

## COVID-19 pandemic lockdown impact on parity of participation for students with mental health challenges in higher education

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### ABSTRACT

Despite post-apartheid South Africa's human rights-based education policies, a range of practices, including curriculum design and teaching strategies, continue to disproportionately disadvantage students with disabilities (SWDs). The disadvantage of SWDs that are caused by these practices, results in low access, throughput, and success rates for this group. Recently the situation has been exacerbated by many South African universities' recourse to emergency remote online learning as a result of the effects of COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. The remote learning strategy disadvantaged SWDs, particularly those with invisible disabilities such as mental health challenges, whose voices, as evidenced by this study, continue to be overlooked. The purpose of this study was to explore how SWDs are experiencing emergency remote online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown. Online self-administered questionnaires were used to collect data from five postgraduate students with mental health challenges at one historically white university in South Africa. Data were coded and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of inductive and deductive thematic analysis, and Nancy Fraser's approach to social justice was used as a theoretical lens. The study identified numerous barriers that highlight the under-preparedness of the sampled university in providing equal educational opportunities, with students with mental health challenges as well as those with other types of invisible disabilities being disproportionately affected. This study has added new knowledge by identifying both new challenges and opportunities for emergency remote online learning for students with mental health challenges. Thus, the study calls for universities to achieve parity of participation for students with mental health challenges by consulting with these students if higher education institutions (HEIs) are to effectively support this group to overcome the identified emergency remote online learning-oriented barriers.

## Introduction

Drawing on a sample of five students with mental health challenges at one South African university, the study investigated this group's experience regarding emergency remote online learning during the early phases of the country's COVID-19 nationwide lockdown. Within the field of Disability Studies, the medical model of disability defines disability from a scientific perspective as a physical and medically-diagnosed deficit which, according to Oliver (1999:4), is seen as "an individual problem requiring medical treatment". In contrast, the social model of disability takes a radical departure from the medical model as the former mainly draws on the lived experiences of persons with disabilities (PWDs). By doing so, the social model of disability places attention and onus on the broader society for being oppressive towards PWDs, thus denying them equal educational opportunities (Freud, 1999).

In the South African context, it has been argued that the apartheid era's educational system was predominantly influenced by the medical model of disability, and this reinforced the social exclusion of PWDs. This is particularly true of the 1948 Special Schools Act (SSA), which provided for a segregated education system that categorised children with disabilities according to both race and disability (Muthukrishna & Schoeman, 2000). This form of discrimination often made it difficult for learners with disabilities to get good grades which would enable them to enrol in higher education (HE). In contrast, post-apartheid South Africa saw the passage of enabling inclusive education policies aimed at equalising educational opportunities for students with disabilities (SWDs). These policies drew on the tenets of the social model of disability as well as the human rights approach as espoused in the post-apartheid South Africa's Constitution.

Inclusive education as defined by Dalton, Mckenzie and Kahonde (2012:2), is an educational approach that promotes supporting SWDs including those with mental health challenges "to be involved with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible". Various international human rights instruments, international policy documents, and international gatherings have endorsed inclusive education by focusing on this concept. For instance, the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), the 2000 Dakar Framework for Action (UNESCO, 2000), and the 2015 Incheon Declaration (UNESCO, 2015) have all called for the international community to commit to providing meaningful inclusive education through promoting equal access, participation and academic success opportunities for all PWDs within mainstream educational settings. On an international level, Article 24 of the United Nations on the Right of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) on 'inclusive education'

obligates State Parties, including South Africa, to create enabling educational environments in which SWDs are provided with equal opportunities to access and succeed academically within these institutions (United Nations, 2006). Article 3 of the UNCRPD on 'reasonable accommodations'<sup>1</sup> calls upon State Parties to provide SWDs with appropriate reasonable accommodations in a timely fashion if this group is to learn effectively within educational institutions (United Nations, 2006). Proponents have argued that reasonable accommodations play a crucial role in levelling the playing field for SWDs in the learning process (Dalton et al, 2012).

In the South African HE context, inclusive education initiatives targeted at SWDs are facilitated by numerous disability inclusion policies. These include the 2001 Education White Paper 6 on Special Needs Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System, and most recently, the 2018 Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post-School Education and Training System. Regardless of these policies, recent research reveals that most SWDs especially those with such invisible disabilities as mental health challenges are disproportionately affected in comparison with their disabled peers with visible disabilities, or those without disabilities (Chiwandire, 2019).

Following the World Health Organization's (2019) definition, mental health challenges include invisible disabilities such as "depression, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and other psychoses, dementia, and developmental disorders including autism", among others. Research has shown that symptoms of mental health challenges can potentially impact the full participation and academic success of some students in HE (Storrie, Ahern & Tuckett, 2010). In this light, it is critical for higher education institutions (HEIs) to make concerted efforts to improve academic outcomes for students experiencing mental health challenges if these students are to also be retained as well as excel in their studies. This is especially important given that the effects of the national COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, which resulted in all South African universities abruptly switching to emergency remote online learning, are likely to exacerbate the challenges to SWDs retention. This is evidenced by Ntombela (2022:534), who argues that "when universities closed due to Covid-19, all students suffer in one way or the other but those with disabilities suffered the most as their support is not mainstreamed". Ntombela (2022) further argues that this resulted in most SWDs being left out in

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<sup>1</sup> Reasonable accommodations, as defined by Hayes and Bulat (2017:37), refers to "a change in curriculum, method of instruction, assessment, homework or other school-based activity or requirement that is designed to reduce or eliminate the effects of a disability on a student. An example is extending time on tests or homework". Hayes and Bulat (2017:37) further argue that "reasonable accommodations are intended to provide equal access and do not fundamentally alter the nature of the material or instructional environment".

terms of equal and full access to quality education in comparison to their non-disabled peers in South African HEIs.

