors were there to assist us...*

*Everything was done on the computer here at Hibiscus University and that made things to be worse. I remember for my first semester when I got my assessment marks. For some results, I got 13 marks out of 100. And I was like, am I stupid or what...? I was not this stupid at high school, and I wondered how people were thinking of me and I started to familiarise myself with the computer and the use of the internet....*

Participants' comments above highlight their lack of knowledge about the use of computer as one of the factors that can negatively influence the academic progress of poor students. For some participant, the use of computers at HU led to her confusion because of an absence of prior training. Similarly, others reported that HU had an orientation and registration period where students were exposed to and trained in the use of information technology (IT). However, he considered that support as not being developmental and he missed out as it was time-bound. Struggling students and late registrations were not catered for. Such findings suggested that students coming from poor backgrounds were neglected.

Participants spoke about how they worked hard to familiarise themselves with computer skills and sought advice and training on the use of IT at the university. This shows how HU's reliance on IT skills for academic progress becomes a burden for the students. The participants (especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds) spoke about how they motivated themselves and learned independently to move from ignorance to a "technologised" digital world (Kajee & Balfour, 2011: 194), thereby improving their proficiency in the use of IT tools to enhance their access to and skills in higher education.

One of participants response above also draws attention to the existence of disparities and inequalities among social work students at HU. It also implied that the school background of the student plays a fundamental role in terms of their ability to use computers and the internet at the university. In other words, the transitional experiences of technology of the students in higher education are invariably influenced by the schooling system. Haung, Hood and Yoo

(2012) argued that socioeconomic status and class are some of the critical factors that influence proficiency in IT use among university students. Poor students experienced online learning as foreign, new and in fact an obstacle to their academic progress, thus not emancipating or liberating.

The struggle with ICT reported by the participants challenges the conclusions of BrckaLorenz *et al.* (2013), who have asserted that the millennial generation group of students (i.e. born between 1982 and 2002) were highly skilled and innovative in technology. These experiences are from USA which is a first world country, however in the South African context the experiences are different. The current article reflects on significant disparities in the exposure to, and use of, ICT among students because of their different school backgrounds. But HU was able to support online learning in different forms before the COVID-19 pandemic. The section below explores those support structures in detail.

### ***Support services for blended learning prior COVID-19 Pandemic***

Participants acknowledged that HU offered several support services that ensure not only students' wellbeing at the university, but also their academic progress. The availability of a tutorship and mentorship programme, the student counselling centre, a writing centre, and the Students Representative Council (SRC) were some of the support structures reported by the participants as available for the academic development of students. Some of the participants indicated that their visits to tutors and mentors' offices influenced their academic progress and also impacted on their online learning skills as follows:

*I received an email from my mentor... She is the one who assisted me. I was able to type on the computer from the first semester of my first year because of her. I made sure that if she calls us, I go to her [...]. She is also the one who helped me to develop computer skills and showed me the LANs. I did not attend orientation, but the mentor assisted me a lot, including assistance with academic writing, and she would tell me to type my work and come back with it the next day...*

*There are many support structures at Hibiscus University. For instance, if the student has a problem s/he is referred either to tutors, mentors, the SRC, Academic Development Officers, Clinics, or the Counselling Centre, based on the nature of the problem. ... For example, if I am in mentorship and doing Engineering, I know there is someone in a mentorship programme who is doing Social Work, I will link you with her/him. Or if there is a student whom I know as a mentor who is doing very well in Social Work, I will connect you with her/him. If the student struggles with writing, there is a writing place. So, support is there.*

*My first-year tutor had a good heart. She made sure that I understood everything that I needed to understand. If I did not participate during discussions in tutorials, she would come to me after class and check if I understood. She would further explain things to me both in English and isiZulu.*

Computer training, academic writing support, assistance with writing university assessments and help in understanding content were described by the participants above as some of the

essential services rendered by mentors and tutors at HU to improve students' academic performance. The participants also acknowledged such services as guidance, orientation and educational support to students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, one participant above mentioned how the assistance he received from his mentor encouraged him to attend mentorship sessions and consistently seek guidance, which in turn improved his academic performance. This suggests that because of their disadvantaged background, poor students appreciate in-depth guidance at the university to improve academically. This enhances access to knowledge. Van Heerden (2009) has also asserted that support services at the university have the potential to enhance students' performance, mitigate failure and reduce the student dropout rate. Similarly, the STARS mentorship programme (University of Pretoria, 2019) instituted a student development mentorship programme that aims to assist first-year students from high school in adjusting to the university environment by providing emotional and social support to advance their academic performance. This suggests that support services at the university respond to students' adjustment concerns. Online teaching and learning as part of BL is one of these adjustment concerns. The provision of such in-depth guidance and support to less resourced students might be questionable during COVID-19.

