Redressing Inequalities while Envisioning University Student Teaching during COVID-19 Lockdown: Lessons from #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall

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Abstract

The COVID-19 first reared its ugly face in the city of Wuhan, China in December 2019 and quickly spread throughout the world, leaving hundreds of deaths on its trail. The intensity of this disease is currently not the same in developed and developing countries. It appears that developed countries are heavily burdened by COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the effect of COVID-19 is gradually being felt in South Africa where, during the completion of this paper, there were 2 456 deaths, 138 000 infections and 68 925 recoveries, respectively. The instability brought about by this pandemic has serious ramifications for the country's economy and schooling at all levels. In order to flatten the curve, the South African government implemented the lockdown of the country, which meant no contact learning could occur. Consequently, consideration was made by departments of education, schools and universities to offer remote teaching and learning. This paper reports on the efforts made by one South African higher education institution (HEI) to save the 2020 academic project in the midst of COVID-19 lockdown, based on the author's experiences and observations. Results revealed that during the COVID-19 lockdown, HEIs operated at different stages of preparedness regarding provision of remote teaching and learning. The author argues that prioritising remote teaching and learning after the 2015-2016 #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall student protests should have prepared South African HEIs better to meet curriculum demands emanating from COVID-19 lockdown. Furthermore, had all institutions increased capacity development and ensured wider staff and student accessibility to resources, the

curriculum would have been delivered efficiently during the COVID-19 lockdown. The paper concludes by showing how the COVID-19 lockdown has transformed and reshaped the manner in which teaching should be done in the future.

Keywords: inequalities, COVID-19 pandemic, online teaching and learning 2020 academic project, #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall

1 Introduction

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2020) released results which showed that COVID-19 brought education of approximately 1.37 billion students around the world to a halt as of 23 March 2020. Abrupt closure of universities in South Africa is not a new phenomenon. The two students' campaigns – #RhodesMustFall (#RMF) and #FeesMustFall (#FMF), which broke out at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and the University of Witwatersrand (Wits) threatened to topple the South African higher education academic project in 2015. The source of #RMF was racial discrimination that Black students allegedly experienced at historically white universities (HWUs), whereas #FMF arose out of allegations of inadequate funding by the same group of students. These students felt that both factors adversely affected their success and wellbeing at South African universities. The campaigns signalled a call for the transformation and decolonisation of curriculum at South African higher education institutions (HEIs) (Nyamnjoh 2017). Paul and Case (2018) argue that these protest movements exposed higher education's failure to facilitate social mobility and redress, as well as many other realities that the youth face across the country.

These protests severely disturbed the normal order of teaching and learning at universities. It is the author's argument that the protests yielded unintended consequences: they signalled the imminence and inevitability of alternative teaching and learning modes at HEIs, such as, online and blended-learning approaches. In a way, they also indirectly sent a signal to universities to be better prepared for future turbulent times such as the COVID-19 pandemic faced by the whole world. South Africa HEIs have entered unchartered territory, as COVID-19 gives them a test of time and puts them

under unprecedented pressure to demonstrate their readiness and preparedness for online teaching.

In this paper, the author shares insights into the efforts of a South African HEI in completing the 2020 academic project in the midst of the COVID-19 lockdown. Online and blended learning are not new, but they are already in place and have become a norm at some universities, albeit in varying degrees. It would therefore appear that the eruption of COVID-19, although unprecedented and a natural phenomenon, challenges and puts in the spotlight those universities that might have ignored the call for blended and online learning during or after the #RMF and #FMF students' protests. Evidently, universities that turned to these modes of teaching after these protests would be more prepared to implement them during COVID-19 than those that did not. In this paper, online and e-learning are used interchangeably.

2 Literature Review

The literature review covers the following themes: E-learning in South African higher education and COVID-19, South-African university responses to COVID-19 lockdown, and COVID-19 and inequalities in South African higher education. These themes are presented in the next section.

2.1 e-Learning in South African higher education and COVID-19

The use of e-learning at South African universities is becoming increasingly popular (Bharuthram & Kies 2012). Universities are using it to expand access to higher education and training opportunities for all students. Provision of e-learning is in line with providing teaching methods and technologies that cater to the diverse needs of students, including those who experience barriers to learning due to factors such as geographic locations (Department of Higher Education [DHET] 2017). It also caters to the needs of a technologically savvy new generation of students who may find learning through conventional pedagogic approaches frustrating.

