COVID-19 and Emergency Online Teaching and Learning: A Challenge of Social Justice for University Rural Students

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Abstract

As a response to COVID-19, many universities have decided to use emergency online teaching and learning (EOTL) to salvage teaching and learning time and ensure that 2020 academic activities do not collapse completely. Drawing from social justice theory, this chapter provides a critical analysis of how EOTL, as a response to COVID-19 complexities, will not succeed in the South African rural context, hence exacerbating injustices for students from poor rural communities. We argue that students from poor rural communities encounter deep social and economic challenges that will collude to render EOTL in the context of COVID-19 unresponsive to the realities the majority of students from poor rural communities encounter. To show how EOTL may only favour the already privileged students, we first look critically at the context of rurality in terms of students' access to resources that are critical for learning through EOTL. Secondly, we expose the nature of the familial setup and learning space in South African rural families in order to demonstrate how the setup and space of EOTL are not conducive to learning. While responding to the current event of COVID-19, the chapter contributes to an understanding of how issues that characterise students from poor rural communities may result in the intended innovations, aimed at addressing COVID-19 complexities may in fact challenge the principles of transformation that many universities have made part of their visions since the demise of apartheid.

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Silent thoughts from a student living in a rural area
Eish, I need money to buy ama-data so I can search for journal articles
But then how will I type it?
Maybe I can write it on a piece of paper for now,
And then go and type it at the internet café in town.
But I will need money for the taxi fare, and to pay at the internet café, Eish!
Maybe I can hitch-hike to and from town, then I won't have to pay the R80 that's wanted by the taxi.
I still don't understand what the lecturer wants.
Haibo! We are on lockdown, eish nx! Ngise njeni

Written by: ***Senzelokuhle Mpumelelo Nkabini***
(*Creative Network Magazine*)

Introduction

The insurgence of COVID-19 is reshaping every aspect of our lives. Universities are one of many entities that have been hit hard by the rapid changes that now confront us. The first wave of responses saw universities evacuate students from residences, which, if we now reflect, was a critical decision to contribute to 'flattening the curve' (World Health Organization 2020). Consequently, many universities in South Africa are now engaging with how to facilitate teaching and learning in the context of COVID-19. Through our affiliations and the media, we became aware of the strong push towards moving teaching and learning onto virtual and online platforms, imploring academics to familiarise themselves with the transition to these modes of teaching and learning. We refer to this 'push' in this chapter as emergency online teaching and learning (EOTL). Our conceptualisation is based on the premise that effective online teaching requires careful consideration in planning and instructional design, a process which is currently absent in most

instances in the current emergency shifts (Bozkart & Sharma 2020; Hodges *et al.* 2020). Universities have been toying with online teaching and learning (OTL) for years, but for many, it has remained at the level of rhetoric. Thus, (OTL) is not new, but it is currently being explored as the emergency response to the complexities emanating from COVID-19.

Against this agenda of EOTL, the reality faced by the majority of universities is the number of vulnerable students that are likely to be affected negatively by EOTL and these are students from poor rural communities. From 1994, the number of Black students, including poor Black rural origin students attending universities in South Africa has increased drastically (Cross & Carpentier 2009; Lephalala & Makoe 2012; Mngomezulu, Dhunpath & Munro 2017; Fataar 2018; Swartz, Mahali, Moletsane, Arogundade, Khalema, Cooper & Groenewald 2018). For example, the percentage of these students increased from 49% in 1995 to 68% in 2011 (CHE 2013; Munaka 2016; Gumede *et al.* 2017). As we demonstrate later, a lot has been written on the challenging experiences of these students as they join universities. In the poem above, Senzelokuhle Nkabini uses issues like data, taxi fare and her lack of understanding of what the lecturer wants, to introduce us to the deeply challenging realities that rural students encounter as they try to navigate the space of higher education in South Africa. Given these challenges, a critical question to ask is what EOTL will mean for students from poor rural communities' access to quality education in the context of COVID-19. Drawing from a social justice framework, this chapter attempts to respond to this critical question. We advance two interrelated arguments in the chapter. Being born and bred from rural and township locales, we are not disputing that rural origin students (ROS), as part of generation Z group, are capable of learning in adverse conditions. However, we argue that these students encounter deep social and economic challenges that will collude to render EOTL unresponsive to the realities the majority of students from poor rural communities encounter. From the first argument, we argue that EOTL in the context of COVID-19 and rurality will exacerbate social injustices that students from poor rural communities have already encountered at South African universities and will consequently collapse.