What also emerged from the above comments is the multiplicity of support structures at HU to promote students' academic performance. For instance, participants highlighted the various support structures such as the Students' Counselling Centre, the SRC, and the Writing Place, which exist to ensure the holistic wellbeing of students. Scott (2016) also perceived support services at a university as fundamental structures that enhance not only academic performance but also the holistic wellbeing of the individual student. Most participants in this study expressed how they used different support structures at the university to improve academically. For instance, one participant expressed how the Students' Counselling Centre reinforced her academic success:

*I noticed that I was too stressed, and I could not cope academically. I think my background, such as the death of my parents and everything, was playing a role. I went to the Student Counselling Centre, where I had sessions with the psychologist. This helped me to ventilate and focus on my studies.*

The participant above appreciated how the Student Counselling Centre enhanced her wellbeing and ensured her focus on academic work by providing a safe space to share her feelings. Scott (2016) also found that counselling centres in higher education aimed to examine and deal with factors that hinder the academic performance of students. Several participants valued the role played by the SRC to promote their access to the university. This is what one participant had to say:

*After moving up and down, and starting to lose hope for admission, I was told by someone that I should go to the Student Union as they could assist me. I was assisted by Bonga [pseudonym]. He was in the SRC at that time. He took me inside the NSB [a building at Hibiscus University]. We went into the Humanities LAN and that is where I was assisted with admission and registration.*

SRC is described as facilitated admission to the university. The discussion revealed that the SRC is a fundamental structure for assisting with students' entry into and support at the university. The SRC (former known as South African Student Organisation) is the body established at the university to represent all students' needs and communicate with the university management regarding students' requirements. This is the fundamental student body that replaced National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), which presented White student interest only (South African History Online, 2023). In 1987, Steve Biko lamented that student organisations representing the interests of Africans were not allowed and were even abolished at South African universities during the apartheid era. The apartheid government obliterated every activity that aimed at expressing African interests in higher education (Stubbs, 1987). Therefore, the endorsement and existence of the SRC structure at HU to represent the needs of students revealed the extent in the democratic era. Similarly, Badat (2007) appreciated the availability of the student body that has been deracialised in higher education institutions to ensure the representation of all students.

All the above-mentioned support services were structured to be physically available to students visiting different offices for support. It is not clear how this was managed during the COVID-19 pandemic. The question is, how has EROL, adopted during the COVID-19 pandemic, transformed to ensure inclusive access to emancipatory education for all students?

### **Participants' experiences with EROL during COVID-19**

The use of EROL during the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging in various ways. The same applies to social work education. But the use of EROL also presented several opportunities. The various reflections from participants indicated that fast technological training and advancement, and fast-tracked university readiness for the 4IR is a major benefit (Mhlanga & Moloj, 2020). This is so because traditional contact class time moved to online platforms in a short period of time, which forced different stakeholders to become technologically equipped very quickly. For participants in this study, the benefits of online learning included technological advancement, self-care and more time spent with families, which further contributed to students' wellbeing and better academic performance.

*I do not want to lie, studying online made me learn to use the computer more quickly you know ...*

*Although I knew the basic skills such as checking emails, accessing modules on Moodle and typing, learning online during the era of COVID-19 made me learn more computer aspects I was not aware of such as Zoom, Moodle submissions and discussions...*

*The truth is change is challenging but it can be beneficial sometimes...for me being more advanced in the use of technology for learning was introduced by the emergency remote learning...*

*There was also an opportunity for me to do self-assessment at home to check my understanding, and I was able to engage in other life-building activities and having enough time and space for self-care.*

COVID-19 led to some benefits not only for the participants but also for the University. For participants, EROL provided flexibility and accessibility. The above extracts from the participants acknowledge the benefits, which include more effective online learning, in line with 4IR requirements. The participants also appreciated the family ties and bonds that were strengthened by spending more time with families while learning online. For some, studying remotely while at home gave parents and other family members a perspective on the everyday life of a student who was engaged in university studies.