Against this background, drawing on the data of a sample of female students with mental health challenges at one South African university, the purpose of this paper is to discuss the preparedness and measures taken by the participants' university in supporting their academic needs as they learn remotely. Firstly, the paper discusses the historical background and context of mental health issues from an international perspective and then funnels down to the South African HE context. Secondly, the paper provides a detailed description of the methodology utilised to collect the data as well as the theoretical framework used to analyse the data. Thirdly, the paper goes on to discuss the dominant findings of the study which are divided into three broad categories including 'conduciveness of homes as places of remote learning', 'inclusive teaching, learning and assessment practices', and the 'flawed one-size-fits-all approach to disability inclusion'. Fourthly, the paper discusses these major findings and how they contribute new knowledge to the body of disability inclusion in HE. Lastly, a concluding remarks section discusses key recommendations and what future research should focus on.

The following section discusses the contextual background of issues related to mental health globally and then in the South African HE context and how prioritising mental health is key to the disability policy framework aimed at advancing the goals of inclusion in education. Inclusion is defined by Krischler, Powell and Pit-Ten Cate (2019:634) as the "placement of students with disabilities or in need of special support in general education classrooms". Inclusion is also said to be achieved when educational institutions take proactive measures to both support the academic needs of SWDs in the classroom setting, as well as their social needs outside the classroom setting in the form of extracurricular activities, among others (Krischler et al, 2019). For this reason, proponents believe that inclusion has beneficial outcomes for both SWDs and their non-disabled peers through potentially enhancing these students' academic achievement, their well-being, and the formation and sustenance of social relationships within HEIs (Krischler et al, 2019).

### **Context: Mental health in higher education**

In response to the growing numbers of students with mental health challenges enrolling in many HEIs across the globe, researchers (Markoulakis & Kirsh, 2013) have called for these institutions to create an enabling environment for this group to flourish both academically and socially. Yet, achieving this

on an international level continues to be a challenge as has been evidenced by research conducted internationally since 2000. To elaborate on this, there has been a growth in the body of research exploring issues of mental health among students in HEIs that has been conducted mainly in the global North, especially in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. In the Australian HE context, for instance, research has found that, despite the growing numbers of students with mental health challenges in this country, most institutions are still lagging in supporting these students' academic needs effectively. This is evidenced by most Australian institutions' failure to create a conducive environment for students with mental health challenges to officially self-disclose their disabilities timeously, leading to the failure to provide adequate counselling services to these students, and to create a non-ableist university culture that values and accepts diversity and difference (Stallman & Shochet, 2009; Wynaden, McAllister, Tohotoa, Al Omari, Heslop, Duggan ..., 2014; Reavley, McCann & Jorm, 2012; Carter, Pagliano, Francis & Thorne, 2017). Additionally, findings also show that most Australian HEIs lack appropriate mental health policy interventions and that students with mental health challenges are often at risk of being stigmatised by the non-disabled community within these institutions (Stallman & Shochet, 2009; Wynaden et al, 2014; Reavley et al, 2012; Carter et al, 2017).

In the United States, studies show that the increase in the enrolment numbers of students with mental health challenges has coincided with these students often being denied reasonable accommodations by their lecturers (Souma, Rickerson & Burgstahler, 2022). Other studies found that stigma against mental health as well as the lack of adequate social and academic support from lecturers are some of the challenges experienced by students with mental health challenges in HEIs in the United States (Kain, Chin-Newman & Smith, 2019). Despite the rising numbers of students with mental health challenges, Canadian HEIs have also been reported to be grappling with responding to these students' needs because of inadequate mental health professionals especially counselling psychologists (Wiens, Bhattarai, Dores, Pedram, Williams, Bulloch & Patten, 2020). Other Canadian studies have pointed to the inadequate provision of campus mental health services, denial of reasonable accommodations by lecturers, and most campuses' ableist culture, which reinforces mental health stigma, as some of the challenges experienced by students with mental health challenges (Giamos, Lee, Suleiman, Stuart & Chen, 2017). Other studies have expressed concerns about how most Canadian HEIs pay minimal attention to doing awareness-raising initiatives about mental health issues as well as investing financially to improve "mental health infrastructure support on campuses; in particular, accessibility to campus mental health resources" (Nowrouzi-Kia, Stier, Ayyoub, Hutchinson, Laframboise & Mihailidis, 2021:1).