We begin this chapter by presenting social justice as a conceptual framework which we use to provide the premise for the argument that EOTL is bound to propagate limited access to education for students from poor rural communities. The second part of this chapter unearths the realities of being a

rural student at South African universities. In the third section we explore the unfavourable realities of rurality further by looking at the nature of access to resources required for EOTL and the familial setup and learning space in poor rural communities. Consequently, we look at how these access and familial features become creators of social injustice making access of students from poor rural communities to quality higher education a challenge. While our stance may be perceived as pursuing a deficit notion of being a rural student, we argue and believe that this chapter may provide a reflective account of what universities should be cautious about as they push towards EOTL.

Social Justice: A Conceptual Framework

We use social justice as a conceptual framework to explore what emergency online teaching and learning will mean for rural students' access to quality higher education. While we acknowledge the existence of multiple theories of social justice, in this chapter we intentionally do not align ourselves with one specific notion of social justice. Instead, we draw from multiple perspectives in order to provide a rich account of what we envisage as a socially just provision of education to university students from rural communities.

Much has been written about social justice, without offering a concise definition of it (Hytten & Bettez 2011). Similarly, Hlalele (2012) argues that social justice, like many social concepts, has varied and complex definitions. He further argues that 'a general definition of social justice is hard to arrive at and even harder to implement' (Hlalele 2012:112). Despite the varied and complex meanings, social justice is generally concerned with the achievement of a just and fair society (Brennan, Enders, Valimaa, Musselin & Teichler 2008; Hlalele & Alexander 2012). A just and fair society demands that people, despite their standing in the echelons of society, are afforded rights and opportunities (Hlalele 2012). Social justice has kinships and associations with notions of human and socio-economic rights, social inclusion, equity, and access to resources and capabilities for human wellbeing (Singh 2011). Hlalele (2012:112) further posits that 'social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition and empathy'. It is now accepted within the transformation agenda that education in South Africa and elsewhere should be provided within the confines of social justice. This view is driven by the fact that 'Education is a social entity and takes input from the society and returns output to it as well' (Abdullah & Chaudhry 2018:1). For education to contribute to the society,

ensuring the distribution of what is beneficial and valued to the society, it must be driven by principles of social justice. 'Higher education institutions are regarded as central to economic and social development because of their role in the production of knowledge, innovations, and high-level skills necessary for economic growth and competitiveness' (Singh 2011). We argue that in providing access to knowledge, innovations and high-level skills for rural students, universities are charged with the responsibility of dismantling institutional obstacles that have deprived rural students from participating on par with other students (Fraser 2008; Hlalele 2012) from affluent communities in social interactions.

Within the ambit of social justice, universities should ensure that in the provision of emergency online teaching and learning, the Constitutional right of rural students to education is not compromised. They further have to recognise and be empathetic to the learning difficulties that are posed by the socio-economic status of students and find approaches to circumvent undermining justice for these students. As mechanisms providing equitable access to knowledge, universities must ensure that rural students have the resources available that will facilitate access to knowledge and high-level skills. The big question is whether universities can achieve this. We are of the conviction that because of the negative rural realities and the experiences of students from poor rural contexts in universities, which we discuss in the subsequent sections, the move towards EOTL is bound to promote some deprivation of these students' access to quality education, which should be about unlimited access to knowledge and the attainment of high-level skills and innovation. This will in turn exacerbate, instead of disrupt and subvert arrangements (Hlalele 2012) that have promoted marginalisation and exclusion of rural students in higher education.