Different concepts are used to refer to e-learning, including blended learning and online education (Czerniewicz, Trotter & Haupt 2019; Swingler 2018; Al-Adwan, Al-Adwan & Smedley 2013; UCT Policy 2017). Blended

learning refers to the use of a combination of online teaching and learning methods with traditional face-to-face classroom (Czerniewicz *et al.* 2019; Swingler 2018; Al-Adwan *et al.* 2013). In spite of the different terms used, the thread that runs through them is that e-learning takes place through information and communication technology (ICT), which generally refers to devices, networking components, applications and systems that facilitate interaction with the digital world. According to the UCT Policy (2017:2),

> Online education is the use of educational technologies to mediate the curriculum, and can refer to offerings where learning activities take place fully online as well as the use of blended or mixed methodologies.

The DHET (2017 and 2012) is very careful not to have e-learning misconstrued or equated with open or distance learning. To differentiate between these concepts, the DHET (*ibid*) describes e-learning as characterised by the following: It,

(i)   uses ICT to access learning;
(ii)   involves the use of electronic devices (e.g. computers, laptops, tablets, and smart phones) to provide access and to allow students to interact with learning materials, with one another and with lecturers; and to participate in discussions remotely and to be assessed;
(iii) is mediated through the use of digital resources (usually combinations of text, audio and visual/video files) and software applications;
(iv)   can be offered online, offline, or in a combination of both online and offline; and
(v)   can be used in face-to-face and distance teaching. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide the definitions of open and distance learning. For full definitions of these terms, please refer to DHET (2017) and DHET (2012).

Although e-learning is still debatable as an effective learning tool, there is research which shows that adopting it has benefits for students and teachers (Reed 2019; Anderson 2018; Cook 2018; Arkorful & Abaidoo 2015; Bharuthram & Kies 2012; Bora & Ahmed 2013; Karaksha *et al.* 2013; Sampson *et al.* 2013). Reed (2019) highlights the convenience that e-learning

provides to students by allowing them to pace their own learning and by providing them with unlimited access to content. Research shows that e-learning promotes a community of practice (COP) (Lave & Wenger 1996) by enhancing relationships and easing communication among students, thus enabling them to assist one another to develop the skills (Arkorful & Abaidoo 2015). Karaksha *et al.* (2013) conducted a study in a pharmacology course which used online learning tools, in which they investigated the effect e-learning would have on student engagement. They found that proper promotion of e-learning increased engagement, including active and collaborative learning, stimulation, time to think, and meeting high teacher expectations. Cook (2018); Bora and Ahmed (2013) and Sampson *et al.* (2013) are of the view that because e-learning is not bound by geography and time, it provides convenien-ce and flexibility of learning, as students can interact with the teacher and be examined anytime and anywhere without necessarily being in the classroom. For teachers, Anderson (2018) mentions how e-learning provides teachers with a comprehensive package by boosting knowledge, motivation and confidence.

There are limitations to e-learning as well. For example, the use of e-learning can present challenges if students' different social contexts are not taken into cognisance, causing those students from disadvantaged backgrounds to lag behind those from advantaged backgrounds (Bharuthram & Kies 2012). Unfortunately, for students, this situation could lead to low self-esteem and alienation resulting from the feeling of being excluded from university community. Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) cite cheating, negative effect on the development of students' communication skills, and negative impact on students' socialisation skills as disadvantages of e-learning.

Murphy, Walker and Webb (2001) explain that e-learning is not meant to replace conventional modes of curriculum delivery but rather to supplement them. In countries such as the United States of America, it has become clear during the lockdown that the presence of technology does not and cannot outweigh the physical presence of a teacher. Rosemead (2020) argues that technology can never replace a well-trained creative teacher, because learning is a social process. This resonates with Vygotsky (1987) and Bruner's (1966) social constructivism theory, according to which the teacher should scaffold or mediate learning at the zone of proximal development (ZPD) through teacher-student interaction. This fact is supported by Bharuthram and Kies (2012), who maintain that teachers should use the scaffolding approach in order to develop

students' expertise. Interaction or dialogic encounter facilitates student's transition from potential development (what the student knows) to actual development (what the student is capable to know through the assistance and support of the most knowledgeable other). The most knowledgeable other could be a teacher, peers, family (parents, siblings, etc.) or anybody that a student interacts with. The same applies to technology- students need proximal interaction with the teacher in order to process new knowledge, bu t with time, they develop mental representations of technology which make it possible for them to use them creatively and to develop further skills on their own without mediation by the teacher (Somekh & Mavers 2010). E-learning is shared learning: students can also acquire these skills from their peers and family. This shows that teaching and learning are social processes that are not confined to the traditional classroom.