*You know, I used to attend my class with my mother, and she was very surprised that I sometimes attend three classes a day and with lot of different submissions. That made her to be very supportive, I do not want to lie. But it stressed her when I had data issues...in early stages when I struggled on how to use Zoom, she was also very worried.*

*For me, it's my parents; they helped me a lot in coping with the pandemic as they decided that every day before I start studying, they would spend some time with me and talk, and have fun so to reduce the stress emanating from the workload and I would feel better.*

The above comments from participants suggested that the use of EROL during the COVID-19 pandemic showed innovation and different platforms of learning for development. Several students also appreciated online learning as it allowed flexibility, and easy access to information (Mukhtar, Javed, Arooj & Sethi, 2020). Remote learning further helps to develop personal skills such as discipline, self-motivation and the ability to communicate (Neisser, 2020). For others, studying online allowed for the personal customisation of self-learning experiences (Neisser, 2020).

Although EROL adopted by HU in response to COVID-19 came with these benefits, there were undeniable challenges, particularly for previously disadvantaged students. Although the university tried to provide the kind of support that had been available prior to the pandemic, the scope and impact was limited due to structural limitations such as insufficient resources, poor connectivity and limited or no access to staff support personnel. Key to social work education is that students should be active agents of their learning, as the curriculum is centred on critically engaged paradigms (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Skidmore, 2006). While questions about equal access during EROL are inevitable, further questions can be raised regarding the extent to which EROL offers a space for students to be critical in their education and the possibilities it offers for them to engage fully in learning.

### ***Participants' experiences of support services in EROL during COVID-19***

Participants described how the university tried to meet the demands and needs of students to enhance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. There may be differences of opinion about this and the extent to which these needs were met, and whether and how technological platforms were beneficial. HU adopted different support structures such as the provision of data, laptops and online counselling to learners to ensure online readiness:

*The university provided us with data and laptops for funded first-year students to help during the lockdown since we were at home, away from Wi-Fi so that we can continue studying online.*

*The university opened support programmes like providing students ... with psychologists that students can contact online and have sessions with them to help them reduce mental health problems and stress so that they can cope well during this difficult time.*

The above comments reflect the various strategies adopted to meet the needs of students and in ensuring adaptability to the challenges posed by COVID-19 and in preparing for technological advancement. The provision of laptops, data and psychosocial support indicates that support services were offered for students to enable them to adapt to EROL. The identified strategies reflect on the state of university readiness, even though questions may be raised regarding sustainability, equity and equal access in ensuring that the disadvantaged benefitted equally from these efforts. The participants also commented on the distribution of computers to first-year students. Consistent with the findings of Mncube, Mutongoza and Olawale (2021), these are some of the irrefutable attempts made by South Africa universities towards encouraging technological advancement. Yet because of diverse student backgrounds, it is unclear whether students had sufficient understanding and knowledge about the use of the devices and ways of accessing the various learning platforms.

Like before the COVID-19 pandemic, mentorship support for technological preparedness was not much in evidence during EROL. If different methods were not adopted to ensure clear orientation and proper guidance, the implication is that poor first-year students were excluded from effective learning. The research has highlighted that most students coming from rural and township areas did not have adequate knowledge of computers (Makhanya, 2021). It is for this reason that they continue to be excluded from learning. This represents the lack of preparedness of South African universities to cater for diverse populations, especially the disadvantaged. Thus, the adoption of EROL might have further deprived and excluded the previously disadvantaged. This suggests that the reality of the inequalities exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic in higher education exist on a continuum of privilege (Perumal *et al.*, 2021).

### ***Participants' challenges with EROL***

Participants reported on the various challenges including internet connectivity, data issues and power disruptions because of load shedding. These made accessibility to classes, tutorials and other forms of online engagements difficult. The university paid less attention to supporting the students affected by these challenges. This negatively influenced teaching and learning. Participants, especially those who reside in rural and township areas, complained about lack of network connectivity in the remote areas where they lived and the shortage of data, which negatively affected their remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic at HU.