Towards a Socially Just EOTL

In South Africa, a socially just EOTL cannot be understood and conceptualised outside the parameters of Education White Paper 3 of 1997 (Republic of South Africa 1997), which is the first legal blue print advocating for social justice in universities. To provide a guide to what we see as a socially just EOTL, we use this White Paper, together with principles discussed in the preceding section. In order to consider recent developments, we also look into the debates around fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and its implications for a socially just EOTL.

The White Paper suggests eight principles for transformed higher education, which we believe socially just EOTL should respond to. In this chapter we focus on a few of these principles, namely equity, development, quality, efficiency, and effectiveness (Republic of South Africa 1997). From the context of 4IR, high-level skills have been noted as critical, and for university education to be regarded as just, its ability to provide such skills should be assessed (Yang & Cheng 2018).

Equity, as it relates to universities, moves beyond access to higher education to include ensuring that all students can succeed in it, ensuring that students have equal opportunities to develop their talents (James 2007; Robeyns 2011) regardless of their social status in the society. As it relates to students from poor rural communities, equity means these students are not only afforded space to enrol at universities, but it also means universities are obliged to create a space that is conducive to these students' access to knowledge, which is critical in developing their talents. Development is also linked to equity in that it has to do with enabling universities to contribute to the common good of society through promoting knowledge production and application, building human capacity, and promoting opportunities for lifelong learning (Republic of South Africa 1997), in line with this, a socially just EOTL should entail capacity building for all students so that they may contribute to the common good of their communities. We argue that this will require a space for knowledge sharing. Furthermore, 'the fast advancement of various technologies has led to partial or full automation of many job positions' (Xing, *et al.* 2018:173) and hence access to the equal development of talents will therefore be required to be in line with this feature of 4IR. Given the context of the 4IR, we also argue that socially just EOTL should also ensure that students develop advanced knowledge and skills to thrive in the highly technologised context.

Another important aspect of a socially just EOTL is its ability to expose students to quality education. Although the concept of quality higher education remains difficult to define and remains with multiple meanings due to different objectives that different universities are pursuing (Olaskoaga-Larrauri *et al.* 2016), here we define quality as the institution's ability to teach in such a manner that students are enabled to participate in and contribute to the wellbeing of their communities. Furthermore, from the 4IR perspective, it is argued that quality higher education can be viewed as education that exposes students to uninterrupted access to learning materials and making it easy reach

to peers. It is further argued that universities should take a great leap in promoting space for students to collaborate and be productive (Xing, Marwala & Marwala 2018). Consequently, we argue that EOTL should be pursued along these ends. Connected to quality are the concepts of effectiveness and efficiency as pillars of transformed universities. As with quality, an effective university is one that can achieve its goals, where efficiency is connected to effectiveness in ensuring that goals are achieved within affordable means (Republic of South Africa 1997).

Above we have explicated what, in our view and from literature and policy, constitutes EOTL that meets social justice demands. However, we need to ask: can universities respond to these social justice challenges through the current conception of EOTL? To respond to this question, we now provide a critical analysis of how South African students from poor rural communities have continued to suffer in universities as a result of social injustices. We do this to demonstrate how these students, now further affected by the abnormal setup posed by COVID-19, may not have access to knowledge in the way they would in a normal university environment and how this will exacerbate the challenge of equity, redress, development, effectiveness, and efficiency.

Challenges of Rural Students in a Normal University Setup

From the onset, we argue that while access for Black rural students has increased since 1994 (Cross & Carpentier 2009; Mngomezulu, *et al.* 2017; Fataar 2018; Swartz *et al.* 2018) the normal university teaching and learning setup where students have contact with lecturers daily has, to date, failed to ensure justice for many students from poor socio-economic backgrounds, which are mostly rural. Concurring with this argument, Mathebula (2019) argues that rural students who qualify for university entry in South Africa are likely to encounter perpetual challenges that require a constant struggle to succeed. He cites the failure of secondary schooling in preparing rural students well enough for university study. In this case, Mathebula talks about students who study through contact. This leaves no doubt that the new 'normal university' where rural students are expected to learn while at home will propagate the existing injustices that we have, for a long time, failed to address.