The debate that teachers are indispensable in the teaching-learning situation dashes the hopes of assuming that during COVID-19 lockdown, remote learning will help students to cover the lost time and salvage the 2020 academic curriculum on their own. On the contrary, students should adopt self-directed learning (SDL) by which, according to Knowles' (1989) andragogical model, they take on an active role to identify their problems (e.g. gaps in their knowledge, skills they lack); devise ways and means of how they acquire that knowledge and skills (how they learn to learn); try things out and self-correct; set their learning pace and evaluate their own learning. The term 'andragogy' derives from the Greek words *andr-* (man/ adult) and *agogos* (to lead). Andragogy refers to the art and science of teaching adults. By adopting andragogy as a student-centred approach, students take charge and self-regulate their learning. During the COVID-19 lockdown, interacting and soliciting support and guidance from the knowledgeable others around them, as well as a high level of motivation and self-determination to achieve their learning goals, will be essential for students to cope with remote learning. Factors of accountability will also play a big role in how students manoeuvre this unchartered territory without the physical presence and support from lectures. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the valuable skills attained by being self-directed, independent and autonomous, coupled with intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and support from the MKOs, might also drive students' accountability while engaged in remote learning during COVID-19 lock-down.

2.2 *South African University Responses to the COVID-19 Lockdown*

As mentioned earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a lockdown which forced the country and institutions, including schools and universities, to shut down. In an effort to salvage whatever was left of the 2020 academic year in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, universities across the globe including those in South Africa, started gearing themselves up for online teaching and learning. In the context of South Africa, it became clear that universities' responses varied widely. For example, in a newspaper article that Asma (2020) published on 15 April 2020, four (4) historically advantaged universities (HAUs) reported to have made strides in preparing for online remote teaching and learning. Similarly, Dell's article released on 17 April 2020 mentioned that ten of the 26 public South African universities were ready to resume online remote teaching and learning, while the eleventh one was still undecided (Dell 2020). Four of these universities quickly announced in the media that they were lending laptops to their needy students and providing them with data to access Wi-Fi to expedite the online remote teaching-learning process, while one mentioned providing students with data only. Of these, only one was an HDU. In the same article, Dell (*ibid*) cited three HDUs at which she revealed that the situation was a bit more complicated or unclear. One of these universities indicated that they had put a moratorium on assessments due to students' unequal access to resources. Nonetheless, in the articles dated 30 April 2020, Ngqakamba (2020) and *Herald Reporter* (2020) revealed that one of these HDUs was issuing 12 000 laptops and data to needy students to be able to transition to remote teaching and learning. Sadly, by the month of May, it was clear that the HDU was struggling to get remote online learning going (Segar 2020). This is in vast contrast to the six HAUs and one HDU which had already shared how they were implementing remote online teaching-learning amidst the COVID-19 lockdown (*Staff Reporter* 2020).

Based on this information, it is evident that universities' responses to the provision of resources and implementing remote online teaching-learning during COVID-19 university closures varied widely (Asma 2020; Dell 2020; *Herald Reporter* 2020; Ngqakamba 2020; *Staff Reporter* 2020). History and context appeared to play a significant role in this discourse, with HAUs at the forefront and exhibiting a higher level of preparedness (Asma 2020; Dell 2020; *Staff Reporter* 2020) than their HDUs counterparts (Dell 2020; Segar 2020).

Nonetheless, one HDU appeared to make strides towards ensuring a transition to remote online learning (Dell 2020).

2.3 COVID-19 and Inequalities in South African Higher Education

After the release of the White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (Department of Education (DoE) 1997), 'massification of education' (Kraak 2000) occurred when masses of Black students flocked to the HEIs, some of which were only reserved for Whites before South Africa obtained democracy in 1994. It is the majority of these masses that James (2020) refers to, who have limited access to digital connectivity and also lack equipment such as laptops, smart phones and tablets to connect to the internet.