Despite most of the studies investigating issues of mental health among students in HE is having been conducted in global North countries, it is notable that South Africa is currently amongst the few countries in the global South that is also experiencing a growing number of students with mental health challenges gaining access to HE opportunities. This has also resulted in an emerging body of research investigating issues related to the inclusion of students with mental health challenges at these institutions. To this end, several South African studies (Nicholas, 2002; Schreiber, 2007; Bowman & Payne, 2011) have reported continuous growth in the number of students with mental health challenges, mainly associated with generalised anxiety and depression, seeking campus counselling services at their institutions. Additionally, numerous studies have reported that students with mental health challenges are experiencing unique challenges such as inadequate therapeutic or counselling services as well as minimal well-trained psychologists and counsellors to guide and provide the necessary social support to such students at South African HEIs (Mbuva, 2019; Makiwane, 2018; Chiwandire, 2017; Bantjes, Saal, Lochner, Roos, Auerbach, Mortier ..., 2020; Hendricks, 2016). To this end, it has been recommended that South African HEIs should equally prioritise the provision of quality counselling services to all its students, including those with disabilities, if these institutions are to increase the throughput rates of these students (Bowman & Payne, 2011).

South African HEIs should facilitate the academic inclusion of all SWDs. In this context of disability inclusion in HE, academic inclusion could be defined as an educational approach that enjoins HEIs to make their classroom teaching, learning, and assessment practices as inclusive as possible, especially for SWDs (Chiwandire, 2020). Researchers (Chiwandire, 2019; Lyner-Cleophas, 2019) have pointed to lecturers at South African HEIs as key stakeholders in achieving the goals of academic inclusion, as this cadre is practically involved with teaching SWDs. From an academic inclusion standpoint, some students with mental health challenges have complained about their lecturers' negative attitudes toward mental health as negatively impacting these students' full participation in the teaching and learning process. This is evidenced by numerous studies (Vergunst & Swartz, 2020a; Vergunst & Swartz, 2020b; Chiwandire, 2017) which reported students with mental health challenges being denied reasonable accommodations by their lecturers. In these studies, one of the grounds on which these lecturers denied such students with reasonable accommodations, is the lecturers' erroneous assumption that these students are lazy or faking their disabilities when requesting such accommodations. From a social inclusion point of view, students with mental health challenges have also reported being socially isolated by their non-disabled student peers and this has negatively impacted not only the possibility of friendships formation, but also the sustenance of such friendships (Chiwandire, 2017).

Research shows that stigma associated with mental health is one of the barriers to the academic success of these students. Vergunst (2017) for instance has argued that the stigmatisation of students with mental health challenges in South African HE continues to be a common phenomenon. Vergunst (2017) goes on to further argue that this has resulted in most of these students feeling unable to officially self-disclose their disability despite this putting their academic success in jeopardy as they may be denied reasonable accommodations by their institutions. A study by Bantjes et al (2020) found that the symptoms of mental health, as well as the stigma associated with mental health challenges, have all affected the academic performance of these students in South African HEIs and elsewhere. Against this background, some scholars have recently called for the need for South African HEIs not only to develop formal student mental health policies and strategies but also to ensure that these are constantly implemented, monitored, and evaluated if these institutions are to improve the learning outcomes of these students (Kaminer & Shabalala, 2019; Vergunst, 2017). Bantjes, Lochner, Saal, Roos, Taljaard, Page and others (2019) conducted an online survey of first-year students registered at two separate South African universities. These authors concluded by recommending the need for these sampled HEIs as well as other South African HEIs to pay more attention to “supporting the psychological wellbeing of young adults as they transition into tertiary education” (Bantjes et al, 2019:9).

In South Africa, the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions were first introduced on 15 March 2020. All South African HEIs were equally affected as they were forced to suddenly switch to remote online learning. Since the introduction of these lockdown restrictions, most South African HE researchers (Ramrathan, Ndimande-Hlongwa, Mkhize & Smit, 2020; Motala & Menon, 2020; Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020; Le Grange, 2020; Hedding, Greve, Breetzke, Nel & Van Vuuren, 2020; Schreiber, Moja & Luescher, 2020; Combrink & Oosthuizen, 2020; van Schalkwyk, 2021; Laher, Bain, Bemath, de Andrade & Hassem, 2021) have conducted studies exploring the impact of COVID-19 on the learning of students at different HEIs. Yet most of these studies have overlooked the voices of SWDs, and the minimal available research specifically exploring the learning experiences of this group during COVID-19 lockdowns has primarily been featured in online newspaper articles (Lyner-Cleophas, 2020; Davids, 2020; Ned, McKinney, McKinney & Swartz, 2020). The available academic literature in refereed journals (Ndlovu, 2020; Ngubane-Mokiwa & Zongozz, 2021; Manase, 2021; Ntombela, 2022) has not specifically explored the experiences of students with mental health challenges.

Despite this dearth of literature, some studies show that the number of students with invisible disabilities, including mental health challenges, on South African campuses continue to grow

tremendously. Bantjes, Kagee, McGowan and Steel (2016), have estimated that 12% of South African university students experience anything from moderate to severe symptoms of depression whereas 15% of these students have reported moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety. Despite this growth in numbers, Vergunst (2017) has noted with concern that most South African HEIs continue to support the learning needs of “students with visible disabilities (such as physical disabilities and sensory disabilities)” at the cost of those with invisible disabilities. Against this background, the purpose of the present study was to explore how students with mental health challenges at one South African university were experiencing emergency remote online learning during the COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. In what follows, the methodology used to collect and analyse the data for this study is discussed in greater detail.