Cross and Carpentier (2009:15) argue that 'Black students from rural areas very often feel completely foreign to a campus culture dominated by cultural practices of middle and elites class tradition'. The foreign feeling is

associated with many challenging realities. The first one is the accessibility of curriculums due to language, difficult content, and technology-driven teaching and learning (Fataar 2018). As evidence of this, Diab, Flack, Mabuza and Moolman (2015), in their study of curriculum challenges encountered by South African rural-origin (RO) health-science students, found that ROs experienced course content, language of teaching and learning and technology used to access the content more challenging than their urban counterparts do. Similarly, Madondo (2018) posits that the science curriculum is organized in a way that favours certain worldviews over others and consequently leaves ROS feeling alienated, because what they bring with them is often not recognised or seen as significant knowledge in the science curriculum. The issue of language is also identified by Cross and Carpentier (2009) as a challenge to curriculum accessibility and they argue that the feeling of strangeness is reinforced by the difficulty for ROs to articulate their own system of values and express themselves in their mother tongue. Due to the above curriculum access challenges, ROs may end up being labelled as underprepared or underperforming students, and this has been linked with high dropout rates and failure to graduate on time (Cross & Carpentier 2009; Pillay & Ngcobo 2010; Fataar 2018; Timmis & Muhuro 2019).

The challenge of underperformance is not foreign in South Africa, especially among students from poor rural communities (Pillay & Ngcobo 2010; Mngomezulu, *et al.* 2017; Mathebula 2019). For example, in 2013, the Council of Higher Education (CHE) reported high dropout and incompletion rates for Black and Coloured students (CHE 2013). It is further asserted that only one in four students at contact institutions in South Africa complete their degrees on time. Furthermore, 48% of students from contact institutions complete their three-year qualifications in five years and in cases where some students have been excluded and re-admitted, only 55% finally graduate (Swartz *et al.* 2018), with the completion rate for Black students being 50% lower than that of White students (CHE 2016). This suggests that students from poor economic backgrounds, especially Black rural students at universities in South Africa are currently struggling. The challenge this abnormal COVID-19 era poses suggests there will be no contact at institutions, at least until the spread of the virus is capped. Given that students, especially those from poor rural communities have struggled under normal conditions, how will they flourish as distance student studying through EOTL? We argue that the failure of universities in fulfilling the ends of social justice in a normal contact

university means that it is highly likely that EOTL will not thrive in a context where students are exposed daily to the complexities faced by their families. In the two upcoming sections we provide further reasons to give credence to this argument.

EOTL and Rurality

In this section we delve into a critical discussion about what it means to be a rural student in the context of emergency online teaching and learning that COVID-19 has introduced. The realities of being a rural student at a South African university present two critical issues, which we believe threatens the success of emergency online teaching and learning, and consequently access to quality higher education for rural students. These critical issues can be categorised as: *Access to resources for online teaching and learning* and *familial setup and space for learning.*

Rural Students' Access to Resources for EOTL

Emergency online teaching and learning requires that all students, irrespective of their location, continue to have access to educational opportunities. We acknowledge that most of the student cohort that is currently enrolled in universities is the Generation Z (Gen-Z) population. This Gen-Z cohort is said to be the most diverse generation and the biggest consumers of technology. This has earned them the title of Digital Natives (Mohr & Mohr 2017). Having grown up in the information age, they are not intimidated by technology and are quite comfortable in using it to access information (Mohr & Mohr 2017). However, the digital divide leaves many students who are currently located in rural areas in a disadvantaged position. Because of various socio-economic factors, which will later be elaborated on, they are systematically digitally disconnected and find themselves in involuntary digital quarantine (Park 2017). So, while belonging to the Gen-Z, their circumstances have for the most part limited their access to the staples of modern life into which they were born (Hohlfeld *et al.* 2017).