In South Africa, inequalities abound, transformation is slow, and education appears to be a right to a select few (Maimela 2015). Therefore, transition to online teaching and learning might be a tall order and a dangerous move that could have detrimental effects on the masses of students from underprivileged backgrounds. Due to inequalities, the employment of sophisticated e-learning technology may lead to the exclusion of many students who lack access to gadgets and reliable internet connectivity. Expressing its opposition to online learning, the People's Coalition (2020: 2 - 3) put it succinctly as follows:

> The move to online teaching and learning ignores inequalities engineered by colonialism, apartheid, capitalism, patriarchy, homophobia, xenophobia and neoliberalism. It reinforces nationality, class, race and gender inequities. Current 'alternative strategies' being put forward will mark, stigmatise and ghetto-ise many of the most vulnerable and marginalised communities. 'Going online' and providing 'alternative strategies' will render the economically deprived the proverbial sacrificial lamb while the privileged few benefit and move ahead with the curriculum.

COVID-19 has put the South African higher education system in the spotlight and unearthed the economic and digital divide that privileges affluent students, while it deprives impoverished students from accessing digital technologies

equitably. Neumann (2020) puts it succinctly, asserting that the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted inequalities in the South African education system. Neumann (2020:1) laments the fate of impoverished township students who 'were never brought up to par with the resources, facilities, opportunities and support structures' available to their counterparts from affluent backgrounds. Due to social inequalities that persist in South Africa, it becomes almost impossible for HEIs to offer online teaching and learning equitably without leaving masses of students behind.

Mathiba (2020:1) acknowledges the challenge brought about by COVID-19 in as far as universities having to transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning, arguing that 'the feasibility is doubtful given the wide disparities among students in terms of access to adequate resources and the internet'. Jansen (2020b) echoes the same sentiments, contending that COVID-19 will simply intensify inequality of outcomes for the rich and poor students, because students in privileged classrooms are familiar with online modes of teaching and learning.

The discourse on inequalities is further raised by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2020:1), which notes that,

> It is clear that capacities, infrastructure, access to devices, and access to the internet are unevenly distributed across the sector and among the student population. These pose a tremendous challenge to institutions to ensure that whatever remote teaching, learning, support and assessment technologies are utilised should not lead to disadvantage to those without devices and internet access.

Jansen (2020a:4) contends that 'In elite schools it is easy to make the switch to online learning should the shutdown continue for weeks or even months'. Keenan (2020:1) concurs with Jansen (2020a), that 'During the lockdown more affluent schools have adopted distance learning as a model for education's way forward, but it is a distant dream for the poor'. To support Jansen (*ibid*) and Keenan (2020), James (2020) raises the issue of the costs involved in accessing high-speed connectivity, which children from underprivileged backgrounds cannot afford. Czerniewicz *et al.* (2019) highlight the same concerns that some academics had with the adoption of blended learning at UCT during the #RMF and #FMF, that its use would benefit the wealthy students and exacerbate the digital divide among students from different socio-economic backgrounds.

Besides costs, race appears to play a role in the lack of accessibility to online learning, as shown by James (2020:2), that 'Broken down by racially defined groups, just more than a fifth of black and coloured people are internet users, contrasted with white South Africans, two-thirds of which have access'. Evidently, COVID-19 replicates inequalities based on the same disadvantages that led to the #RMF and #FMF.

What these facts reveal is that in the context of COVID-19 university closures, it is those students from underprivileged backgrounds who bear the brunt of the virus (Jansen 2020a). Due to ingrained inequalities in the South African social and education fabric, COVID-19 creates a heavy burden on the poor masses of society. To put this situation into context, Keenan (2020:2) argues that,

> The disparity between the affluent and the poor has been highlighted in the Covid-19 lockdown, and the difference in educational opportunities between those who have and those who do not is now startlingly obvious.

Shaw (in Keenan 2020:3) raises the same issue, that,

> It is very worrying because the poor will be the most disadvantaged. Covid-19 will unfortunately shake up the academic order, and only the rich will be advantaged.

The unequal online-learning playing field among students from different backgrounds is a reality that cannot be denied, as acknowledged by a deputy vice-chancellor of academic affairs cited in Asma (2020a:3), where she highlighted the 'the unevenness in access to online platforms and the very real concerns about students lacking connectivity, devices and adequate work space to successfully engage in online learning'.