## Methodology

The present study draws on the data from a survey of five female postgraduates (Honours and first- and second-year Master’s) students who, at the time of data collection, were registered with either the Faculty of Humanities or Faculty of Education at one South African university. All the participants identified as having a disability, in the form of various mental health challenges which they reported as ranging mainly from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), to mild, seasonal, or chronic depression as well as mild or severe anxiety. In addition, two of the participants also reported having additional invisible disabilities which, for the first participant, was a specific learning disability<sup>2</sup> in the form of dyslexia, and the other participant also had temporal lobe epilepsy. All participants were confirmed to have officially self-disclosed their disability to their institution’s relevant department. Given the difficulty of recruiting participants as it was in the early stages of lockdown restrictions, the researcher resorted to using a combination of snowballing and convenience techniques as effective research participant-recruitment strategies. Despite this, it is notable that neither snowball nor convenience sample recruitment techniques are without limitations. Critics have noted that one of the limitations of convenience sampling (Jones & Gratton, 2009) as well as snowball sampling (Sedgwick, 2013) is that they reinforce selection bias. Such selection bias may result in researchers running the risk of recruiting and interviewing the people they know, thus having a very uniform sample. This was the case in the present study which ended up yielding participants who all self-identified as female students with mental health challenges. This could have also been attributed to the fact that disability

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<sup>2</sup> Hammill, Leigh, McNutt & Larsen (1987:109) define learning disabilities as “a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities”.



research is still a sensitive topic in the South African HE environment. This possibly resulted in participants opting to share the information about the present study with peers within their circle of friends or acquaintances with whom they felt comfortable to openly discuss this topic and the purpose of the study.

Notwithstanding this, however, it is hoped that the findings of the present study will still add value to the limited emerging studies specifically exploring the experiences of female students with disabilities. Most such studies have been conducted in various African countries' universities (Mwarari, 2022; Tuomi, Lehtomäki & Matonya, 2015; Opini, 2012; Moswela & Mukhopadhyay, 2018), and, notably, none of these have focused specifically on the issue of mental health among these participants. In the South African context, little is known about how female students with disabilities experience learning within the country's HEIs. The only available recent study exploring the learning experience of female students with disabilities (Sefora & Ngubane, 2021) did not focus specifically on the issue of mental health nor how COVID-19 impacted the learning experiences of this group.

The researcher utilised online self-administered questionnaires to collect data. The questionnaire was aimed at eliciting how participants were experiencing emergency remote online learning in the early phase of the national lockdown and participants were asked the following questions:

1. How is the COVID-19 lockdown and the recent switch of your university to emergency remote online learning affecting your learning?
2. How is your university currently supporting you including other students with disabilities to succeed during the COVID-19 lockdown emergency remote online learning?
3. What role should lecturers play if they are to support you including other students with disabilities holistically during the COVID-19 lockdown emergency remote online learning?
4. What role should tutors play if they are to support you including other students with disabilities holistically during the COVID-19 lockdown emergency remote online learning?
5. What potential lessons could South African universities derive from COVID-19 emergency remote online learning in terms of supporting students with disabilities at present and in the future?

Regarding ethical considerations, all participants were informed via the invitation to participate that they need to be 18 years and older to be eligible to take part in this study. Participants were also informed that the survey did not involve a foreseeable risk or cost to them, that their responses will be kept confidential, and that the researcher will delete all self-identifying information that could be

linked to their institution. Additionally, participants were also informed that taking part in this survey was completely voluntary, that they were allowed to withdraw at any time, that their responses were to remain anonymous, and that the researcher would use the participants' pseudonyms (Mbali, Lerato, Claudia, Pula, and Elna) when reporting on the findings for publishing purposes. Ethical approval to conduct this research was granted by the sampled university's Ethical Clearance Committee. In what follows, the researcher reports on the theoretical framework used in coding and analysing the data for the present study.

### **Conceptual framing: Fraser's theory of social justice**

In coding and analysing the data, the researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of inductive and deductive thematic analysis and employed Nancy Fraser's (2008, 2003) theory of social justice, as well as her three-dimensional approach to justice, which were used as a theoretical lens. Fraser's approach to social justice emphasises the principle of parity of participation (PPP) which is at the heart of her theory of social justice. As a norm of justice, PPP requires social arrangements to be conducive to all; for all "adult members of society [to] be in a position to interact with one another as peers" (Fraser, 2003:36). To practically achieve parity of participation, Fraser (2003) proposes the need for the removal of three types of obstacles: the denial of social status, economic resources, and political marginalisation – all of which determine one's ability to participate on a par with others.

Seen in this light, Fraser (2003:36) argues that, for vulnerable members of the society to benefit equally from all three dimensions of social justice, they need to have what she refers to as 'equal autonomy' in the form of having "real freedom to participate on a par with others in social life". Fraser (2000:113-114) further argues that what often hinders vulnerable community members from exercising 'equal autonomy' are obstacles that lie in "institutionalised patterns of cultural value that constitute one as comparatively unworthy of respect or esteem". These institutionalised patterns may take different exclusionary forms including legal, institutional, policy-bound, and everyday social practices, to name but a few (Fraser, 2000).