Their limited access is influenced by the digital divide which describes how various multi-dimensional factors affect how the internet is accessed and used (Wessels 2010) and how these factors either enhance or inhibit this access. One of the factors relates to the demographic (age, ethnicity, gender) and socio-

economic factors (income, status, level of education) (Wessels 2013; Ragnedda & Muschert 2013). Another factor relates to infrastructure and the various material resources needed for access (Van Dijk 2005; Ragnedda & Muschert 2013). A third factor worth mentioning pertains to the divide being the product of low skills and limited cultural capital in the use of digital resources (Van Dijk 2005; Ragnedda & Muschert 2013). These factors configure in different ways across the globe and in South Africa geographical location and ethnicity significantly shape the digital inequities produced by the digital divide (Wessel 2013). The COVID-19 pandemic is imploring us to pay attention to the long-existing inequities that were systematically shaped by colonialism and apartheid, but continue to shape our current reality (Kathard, Galvaan & Kleintjes 2020). While these inequities exist in the wider society, they are more deeply entrenched for rural students and communities who, as a result of these previous systems, have experienced intense forms of disadvantage (Timmis *et al.* 2019). As such, COVID-19 has surfaced at a time when rural students are already experiencing the digital divide as an inhibiting barrier to their access of digital resources and technology. The pandemic has shown that it not only exacerbates existing inequalities, but simultaneously it creates new ones (Mohamedbhai 2020; Timmis 2020).

We now expand on how the above-mentioned factors influence students from poor rural communities and how the emerging proposals for EOTL will deprive these students of access to quality education. As previously mentioned, we are aware of the emerging proposals by universities who have articulated their intention to resume academic activities through EOTL. There has been a commitment by these institutions that they will try to the best of their abilities to leave no student behind. In order to fulfil this commitment, some universities negotiated with mobile networks for zero-rated access to certain university sites; they have committed to provisionally providing students with data; and have further stated that laptops will be provided for students (Dell 2020a; 2020b). It is, however, unknown how these initiatives will be financed or for how long.

What we do know is that data costs in South Africa are high, such that in 2016 there was a #DataMustFall campaign to compel providers to reduce data costs (Chothia 2017). These high costs will be a prohibitive factor if students are requested at any stage to purchase their own data (Chothia 2017). This will be even more challenging for rural students because they come from poor families where financial resources are already strained (Mngomezulu *et*

al. 2017; Sulla & Zikhali 2018; Swartz *et al.* 2018). This is just one of many obstacles that Senzelokuhle highlights in his poem where he wonders where he will obtain the means to purchase data. The geographical location of rural students is also a barrier to access. In rural communities, internet connectivity and accessibility to a stable connection are scarce and in some remote areas these are not available at all (Chothia 2017). So, while the provision of laptops and data may circumvent access that emanates from a lack of hardware and inadequate income, this response is premised on a binary view of the digital divide, which assumes that access is merely about these resources.

As explained above, and shown in the previous discussion, there are other significant factors that inhibit access. Scholars (see Cross & Carpentier 2009; Czerniewicz & Brown 2014; Holhfeld *et al.* 2017; Park 2017; Timmis 2020; Timmis & Muhuro 2019) argued that access is multi-dimensional and digital inequalities are not only perpetuated by a lack of ICT access and technological infrastructure and resources. We argue that the rural ecosystem and the lived experiences of students in these areas are multi-faceted and the proposals offered ignore and misrecognize the circumstances faced by rural students. Cross and Carpentier (2009:7) posit that the advent of massification resulted in universities having to provide access to what they term 'new students' or 'non-traditional' who 'fall into the category of poorly or under prepared' and come from families who 'are more and more distant from the cultural and intellectual norms required by the educational institution, usually dominated by the values of the elite'. During this expansion to access universities made little effort, if any, to transform from within and acknowledge, recognise, and accommodate this 'new student' cohort (Timmis *et al.* 2019).