Students have also voiced concerns about the switch to online teaching and learning by universities, as demonstrated by university student representative councils (SRCs) from different HEIs, student unions such as SAUS and by virtual protests by UJ and students in other HEIs. Their bone of contention is unequal access to online learning emanating from their different social contexts and high costs related to obtaining data. Mpai (in the South African Broadcasting Commission [SABC] online 2020:2) echoed the

sentiment that 'they [universities] haven't addressed the elephant in the room which is that majority of the students come from poor working class and they don't have resources to access'. Khofi (in Asma 2020b:2) echoes the same sentiment, tweeting that 'In reality, however, not everyone has access to the internet, so many would be disadvantaged'. Evidently, the issue of inequalities dominating the higher education discourse in South African HEIs has serious implications for offering online teaching and learning during COVID-19 university closures.

Although he was speaking about COVID-19 in the context of public health, in his speech on television, António Guterres, the United Nations (UN) Secretary General, stated that COVID-19 is an economic, social and human crisis that is fast becoming a human rights crisis. He emphasised that the response to this virus had to be guided by human rights principles, ensuring that no one was left behind. Evidently, providing online learning to some while leaving underprivileged students out in the cold violates some students' basic human rights of equal access to educational opportunities. It results in education becoming accessible to only the elite (Jansen 2020a). A situation which divides students into haves and have-nots is untenable, unsustainable, and intolerable: it violates the principle of Ubuntu (humanity). A middle ground has to be found to ensure that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, access education in an equitable manner during the COVID-19 lockdown. The question arises regarding how equity can be achieved when some universities are already ahead with offering online teaching whereas others are far from beginning to do so? Clearly, the principle of no student left behind becomes lip service and an elusive dream.

3   Support for Students

South African universities have their hands full trying to find ways of completing the 2020 academic project without exposing students to the danger of the COVID-19 pandemic. As shown earlier, some HEIs have taken advanced steps to mitigate the potential threat posed by COVID-19 on the academic project. This section reports on the activities undertaken at a South African university during the lockdown to either support students or inform steps to be taken to salvage the 2020 academic year. Some of the activities reported in this section were done at university and departmental levels simultaneously. These efforts include: Conducting university and departmental

needs-assessment surveys; Adherence to the principle of no student left behind; Capacity-development training workshops; and Application of low-technology teaching strategies. It appears that, unlike Jansen (2020b), HEIs have not given up on the 2020 academic year, but they believe something can still be done to salvage whatever is left of it.

3.1   Conducting University and Departmental Needs' Assessment Surveys

Perhaps conducting surveys is the step that all the universities have followed to determine the needs of their students in relation to access to online learning. For example, the Staff Reporter (2020) reports on an online access survey that one of the HAUs conducted, the results of which yielded a response rate of 90.4% and revealed that a majority of students had access to devices and Wi-Fi. Similarly, Asma (2020a), Du Plessis (2020), Hlati (2020) and Mathiba (2020) report on online and text message surveys conducted by different universities in order to determine whether or not students had access to devices, Wi-Fi and a conducive space for studying. Having said this, I argue that if #RMF and #FMF had been anything to go by and lessons from them had been heeded, the universities would have long assessed students' needs by the time the COVID-19 lockdown came into effect. Yet, as shown earlier, even those HEIs that had been directly affected by student protests conducted needs assessment surveys. Czerniewicz (2020) reports on the survey they conducted during #RMF and #FMF student protests, but since it was more than three years ago, before the COVID-19 pandemic, they perceived a need to conduct another survey to determine current students' digital needs. What these surveys illustrate is that generally, HEIs did not quite heed lessons that should have been learnt from the students' protests of the previous years and that if they had, they would have made these needs-assessment surveys part and parcel of planning for each subsequent academic year, instead of waiting until COVID-19 showed its ugly face.

Clearly, the pace at which the surveys were conducted varied drastically. For example, on 2 April 2020, Ahmed Bawa, the chief executive officer of Universities South Africa (USAf) which represents South Africa's 26 universities, reported that at least three universities had already conducted surveys to establish their students' access to the internet, data and equipment, such as, computers, laptops, tablets and smart phones (Dell 2020). Immediately

thereafter, four universities distributed laptops and data to their students. As shown earlier, not all universities were on par in as far as distributing resources to students.

The university on which this paper is based fell in the latter category. It was only towards the end of April 2020 that data were collected from students to determine this HEI's ICT capability of offering online teaching and whether it qualified for assistance as promised by DHET (Shoba 2020). The question of institutions' ICT capability had been posed by a member of the Democratic Alliance (DA) at a meeting at which the DHET briefed the Higher Education Parliamentary Committee on university and TVET plans for the 2020 academic year (Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology 2020a). Considering the strides made by those universities that had already distributed laptops and data, one could argue that this HEI's survey was conducted at a later stage. Clearly, the former had completed this process much earlier (Dell 2020; Hlati 2020). The DHET deadline of 26 March 2020 for universities and TVET colleges to indicate their eligibility for assistance also confirms this assertion (Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology 2020b; Shoba 2020).