In recent years, numerous scholars (Keddie, 2012; Cazden, 2012) have applied Fraser's three-dimensional model for understanding matters of justice in educational contexts. Keddie (2012:264), for instance, has called for educational institutions to practically operationalise Fraser's theory of social justice if they are to fulfil their commitment "to supporting a more just education for disadvantaged or marginalised learners". Apart from that, Keddie (2012:264) also draws our

attention to the importance of educational institutions to recognise “how students are differently positioned in terms of their equity needs and on providing differential support to address these needs”. It cannot be doubted that South Africa has attempted to address the historical disadvantages suffered by SWDs by providing differentiated support measures in the form of affirmative action-oriented inclusive education policies. Yet achieving full parity of participation for students with mental health challenges (including those with other disabilities), in practice, continues to be a challenge facing most HEIs, making it difficult for most of these students to thrive within these institutions (Mutanga, 2019). Thus, achieving participatory parity for students with mental health challenges in South African HE becomes even more important during COVID-19 times. This is especially true when taking into consideration Universities South Africa’s (USAf) call for universities to ensure that the emergency transition from contact to emergency online learning process should be as inclusive as possible to ensure that 'No student will be left behind' (Prof Bawa cited in Asma, 2020). Seen from this light, in analysing the data the researcher was more interested in discerning whether the sampled university’s practices of supporting students with mental health challenges remotely could be said to be socially just, in the sense of also ensuring that this group was not left out in the learning process. The subsequent section reports on the present study’s dominant findings.

## Findings

### *Conduciveness of homes as places of remote learning*

Participants in the present study expressed different views about how they are experiencing learning remotely from their homes during the COVID-19 lockdown. Mbali, for instance, finds her home as not instilling a learning mindset fully as she must multitask academic responsibilities with household chores:

I am struggling because being in a different environment with family has put my schoolwork on hold due to family responsibilities.

Participants doing practically-oriented courses seem to be disproportionately affected by other factors which do not necessarily have to do with their gender, but more with their geographical location, as they are learning remotely. Lerato is a case in point as she expressed her concerns about the scarcity of supplies as a major barrier to having to submit her practical-based work components for her course on time:

I am a Fine Art student, and I don't have all the supplies I need in order to complete certain work. This, it is still very frustrating and inconvenient because art supplies are difficult to come across where I live.

Claudia cautions that the constant heavy presence of police enforcing the COVID-19 lockdown regulations in certain neighbourhoods could potentially exacerbate some students' symptoms of mental health, thus making it difficult for this group to study and concentrate:

With police patrolling the streets, students who are still dealing with the aftermath of the 2016 #Fees Must Fall protests are more anxious and feel unsafe around the police.

In contrast, participants whose homes could be said to be conducive to emergency remote online learning have commented on how the COVID-19 lockdown will be less likely to negatively impact their daily learning experience. Lerato, for instance, comments about how productive she has been since working from home as it provides her with a comfort zone, and also cautions how this should not be generalised to other students:

I also think that this period of time would be refreshing for some as we're now allowed to work in a space that is comfortable and familiar, but there are some people who have university as an escape so this could also be hell for others.

Pula brings our attention to the issue of class and affordability on the part of parents as this determined their capability to make their home environment conducive to learning for their children enrolled at South African universities:

I think it is too early to say how this move has impacted students with impairments. Online learning will allow students to work in environments they are comfortable with, assuming they have the financial means to access the new learning platforms.

The dominant finding from most of the above participants' narratives highlights a consensus that successful emergency remote online learning is mainly determined by how hospitable or inhospitable each student's home environment and neighbourhoods are to one's successful learning.

*Inclusive teaching, learning, and assessment practices*

## a) Concerns about workload

There seems to be a consensus among participants that the COVID-19 lockdown has presented them with both challenges and opportunities. Some of the participants for instance have highlighted that their lecturers should do more to improve the learning experiences of students with mental health challenges learning remotely. In particular, the following participants voiced their concerns about increased workload and lack of constant consultation from their lecturers as imposing a barrier on this group to utilising learning support strategies that can improve these students' emergency remote online learning experiences:

Lecturers could play a huge role in ensuring that students are not bombarded with work at the moment, because much of the anxiety is about not being able to get enough work done and the fear of being left behind (Claudia).

Open communication between lecturers and students will provide students with a platform to express their needs and have these needs to be incorporated in the new teaching design (Mbali).

I think that lecturers should be considerate and also be as patient as possible with students with impairments because it does get very difficult in times like these, and we do have different needs compared to other non-disabled students (Lerato).

## b) Monitoring of progress

Apart from only expecting lecturers to support students with mental health challenges remotely, the following participants believe that relevant university authorities should also constantly monitor the progress of students with mental health challenges to ascertain whether these students are coping with emergency online learning. The following student believes that doing so will prevent a situation whereby some students will struggle more due to the lack of face-to-face interaction and assurance:

A supportive role when it pertains to trying to track how learners with disabilities are dealing with online learning as not all persons with disabilities are able to learn independently (Elna).

Some students expressed the view that they require face-to-face connection and that working from home increases loneliness and anxiety:

There is no one I have to bounce ideas with. Being at university allows me to be surrounded by a large number of people who can assist and inspire me, I currently do not have that (Mbali).