*It was quite challenging for me because I am from the rural area. We sometimes face network and connectivity challenges, and on the other hand, mobile data is very expensive...*

*Sometimes, I would not attend classes due to the network problems that I was experiencing since I stay in a township.*

*In my area, network is a challenge particularly that of MTN and Telkom. Then load shedding also contributed to my woes. So, I would skip lessons most of the time, and I would be concerned because I will be missing out on something important.*

The above comments suggest that students' location and financial status negatively influenced EROL at HU. This is the case because when asked about the mobile data provided by the university, most participants complained that it was too little and it was exhausted in the first week of the month, so they struggled since they had no sources of income to pay for additional data. This struggle is well captured in the study conducted by Perumal *et al.* (2021), which focused on social work educators' reflections on the COVID-19 pandemic, and one of the reflections was:

*While this conversation about EROLT [Emergency Remote Online Learning and Teaching] became critical for educators like me, it was even more concerning that it appeared to be the overlooking of the plight of students amid this situation and that the conversation drastically shifted from the level of readiness of how EROLT had to be done. From that very onset, it became apparent that the socio-economic background of the majority of students was going to be the main determinant on how quickly the institutions of higher learning responded to pandemic-related challenges (Perumal *et al.*, 2021: 402).*

The above quotation draws attention to the prevailing inequalities in universities and in social work education, which were inherited from the past. Disadvantaged students are products of families which are still living below the poverty datum line (Equality Report, 2018). Even though attempts such as the provision of mobile data were made for students to facilitate online teaching and learning, it is clear that they were not enough. Participants could not afford the high costs of data, and because of their economic status, they were excluded from the learning processes. This raises two points that should be carefully addressed, i.e. the availability of technological resources and access to learning platforms. The students were directly and indirectly deprived of their right to education as stipulated in the Constitution of South Africa (RSA, 1996). HU displayed limited cognisance of and consideration for disadvantaged students in its plan and during the process of implementing of EROL. One participant expressed this dissatisfaction as follows:

*I was struggling because that 10 GB which was provided by the University was too little...it just took a few days. and I had no money to buy data because I am not working and no one is working at home...so I struggled a lot with this data thing shame.*

The inability to connect with peers, lecturers, tutors and others exacerbated the struggles of students during EROL. Mhlanga and Moloï (2020) claimed that South Africa has great excellence in the area of technological advancement, which was evident during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, yet the above discussion has revealed that poor students from rural communities in South Africa struggled to experience emancipatory education through EROL

as a result of the lack of technological resources. Tamrat and Teferra (2020) stated that only a minority of the population have access to the internet, and for students in particular structural issues such as poor connectivity and electricity cuts are an additional challenge.

The challenge of poor connectivity leads to a systematic exclusion of disadvantaged students in education. Although laptops were provided to first-year students, they were not prepared for the use of computers. In addition, returning students (who were not first year students), were not considered and provided with laptops. Clearly, there was no concrete plan to prepare students to use computers and sustain them when they ran out of data, as such they did not attend classes and many of them were excluded from daily class discussions. This demonstrates that the objectives of the transformation agenda of the university structures, system and syllabus as indicated in the Higher Education Act (RSA, 1997) continues to be an unfulfilled dream.

In 2018, the Equality Report revealed that South Africa is still amongst the most unequal societies in the world and African poor families constitute the most disadvantaged groups (Equality Report, 2018). The unequal societies are the product of previous oppressive systems, which deprived Africans of resources and opportunities. The implementation of EROL during the COVID-19 pandemic continues to reveal such inequalities.

*I was less privileged than others and I could not even afford to go to the internet cafe to have access to Wi-Fi and network as other peers were doing since libraries were closed. So, I had a big problem.*

*Although there were laptops provided by the university for us who lived in rural areas, the distribution and posting were hard. I received mine toward the end of semester due to delays since posting in my area is not easy. So, the universities had to distribute laptops to students who live far, far away. And it was not easy.*

From the above, three issues impacting on access to education can be identified, i.e. social privilege, affordability and computer literacy. Consistent with this, Tanga, Ndhlovu and Tanga (2020) found that students were excluded from learning for a variety of reasons such as weak education, poor materials and uncertain social rights. These are some of the factors which sustain the inequalities among students in higher education institutions in South Africa. In this article, it is evident that students from less privileged backgrounds continue to battle with network problems, while students from the most privileged societies have ready access to Wi-Fi and the internet. The conditions in universities in South Africa mirror the inequalities in contemporary society (Makhanya, 2021). Students from disadvantaged areas are socially – and hence cognitively – unprivileged when it comes to accessing resources for their learning. This is consistent with the finding by Dube (2020), who states that rural students struggle to access the online methods of teaching and learning as a result of lack of resources. In South Africa there are still vast disparities between the rich and the poor when it comes to access (Perumal *et al.*, 2021). Post-pandemic transformation agendas in South African higher education must take cognisance of these disparities, particularly in social work education.



## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussion has revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated inequalities and weakened the already failing systems in South Africa's higher education sector, which jeopardised the implementation of BL and EROL in social work education. The participants' different experiences of BL and EROL suggest that the diversity in the socio-economic backgrounds of students influences their academic access, participation and success. What is also evident is that past injustices still affect and influence the current experiences of students in higher education. The discussions also problematise technological investments that ignore the inequalities prevailing in South Africa's higher education institutions. The country is preparing to enter into the 4IR (fast tracked by the COVID-19 pandemic)—indicated by disruptive technologies and trends (Schwab, 2016), which means high reliance on blended learning (e.g., combined methods of technological and traditional teaching and learning) and online learning in higher education institutions. It is important that the legacies of the past, that left most citizens in disadvantaged positions, should equally be the concern of these technological advancements.

The biggest concern is the failure of the democratic dispensation to acknowledge and address the diversity (in background and experiences) of university students. Although disadvantaged students from poor backgrounds are accepted at the university, the university still fails to address the needs of such groups (Cakata, 2015; Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2018; Stubbs, 1987). This in turn, demonstrates how South African universities are still ill-prepared to accommodate students from diverse social backgrounds. The poor digital skills mentioned by the participants in this study, and which in some cases contributed to poor academic progress, are an indication of the exclusion and alienation of disadvantaged students. This exclusion is a concern for an education system that aims to 'emancipate' not only learning but also practice. This calls for structural transformation and equal access to resources for online learning to be emancipatory for all students. Education tailor-made for the historically oppressed in society should be facilitated by principles of emancipatory learning and inclusion with the aim of achieving critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Sewpaul, 2013; Dube, 2020).

Social workers practice in different fields that require them to be equipped with ICT skills. These include health care, child care, family care, youth, addiction, substance abuse, trauma and bereavement counselling (Schenk *et al.*, 2015). Thus, in compliance with the requirements of these fields, social workers are expected to conduct administrative tasks, type and produce reports, gather and present information, conduct research, keep records etc. How are social workers expected to effectively conduct these duties in practice if social work education at the university fails to address the importance of access to ICT and related training for students. Social work education needs to ensure that students are technologically equipped not only for academic success but for professional practice. For success in incorporating information technology into social work students' education, proper online methodologies and pedagogies should be followed (Barbour *et al.*, 2020). The inclusion of technology should not compromise on the nature of social work education and practice as it requires a certain level of critical engagement (Mupedziswa, Modie-Moroka & Malinga, 2021).

To ensure that all students are prepared for remote online learning and the use of computers, social work education must include computer-based tutoring of first-year students. This is to ensure that all students are equally exposed to and trained in the use of ICT at the university and for future practice. Some scholars also advise that context-based computer training of first-year students at the university has the potential to bridge the technological ignorance gap and produce good academic results for those students who come from disadvantaged schools (Mthethwa, 2018; Kilfoil, 2015). Social work research must also investigate the exposure of students to new digital media and whether and how they use ICT to effectively employ technology to make proposals for improve education (BrckaLorenz *et al.*, 2013; Mthethwa, 2018). The impact of new digital technology on academic outcomes must also be considered and evaluations must be conducted differently, remaining cognisant of the socio-economic diversity of students (Mthethwa, 2018). This is vital considering that most African students entering university come from deprived economic backgrounds and with a poor basic education. Accordingly, there is a need for the establishment of developmental technological support at the university level.

Future research needs to explore the ramifications of the 4IR and its potential to respond to Africanisation and the decolonisation of social work tuition in academia in South Africa for emancipatory blended and remote learning. This is to ensure that global developments capture the needs, interests and cultures of the African continent. There is also a need for further research to explore how rural primary and secondary schools can better prepare learners for university, especially in the areas of information technology.

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