Besides institution-wide online surveys, departments in various faculties also conducted surveys of a similar nature to their respective students. The challenge with the departmental surveys was lack of uniformity, with each department at different campuses and faculties using their own. The other challenge was that in some departments, the university-wide survey overlapped with the departmental ones, thereby creating an overload on students. Survey results were generally low. For example, online surveys from two departments yielded response rates of 35% and 44%, respectively. A follow-up with class representatives revealed that the majority of students could not respond to the surveys due to the lack of data and devices. Evidently, many surveys could not reach the intended recipients. Similarly, university online surveys yielded moderate results, proving that not many students had participated in them, probably due to the same reasons. The university unsuccessfully conducted further surveys after the initial ones, but by this time, students might have suffered from survey fatigue. These poor response rates were not unprecedented. They were a reflection of inequalities and the digital divide prevalent among students in the South African Higher Education Institutions. They also highlighted the bleakness of the prospects of online teaching during the lockdown.

3.2 Adherence to the Principle of no Student Left Behind

During the period when needs-assessment surveys were conducted, the university was careful not to embark on online teaching, as this would perpetuate inequalities among those students with access and those with no access. Essentially, the university refused to succumb to the temptation of leaving some students out in the cold. Indeed, providing online teaching to some students and not to others raises questions about how and when those universities would assist the missing middle; that is, those students whose parents earn an above-average income, but that income is not high enough for them to afford their children's tuition fees. According to the former Wits University's Vice-Chancellor Adam Habib, these students are '*too rich to qualify for the scholarship but in reality too poor to afford their education*' (Habib, in Fihlani 2019: 3). The other question is: if universities let some students continue with online teaching and learning and others remain behind, how do they (universities) justify having two systems – one for the haves and the other for the have-nots, running parallel to one another? Dividing students into haves and have-nots renders the principle of leaving no student behind to sheer rhetoric.

The university in question implemented a moratorium on teaching and learning during the COVID-19 lockdown which was supposed to last until 16 April 2020 but was extended till 30 April 2020. The motivation for this moratorium was to mitigate leaving those students who did not have access to resources behind, and also to observe inclusivity, equity, equality and participation by all, as stipulated in the White Paper 6 (Department of Education 2001) and Ubuntu (humanity). Implementing moratoria is not new. For example, one of the public universities reportedly issued a moratorium on assessments during the lockdown (Asma 2020a; Fengu 2020).

In line with the principle of no student left behind, staff and students were informed that teaching and learning would only begin after it had been established that all students had access. How long will the moratorium last? This remains to be seen. The challenge is whether a point will be reached when all students have equitable access to resources. If this point is not reached, will moratorium after moratorium be implemented at this university, thus confirming Jansen's (2020b) assertion that the 2020 academic year is lost for these students, or will the university continue with those who have access and leave those without behind? This situation puts this institution in a fix, calling

for the DHET's immediate intervention, as suggested by Members of Parliament (MPs) at the meeting during which the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) briefed the Parliamentary Committee of Higher Education on university and TVET plans for the 2020 academic year (Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology 2020).

3.3 Capacity-development Training Workshops

Czerniewicz (2020) shows how academics in her institution were caught off guard when they had to switch to blended learning during #RMF and #FMF, as online learning was a new phenomenon at many HEIs. She emphasises how important it was for staff at the university's centre of teaching and learning to support academic staff, which she reports was facilitated by departmental- and discipline-specific training workshops. Czerniewicz *et al.* (2019) also mention the support structures that were developed at their institution during the 2015-2016 student protests in order to assist academics with going online. These workshops allowed academics to ask questions and obtain answers, share knowledge and to form disciplinary CoPs (Lave & Wenger 1996), a fact raised by Arkorful and Abaidoo (2015) earlier. During the COVID-19 lockdown, many universities acknowledged that not all academics were well prepared to offer online teaching. Consequently, one of them developed a university teach online strategy (TOS) which familiarised and helped academics to adopt a culture of using technology to teach creatively and to conduct online assessments (*Staff Reporter* 2020). A Vice-Rector of Teaching and Learning at one of the universities acknowledged the need to develop staff and students' capacity on the use of technology (*Staff Reporter* 2020). He maintained that the Online Transition and Orientation period would familiarise staff and students with online teaching-learning environments and enhance new ways of communication, relationships, and interaction between the two parties, thus enhancing the teaching-learning processes. During the COVID-19 lockdown, challenges with teaching online were inevitable, which could point to the fact that the 2015-2016 student protests might not have succeeded in prompting universities to prioritise online learning and to develop academic staff capacities. Due to COVID-19, the university in question facilitated virtual staff training workshops in order to observe social distancing imposed by the virus, a fact highlighted by Czerniewicz (2020). Even though this process might have been too little too late, considering that some universities had already