Online learning may cause additional worry to students with anxiety and depressive disorders. As we are often reliant on constant face-to-face interaction with our educators to reduce anxiety about course content and assessments (Pula).

The participants doing their Master's degrees commended their supervisors for continuing to be an important source of academic and social support through various virtual platforms and this helped these students to mitigate the challenges of adjusting to emergency remote online learning:

My supervising lecturer has offered to have Zoom/WhatsApp calls in order to check progress (Lerato).

My supervisor has been a great help but I constantly feel like an inconvenience constantly contacting her (Mbali).

#### c) Mode of teaching preferences

For one Honours student participant who also has a specific learning disability (dyslexia), she appreciated the flexibility in terms of submission of academic work as one of the beneficial outcomes of learning remotely due to COVID-19 lockdowns:

It has helped because I am able to pace myself. Before it would be difficult for me to meet my deadlines because of the time constraints (Elna).

Elna's narrative resonates with some of the findings from Manase's (2021) recent study of fifteen students with various specific learning disabilities at one South African university. That study found that most participants reported experiencing better engagement with emergency remote online learning in a way that outweighed some notable challenges (Manase, 2021).

As for Pula, she believes that students with visible disabilities are more likely to fare better during the COVID-19 imposed emergency remote online learning in comparison with their student peers with certain visible disabilities:

Ordinarily, there is an assumption that students with impairments are adversely affected by major changes in curriculum design, but it is, in my opinion, that remote learning may actually be better suited for the needs of students with physical impairments; visual impairments, hearing impairments, and mobility issues.

#### *Flawed one-size-fits-all approach to disability inclusion*

According to Mutanga, Manyonga & Ngubane–Mokiwa (2018), the lack of political will on the part of most South African HEIs to fully support the diverse academic needs of SWDs manifests itself in how this group has and continues to be treated as a homogenous group. Mutanga et al (2018) go on to argue that the danger of this approach is its failure to acknowledge and understand that SWDs have varied and unique needs which cannot be addressed with one-size-fits-all approaches. Participants in the present study also spoke about how their university is taking a one-size-fits-all approach in responding to the remote learning needs of students. As will be shown below most participants find this approach to be too generic and thus flawed for various reasons, specifically when supporting the diverse learning needs of students with mental health challenges. Claudia, for instance, questions her university for taking an ableist approach that favours supporting mainly the learning needs of non-disabled students at the cost of SWDs including those with mental health challenges:

There is no one size fits all approach to education. Much of the focus has been on ensuring that students have access to resources such as internet and laptops and that these are supposed to ensure that all students can access education. One's learning environment plays a huge role in their ability to access education.

This one-size-fits-all approach reinforces what Fraser (2003) refers to as patterns of cultural value that not only foster misrecognition, but also 'status subordination' [of students with mental health challenges]. Such patterns reinforce injustices that disproportionately affect SWDs whose learning needs are relegated as immaterial, thus forcing them to fit in an oppressive unchanged HE environment, which is contrary to the values of inclusion.

Other participants have also criticised their university's one-size-fits-all approach for overlooking their lived reality that SWDs are not a homogenous group, but rather a heterogeneous group. Claudia

questions the sampled university's tendency to prioritise the learning needs of students with visible disabilities at the cost of those with invisible disabilities (including herself) as unfair:

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to education. University spaces should not only support students with visible disabilities because disabilities such as anxiety and depression affect one's ability to learn and produce good quality of work.

As Pula cautions, by adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, this university runs the risk of failing to provide appropriate tailored academic support aimed at accommodating the unique learning experiences of students with diverse disabilities:

I think the key to this is understanding that students living with impairments have unique requirements. As such a singular approach to providing support would be largely ineffective.

At the time of data collection, there was consensus among my participants that their university had not yet sent them any form of formal communication informing this group as to how the institution intended to support their learning needs remotely either on an individual basis or as a group. This left some of the participants in limbo, anxiously worrying about whether or not their institution would or was able to support these students' unique learning needs:

I don't feel that they are actively trying to include students with disabilities. They are making use of online learning platforms but there is no additional help targeted toward students with disabilities (Mwali).

I mean they [the university] haven't really done anything besides tell our class that we should stay in touch with one another so that we don't go crazy (Lerato).

Before the lockdown, most of these reasonable accommodations were provided by support staff or Disability Unit staff members. Yet the above narratives exemplify how these personnel have also not contacted SWDs regarding the provision of reasonable accommodations remotely which has left these students uncertain. Academically, SWDs can best be supported if their institutions honour their legal obligations of providing this group with additional support in the form of reasonable accommodations where necessary. This is because the provision of appropriate accommodations to students with mental health challenges allows this group equal access to academic courses (Souma et al, 2022). Thus, by providing all SWDs including those with mental health challenges with formal communication on how these students would be supported through reasonable accommodations where necessary,



the sampled university would have helped these participants to focus on their academic work with greater ease.

Despite multiple challenges presented by the COVID-19 lockdown, some participants also discussed its positive aspects. For instance, Lerato is optimistic that the COVID-19 lockdown has presented universities with opportunities to better understand the learning needs of students with diverse disabilities in cases of similar emergencies or pandemics in the near future:

Universities will however have a greater understanding of various impairments, I think.