The 'new students' have remained invisible and on entering universities they have to renegotiate themselves, their knowledge, their practices and identities against trying conditions in order to 'bridge the gap and work their way across the community/school and university divide' (Fataar 2018: 8). This working their way across also pertains to the rural students having to bridge the digital divide that is caused by the limited digital literacies they bring when they enter the university. Studies (see Kajee & Balfour 2011; Czerniewicz & Brown 2014; Timmis *et al.* 2019; Timmis & Muhuro 2019) looking at the digital literacies of first-year rural students have reported that rural students have limited opportunities to cultivate digital literacy prior to entering higher education. This is the result of being at schools and in

communities where ICT facilities are not available and of having limited economic capital to purchase smartphones, laptops and/or data. In some communities, internet cafés do exist, but they are located far away and require additional commuting costs, which unavailable are at most times as a result of insufficient economic capital (Timmis & Muhuro 2019). Senzelokuhle's poem epitomizes similar constraints and struggles pertaining to data affordability and the additional high cost of having to commute to an internet café.

Rural students thus enter the university with limited cultural capital in terms of digital literacy (Kajee & Balfour 2011; Czerniewicz & Brown 2014; Timmis *et al.* 2019; Timmis & Muhuro 2019). This is not alarming, because digital literacy is unattainable without digital access and the ability to use it efficiently and effectively (Holhfeld *et al.* 2017). Consequently, this prior lack of digital access, which is not of their own doing, makes it difficult for transition when they enrol at university. In their first encounters with technology students experience anxieties and challenges, such as not even knowing how to operate a computer or laptop and having their assignments disappear (Timmis & Muhuro 2019). It creates challenges for them when they must compete on equal footing with digitally competent students from affluent communities (Kajee & Balfour 2011). This lowers their self-esteem, as they see themselves as inadequate and dispositioned against the technological expectations of the university (Timmis & Muhuro 2019).

Together, the studies above provide insights into the digital divide that exists when rural students enter universities. While the focus of many of these studies is on first-year entrants, we argue that these findings may be stretched, as well as apply to those at other levels of study from similar contexts. We make this assertion because some universities are still in the process of integrating blended learning and the acquisition of digital skills is related to usage levels (Park 2017) which students have not been sufficiently exposed to. Unless these students have been fully acculturalized with the necessary digital skills and literacy, emergency online teaching and learning may also disadvantage them, given that they already face the challenges previously mentioned. We argue that the digital divide that currently exists cannot be mitigated under the current circumstances to ensure that values of justice, fairness and equity are upheld through EOTL. We further submit that is too optimistic to believe that EOTL will ensure equity and quality, given the challenges that rural students currently encounter at the 'normal university' and now in the proposed remote learning space where they find themselves.

Familial Setup and Space for Learning for Rural Students

In a recent book, *Studying while Black: Race, Education and Emancipation in South African Universities*, by Swartz *et al.* (2018), the reality of the familial setup many working-class students find themselves in is well documented. Through the interviews with some Black students, the authors alert us to the issue that some Black students come from families where there are both social and economic obstacles. One social challenge is that once students leave their residences, they join families where there are no biological parents and they live with grandparents or their relatives. In other cases, students assume the role of parents themselves in different forms (Mngomezulu *et al.* 2017). Swartz *et al.*'s (2018) study further finds that families of students studied experienced rapidly changing financial circumstances as an obstacle to their studies. Consequently, Mngomezulu *et al.* (2017) in their study about why university students continued to perform poorly despite being funded, found that students from poor family backgrounds use their funding to support their families. It is argued that learning occurs in a wider social context (Mokoe 2006) and it involves actions and reactions in an exchange between an individual and the external environment (Robotham 2004). To show how the context may drive the actions and reactions of students, the stories of students from Mngomezulu, *et al.* (2017:137) teach us that 'the suffering of their [students'] families contributed to their psychological schemas, which consequently impacted on their academic performance'. It is important to highlight that these sufferings happened when students were accommodated in university residences away from exposure to the daily family sufferings. On the contrary, emergency online teaching and learning will occur while students are home and exposed daily to the psychologically and emotionally draining realities of poverty. Education driven by social justice, as coined by Sen (2011), is driven by the agenda of ensuring that every student is able to flourish. Given this, we argue here that the familial circumstances presented above provide a social and economic context within which universities expect learning and access to quality education to occur. However, we are of the view that flourishing as a student in the described context may not be easy and is bound to subject rural students to injustice in terms of basic access to education. The above context can render it hard for rural students to engage in emergency online teaching and learning, which will undoubtedly limit their access to quality education, a social justice concern.