embarked on online teaching, suggesting that they were equipped with these skills, this training will prove beneficial when the university embarks on online teaching and if student protests erupt in the future.

3.4 Application of Low-technology Teaching Strategies

Disappointing as the results of the departmental survey mentioned earlier were due to the low response rate, they did prompt the department to explore alternative strategies that could be used to facilitate teaching and learning during lockdown, while the university made efforts to cater to all students' needs. Czerniewicz (2020) reports that during the 2015-2016 student protests, there was no one strategy but multiple strategies that allowed more asynchronous teaching with less bandwidth-intensive, or low technologies. The idea was 'to use what students have, and keep it simple' (Czerniewicz 2020: 4), so as to be able to accommodate those students without or with limited access to resources. Academics identified several low-technology strategies that included sending notes and PowerPoint presentations via WhatsApp as attachments to the class representatives (class reps) who would in turn send them to the subject groups of the different levels. This was possible, as class reps represented all the subject groups and programme levels. Another option was to have lecturers create WhatsApp or Facebook subject groups through which they could send the learning materials directly to the students instead of using the class reps. Nonetheless, the team was disheartened that they had to resort to low technologies, as they felt that student teachers had to experience learning through technology so that they would in turn be hands-on and be pioneers of teaching with sophisticated technologies by the time they graduated from university.

Furthermore, it was agreed that when the teaching and learning moratorium had been lifted, some of the learning materials would be posted online for those with access to Blackboard. WhatsApp voice notes and audio recordings were another preferred mode of curriculum delivery considered, as it is possible to send them via WhatsApp or to post them on Blackboard. Facebook was identified as another platform that could be used, since many cell-phone companies sell social data for WhatsApp and Facebook cheaper than Internet data.

The Cluster Heads also considered print media, but the challenges they identified were that the post offices were closed during Level 5 of the lockdown

but, more importantly, was the challenge of the high cost of printing, photocopying and postage. Consequently, this idea was abandoned. The issue of those subjects that include the practical components posed another threat, as practicals could not be done through online platforms. The team agreed that during the lockdown, the focus would be on covering the content, with the practicals to be done when face-to-face learning resumed. Regarding teaching practice (TP), it was agreed that the portfolio guides could be sent to students as attachments using the different platforms so that students could familiarise themselves with the contents. However, visits to schools would need to be planned when the COVID-19 dust has settled.

4 Discussion and Conclusion

It is clear that the COVID-19 lockdown has had an enormous impact on global education. Not only this, but it has also shaken HEIs from their comfort zone and challenged them to rethink ways of salvaging whatever is left of the 2020 academic project. This paper has demonstrated that while this pandemic ravages the world, online teaching is seemingly the best preferred approach to help with salvaging the 2020 academic curriculum. Questions arise as to why there have been no plans all along to invest in online teaching (Department of Basic Education 2020). The same question applies to HEIs in South Africa, where students' protests arising from #RMF and #FMF signalled the imminence and inevitability of investing in online teaching and learning, due to the disruptions on the academic activities. Czerniewicz (2020) and Czerniewicz *et al.* (2019) mention how during #RMF and #FMF student-led protests, their institution unexpectedly opted to switch to blended learning in order to allow students to complete their academic year, and how their institution has incorporated the practice of providing all students on financial aid with laptops on arrival. This is an indication that this institution learnt some lessons from 2015-2016 student protests. They report that even though the university has adopted online teaching and learning, contradictions and tensions that permeated this mode of teaching and learning during protests interfered with its adoption as a norm. Clearly, if online teaching and learning had been normalised, transition to the online mode would have been much smoother than it was. It is worth noting that this institution is one of those that were among the first to offer online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 lockdown. It might be possible that the others who were at the forefront of

online teaching and learning during this pandemic had learned some lessons from #RMF and #FMF shutdowns.