It remains to be seen whether Lerato's view will come to pass especially given the fact that the sampled university at the time of data collection had not made any concerted efforts to effectively consult with all SWDs including those with mental health challenges regarding how they should be best supported to learn remotely.

The continual provision of counselling services through virtual sessions has been commended by other participants as particularly important for students, especially if also backed by additional tailored academic support needs:

The university has also offered online counselling sessions but supporting students with psychological disabilities should go beyond a few counselling sessions (Claudia).

These online counselling services are not only beneficial to students with mental health challenges but also to their non-disabled peers, both during the COVID-19 era as well in the near future. This has also been confirmed in recent studies investigating the current COVID-19 psychological impact on students in HEIs in South Africa (Laher et al, 2021) as well as in the United States (Browning, Larson, Sharaievskia, Rigolon, McAnirlin, Mullenbach ... , 2021). The findings from these studies have predicted the possibility of a rise in more university students suffering from mental health challenges mainly associated with depression and anxiety currently, especially in the post-COVID-19 era (Browning et al, 2021; Laher et al, 2021). Hence, the strengthening of online, as well as face-to-face, counselling services will potentially help mitigate these challenges if they happen to arise.

## Discussion

In this section, I attempt to discern whether or not the sampled university's practices of supporting students with mental health challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown could be said to be in line with

Fraser's three dimensions of social justice. I consider the subsequent impact of such practices on the inclusion of students with mental health challenges in other HEIs in South Africa and elsewhere. Regarding Fraser's recognition (cultural) dimension of social justice, this begs the question of whether emergency remote online learning practices are inclusive in the sense of recognising the diverse learning needs of SWDs specifically those with mental health challenges, and achieving this is one of the lecturers' key responsibilities. The findings show that most participants have called for their lecturers to be more hands-on as well as more empathetic in their approaches to teaching SWDs as COVID-19 is imposing additional barriers to this group's learning.

Previous research (Chiwandire, 2019) has shown that having lecturers who are empathetic or who hold positive attitudes toward supporting the learning needs of SWDs alone is not enough in guaranteeing the academic success of these students. Rather, there is also a need on the part of South African universities' management personnel to invest financially in professional development courses aimed at equipping lecturers on how to operationalise the Universal Design for Learning (UDL)<sup>3</sup> framework, especially its three core principles<sup>4</sup> when developing and teaching their curriculum (Chiwandire, 2019). Likewise, since the outbreak of COVID-19, numerous South African disability inclusion HE researchers (Lyner-Cleophas, 2020; Ndlovu, 2020; Ngubane-Mokiwa & Zongozz, 2021) have called for lecturers to inform their curriculum development, delivery and assessment practices with UDL. One of the key benefits of incorporating UDL in the HE environment is its "aim of ensuring that the curriculum is accessible to all students including those with disabilities" (Ngubane-Mokiwa & Zongozz, 2021:138-139). It is hoped that fast-tracking the process of equipping lecturers with the necessary skills for operationalising UDL on the part of South African HEIs can help mitigate some of the challenges which are being experienced by all students in accessing and participating in the curriculum both during and post-COVID-19 eras at these institutions.

However, this does not mean that all lecturers are not making efforts in recognising and supporting the learning needs of SWDs learning remotely as evidenced by some of my participants who found emergency remote online learning presenting them with unique opportunities. This was particularly evident with Master's student participants who appreciated the unwavering support of their

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<sup>3</sup> As defined by Mitchell (2010:13), UDL involves "planning and delivering programmes with the needs of all students in mind from the outset. It applies to all facets of education: from curriculum, assessment and pedagogy to classroom and school design".

<sup>4</sup> According to Dalton et al (2012:3), the three core UDL principles include: "'Multiple means of representation': provide multiple, flexible methods of presentation to support recognition learning (the HOW of learning); 'multiple means of action and expression': provide multiple, flexible methods of action and expression to support strategic learning (the WHAT of learning) and 'multiple means of engagement': provide multiple, flexible options for engagement to support affective learning (the WHY of learning)"

supervisors constantly keeping in touch with them to ensure that they continue to make smooth progress with their academic work. Likewise, one of the postgraduate Honours student participants appreciated the introduction of flexible assessment practices by lecturers in terms of less strict deadlines as helpful to enabling her to self-pace her learning and potentially score good grades.

A large portion of the responses highlights the participants' concerns about the lack of consultation from the sampled university's relevant stakeholders on how this university intended to best support the learning needs of these students. In Fraser's terms, this is a clear denial of the representation (political) dimension of social justice. The denial of consultation has had negative unintended consequences for participants in this study, thus denying them full inclusion. This has been evident through this sampled university's tendency of taking a one-size-fits-all approach to online learning, which participants found to be predominantly designed to benefit the dominant non-disabled students. This led to the cost of SWDs peers being left in limbo without knowing how their diverse learning needs will be catered for. Given this, as in recent studies (Ndlovu, 2020:131) investigating the impact of COVID-19 on SWDs in South Africa, I also call for HEIs to prioritise extensive consultation with this group if they are to effectively "assist in their inclusion, as they know what they need in terms of learning".