In addition to social and economic difficulties, the familial space for rural students may not be conducive to emergency online teaching and learning to take place due to multiple reasons ranging from access to technological resources as discussed earlier and rural family space as communal and shared. Regarding resources, many rural African family spaces lack access to basic technology. The students lack access to a home computer and where the computer is available as provided by universities for emergency online teaching, many rural towns do not have high-speed Internet connections (Malhoit 2005; Mahai 2014). Despite the access to resources, when rural students are at home, they are exposed to other family responsibilities that make the space less conducive to learning. For example, in a study conducted in Tanzania on rural students' experiences of an open university, Mahai (2014) shares a story of a student who was only able to study on weekends due to other family commitments during the week. While this student was busy with his employment responsibilities, Mahai argues in his study that other students relied on support from other family members to be able to study, which suggests that, depending on the family characteristics, emergency online teaching and learning may not work. Supporting this from a South African context, Moletsane (2012) argues that rural life is governed by a sense of collective responsibility from an early age. Rural students will be expected to share home responsibilities during this time and with some being the only adults in their families, emergency online teaching and learning are bound to fail as a result of the strenuous nature of rural home responsibilities (Timmis *et al.* 2019). These types of challenges are likely to disadvantage female students more than male students, as women may be unable to escape household responsibilities like cooking, fetching water and firewood.

In addition to family responsibilities, extended family households dominate most rural South African families (Amoateng & Ritcher 2003) and our experiences as authors coming from extended families teach us that in a poverty-stricken, extended family environment, students do not even have a chair and table to study at. Furthermore, the size of the family means that the space is frequently communal and may not allow for individual study activities. We cannot ignore the reality that the conditions outlined above are adverse and not conducive to online teaching and learning. However, by making this point we do not neglect the fact that rural students have already demonstrated their resilience and capabilities (Malhoit 2005; Calitz 2019) by making it to the university and hence they can study under these conditions. However, our

argument is that pushing them to study in this kind of setup is an injustice and bound to affect their access to resources relevant for gaining knowledge (Mathebula 2019).

In his address to South Africans, Dr Blade Nzimande acknowledged that higher education is aimed at transformation and dismantling poverty. It is now the same poverty that higher education is aiming to address that is a major barrier, because the conditions, as described above, are not conducive to EOTL. We argue that the setup and space are barriers to access and students should not be expected to study in an environment where they will not have equal opportunities to develop their talents (James 2007; Robeyns 2011), a social justice demand. As mentioned earlier, social justice has kinships with social inclusion, capabilities for human wellbeing, care, recognition, and empathy (Singh 2011; Hlalele 2012) and to enforce EOTL under such conditions can be a contradiction and indictment to these values.

Concluding Thoughts

In this chapter our intention was to draw from a social justice framework to argue how EOTL as a response to COVID-19 complexities will not succeed in the context of rurality, hence exacerbating injustices for students from poor rural communities. We argue that students from poor rural communities encounter deep social and economic challenges that will collude to render EOTL in the context of COVID-19 unresponsive to the realities that the majority of students from poor rural communities encounter. In line with our argument, in the chapter we have shed light on what a socially just university and EOTL entail and through the discussion of access to resources for students from poor rural communities and familial setup and space for learning, we have demonstrated how EOTL, in the context of rurality and COVID-19, will expose students from poor rural communities to education that limits their access to equity, development, quality, effectiveness and efficiency. While, in this chapter our task was to respond to a situation that might be a once-off event, it has shown that institutions should be ahead of change, and innovation proposals should not contradict the outcomes of transformation that the same universities have premised their vision statements on. We note that universities have been toying with online teaching and learning for years, but for many, it has remained at the level of rhetoric; hence the rushed phasing in, which disadvantages some students. We do not suggest in this chapter that students

in poor rural communities are not capable and resilient enough to adapt to virtual ways of learning. However, we caution against a one-size-fits-all approach that will result in the further marginalisation of students from poor rural communities.

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