Having said this, issues of privilege for HAUs and disadvantage for HDUs cannot be ruled out. The fact that HAUs acted faster and HDUs slower in embarking on online teaching and learning is itself a symbol of privilege. This could be because the majority of students at the former is privileged and familiar with learning with technology, unlike their underprivileged counterparts at HDUs who come across a computer for the first time when they enter university. In fact, as shown earlier, the COVID-19 lockdown has exacerbated inequalities and disparities among students in South African universities, which led to the People's Coalition (2020:3) advocating social pedagogy and arguing that 'Our efforts to flatten the viral curve must not sharpen the social inequality curve [among students'. Granted, there was one HDU that also embarked on online teaching and learning at the same time as the HAUs, and another that distributed laptops to needy students around the same time that HAUs did (Ngqakamba 2020; *Herald Reporter* 2020). Nonetheless, the number of these HEIs is too low compared with their HAU counterparts. The fact that HDUs were generally not on par with their HAU counterparts might not be because HDUs did not learn any lessons from the 2015-2016 student protests. Instead, it might be a reflection of their low socio-economic status, which might have prevented them from acting as quickly as their advantaged counterparts. Therefore, inequalities should not be overlooked in the discourse of the COVID-19 lockdown and online teaching at South African HEIs.

Results have also revealed that at the heart of university efforts to save the 2020 academic year is the principle of equality of opportunities for all students, as shown by the rule of no student left behind. This is apparent in how, as shown earlier, some universities provided technology equipment and data to their needy students, opted for low-tech approaches, and put moratorium on teaching and learning, as well as in some cases on assessments (Asma 2020a; Fengu 2020) until all students have access. All these are commendable acts of tolerance, inclusion and transformation embedded in the White Paper 3 (Department of Education 1997) and White Paper 6 (Department of Education 2001).

Several lessons could be learned from the COVID-19 pandemic. Like this virus, #RMF and #FMF protests should have changed the teaching and learning processes forever. If these protests did not change these processes,

perhaps the COVID-19 lockdown will change them in a way that academics and students will never experience education the same way as before this pandemic. Perhaps the lessons learnt from #RMF and #FMF that Czerniewicz (2020) identifies in her research on university shutdown and going online apply to the COVID-19 lockdown and the future of higher education. Czerniewicz (2020) highlights how these shutdowns have taught them lessons about inequalities among students, staff and institutions. In addition, shutdowns taught them about the significance and role of data ownership and use of data (datafication) and its impact on students. They also learnt about academic and student experiences of online learning and the role of media communication, as well as surveillance in teaching and learning. Some of these lessons, if not all of them, resemble those learnt from the COVID-19 lockdown and as such, should inform policy of education in the future.

The COVID-19 lockdown demands a change of attitudes, mind-sets and practices regarding how knowledge in higher education will and should be imparted. Rodny-Gumede (2020) maintains that COVID-19 has placed increased focus on online learning, thus exerting pressure on universities to adapt course content to online environments. Similarly, Nguyen and Pham (2020) perceive the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity through which online teaching and learning could be strengthened. If COVID-19 has taught us one thing, it is that investment should be made in the infrastructure of online teaching and learning. Not only this, but also that investment should be made in developing academic capacities for online teaching and learning. Moreover, assessment of students' digital needs should not be once-off, but should be packaged in the academic curriculum. In addition, emphasis will have to be placed on self-directed learning, so that students are able to regulate their own learning during tumultuous times, such as presented by the #RMF and #FMF protests and by the COVID-19 lockdown. This requires students having the tools to learn on their own and being curious to continue learning (Department of Basic Education 2020: 11). Additionally, inequalities that permeate the higher education landscape should be attended to, and ways of transforming the higher education system should be found.

Conclusions that could be drawn in this paper are that COVID-19 has transformed and reshaped the manner in which teaching should and will be done in the future. Another conclusion is that, as is the case at other HEIs already, technology in education will be central in the education of the current and future generations. Moreover, it is clear from the contents of this paper that

if the HEIs did not heed the central role that online teaching and learning played during the #RMF and #FMF, now is the time for them to redefine its role. The conclusion is, therefore, that HEIs need to align their curriculum with flexible modes of teaching that make education accessible anywhere and anytime through technology, while being mindful of inequalities that exist among students from different backgrounds. So, while there is so much destruction along the COVID-19 path, there are also vital lessons that the pandemic has contributed to the education landscape as a whole.

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