As far as the redistribution (economic) dimension of social justice is concerned, the study found that, as in other South African universities, the redistribution of tangible and intangible material resources has mainly been taking the form of free data, hardcopy learning materials as well as loaning laptops to those students in need. However, given that decisions of allocating the redistribution of necessary resources was being made without consulting with students with mental health challenges, one of the participants who is a Fine Art student expressed concerns about experiencing challenges of having to source the material herself if she is to do her practical work. Despite this, some participants have acknowledged the sampled university's concerted efforts to redistribute intangible materials in the form of online counselling services so that all students can continue to utilise these services which have become even more important during COVID-19 as most students reported being overwhelmed by emergency remote online learning.

This strengthening of online counselling services for students during COVID-19 was also confirmed in one study which explored psychology students' mental health experiences during national lockdown at one South African university (Laher et al, 2021). That study found that the participants' university constantly provided them "with details for the free online and telephonic counselling services offered

by the university and encouraged them to use these if they felt overwhelmed” (Laher et al, 2021:7). Against this background, it is evident that the provision of counselling services is crucial in facilitating the full inclusion of all students, including those with mental health challenges. Thus, it is important for HEIs with students with mental health challenges to also ensure the dissemination of relevant information about the availability of online counselling services to all students so that they can decide whether they want to utilise them. This could be done through various platforms like live emails, Short Message Service (SMS), and other relevant social media platforms so that all students could be aware of the continual availability of such services.

From the findings of the present study, one could argue that Fraser’s theory of social justice, particularly her three dimensions of social justice, was useful, especially in ascertaining whether the sampled university is making progress or not in terms of supporting the learning needs of SWDs remotely. Given that this theory has been utilised mainly to understand issues of social injustices within educational institutions, I argue that it fails to also account for what happens beyond these HEIs’ settings. By this I mean it cannot be doubted that COVID-19 national lockdowns and the subsequent transition to emergency remote online learning require us to also think more critically about how conducive students’ homes as new learning spaces for remote online learning are. For instance, while most participants in the present study seemed to find their homes conducive to learning effectively because of good internet connectivity and supportive family members, this was not the case for others. A notable example is one participant who voiced her concern about her family’s expectation of her to also commit fully to household chores. This shed light on the intersectionality of disability and gender stemming from how society often expects females to do household chores with little regard for how this might present unique challenges which might negatively impact their academic performance while learning remotely. This finding has also been confirmed in one recent South African study which explored students’ mental health experiences during the COVID-19 Lockdown (Laher et al, 2021). In that study, female participants “reported experiencing difficulty balancing studies and home responsibilities” (Laher et al, 2021:7). This resulted in some of these participants expressing a need to be back at the university residences in comparison to their peers who received support from their family members (Laher et al, 2021).

## Conclusion

Drawing on Fraser’s three dimensions of social justice, which include redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural), and representation (political), this paper has identified challenges experienced

by female students with mental health challenges in learning remotely during COVID-19. Some of the challenges included the sampled university's non-inclusive and generic one-size-fits-all approach to supporting the learning needs of students which is biased against students with mental health challenges. Yet some participants also acknowledged that COVID-19 presented them with unique learning opportunities such as flexibility in assessment practices and the possibility of deadline extensions for submitting academic work. For other participants, such opportunities were presented in the form of continual academic and social support from their supervisors via virtual platforms. Other participants found online counselling to help them navigate emergency remote online learning with greater ease.

One of the unique findings of the present study, which adds new knowledge to the body of literature on disability inclusion in South African HE and possibly elsewhere, is the important need for holistic consultations with SWDs in times of emergencies like COVID-19. In her recent study, Ndlovu (2020: 131) notes that "students with disabilities were excluded in their learning before Covid-19, and the pandemic only exacerbated their exclusion" at South African universities. Thus, it is necessary to call on South African HEIs to equally prioritise the inclusion of students with mental health challenges and those with other disabilities, both during and in the post-COVID-19 era as the country has national and institutional disability policies. These policies provide for inclusive education as an important human right for PWDs, and obligate educational institutions to consult with PWDs in finding possible solutions for protecting, promoting, and advancing such rights.

A closer look at the narratives of participants in the present study shows that most if not all the challenges reported by these students could have been avoided had the university consulted specifically with this group from the outset on how they might opt to be supported if they were to thrive in emergency remote online learning. As advocates of social justice working in educational circles have cautioned, "political injustices arise when some individuals or groups are not accorded equal voice in decision-making about justice claims" (Keddie, 2012:264). Thus, I hope that according all SWDs, including those with mental health challenges, a voice, or what Fraser has referred to as 'political representation' is important in enabling these students to feel that they are recognised and valued as full members of HEIs who also contribute to diversity at these institutions.

The present study has some limitations. One of the major limitations is that the study draws on a small sample of only five female participants, all of whom were postgraduate students. This was the result of trying to recruit as many participants as possible in the early phase of lockdown. Despite this, the

present study has contributed to the body of knowledge as it is among the few studies which specifically investigates the experiences of female students with mental health challenges. This helped in yielding useful findings which could inform HE disability policies and practices in South Africa and elsewhere. There is a need for further research investigating how students with both visible and invisible disabilities at other South African HEIs are experiencing emergency remote online learning. It is hoped that doing so will positively result in useful best practices for supporting the academic needs of students with mental health challenges during COVID-19 and beyond.

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