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Problematising the South African Higher Education inequalities exposed during the Covid-19 pandemic: Students' perspectives

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Abstract

Former Rhodes University students, co-authors of this article, were engaged in a knowledge-making project during the Covid-19 pandemic. This paper is a product of that project, where participants deliberated on the inequalities in the education sector based on their experiences in their university. These were exposed and exacerbated by the pandemic. Using a decolonial theoretical lens, they present the experiences of students to critique university decisions at the time. They argue for a reconnection with the idea of the university as a public good, as an antidote to the neoliberal tendencies that perpetuate inequality in the sector. This requires a reconnection with its own students, and to collaborate with them to find strategies to deal with crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, a reconnection between the university and the school sector could lead to greater synergy and an easier transition between school and university.

Keywords: decolonial knowledge, education sector, inequality, students

Introduction

Students come to university in South Africa with experiences and ways of knowing and being that are not necessarily aligned with the university system. This is partly linked to experiences in school settings that fail to anticipate and shape their navigation of university life. But in addition to this, we[1] argue that the university itself has shown a lack of vision and empathy for the lived experiences of young people in the throes of extreme inequality. The Covid-19 pandemic exposed inequalities in the education sector in South Africa that were already present (Madonsela, 2020), and this is our motivation for writing this paper. The severe lockdown restrictions in 2020 and in 2021 meant that universities had to quickly adapt to emergency remote teaching and learning (Mpofu, 2020; Reddy, 2021). Unfortunately, many universities and

[1] We, the authors, use the collective first-person pronouns in this article. Although not all of us are still students, we speak from the perspective of those we have worked with on the project described later (*With Dreams in our Hands*), and the students we know who continue to struggle with the inequalities inherent in schools and universities.

households were unprepared for this, and the inequalities that are deeply entrenched in South African society were exacerbated by the switch (Mudaly & Mudaly, 2021). Despite the mantra by Minister Blade Nzimande that 'no student be left behind' (Dlulane, 2020), many are exactly that. They are left behind by political, economic, and educational decisions that were and are taken about them, without them, and which failed to acknowledge the daily struggles of the poor majority, especially during lockdown. These struggles include poor or no internet connections in the homes of many students; crowded homes with no conducive workspace; and food and physical insecurities that were exacerbated during lockdown.

This article exposes the experiences of some students as they were forced to adapt to a situation beyond their control, and without the means to do so. It considers the inequality in the higher education sector from students' perspectives, using a critical, decolonial theoretical lens through which to explain the challenges, but also the possibilities that these lost years of the pandemic offer us. It is a contribution to ideas about teaching and learning in universities going forward, using the lessons we have learnt during and from the pandemic experiences. We argue that the exacerbated inequalities that were exposed during the pandemic compel us to approach educational transformation from a decolonial perspective, collaborating with students themselves, to find a reconnection to the idea of the university as a public good.

The data that informs how we approach the issue of inequalities comes from a project that began at the start of the pandemic. The project asked the questions: What do students entering the university bring with them to contribute to knowledge-making? And what would happen if students and former students, working according to African/Black feminist principles, collaborated to produce knowledge together?[2] So, this article does two things: the topic we address, inequalities in the higher education sector, is one we care about and have experienced; and the writing of it is a collaborative praxis of African feminist principles in a knowledge-making project. We have worked with data from the project to construct knowledge in the form of this article.

Putting the problem in context: The 'With Dreams in our Hands' (WDIOH) project

The project, With Dreams in our Hands (WDIOH), began at the start of the pandemic. It was part of a PhD by publication project of our former Extended Studies (ES)[3] lecturer, Corinne Knowles, and it used many of the pedagogic principles that we were familiar with in our ES classes over

[2] See Knowles (2021) for more details on the theory and methodology for the project

[3] At the university currently known as Rhodes, the Humanities Extended Studies Programme invites students into the programme based on a number of criteria, including matric marks that fall short of automatic entry into the Bachelor of Arts (BA) or Bachelor of Social Science (BSS) degrees, being the first in their family to go to university, and having received township or rural schooling. They are required to select one of two streams. The authors are part of the group who selected Politics 1 and Sociology 1 as their mainstream subjects. Computer and academic literacies are also taught, and most of our work involved the augmentation and literacies of the mainstream courses. The class size ranges between 30 and 45 students.

the years, including communal knowledge-making (Ntseane, 2011). Twenty-four former humanities ES students from the University Currently Known as Rhodes (UCKAR)[4] responded to an open Facebook call by our former lecturer. We worked together on the project for five months, and then spent a further eleven months on the writing of this article. We applied African feminist principles of empathy and connection (Nkealah, 2022; Nnaemeka, 2005), recognising the intersectionality of oppressions that affect the potentials of young people in South Africa (Tamale, 2020; Xaba, 2017), and valuing the experiences and ways of knowing that we each brought to the process (Wane, 2008).

The project was forced to operate online because of lockdown stipulations in response to the Covid-19 pandemic and so we experienced some of the frustrations of online work, while critiquing how universities made this adaptation. In a series of online workshops and a dedicated Facebook group where we communicated in between workshops, we chose topics that we believed were current, relevant, and important to us, and then came up with ways to respond to these (Knowles, 2021). Nineteen of the project volunteers responded to the four topics with text pieces, one of which dealt with inequality in the education sector. Each submission was reviewed by three or four other participants. We then volunteered to be part of paper writing teams, using the submissions and workshop transcriptions as data. The team that has worked on this paper has scrutinised seven of the project submissions and their reviews. We have participated in nine online workshops to discuss the topic, work on our writing and to analyse the data, asking questions such as: What claims do the authors make? How does he/she make these? How are they supported? How do we respond to what has been said? What resonates? What themes run through them? Where are the differences? In our online workshops, we practiced empathy, listening and welcoming each other' s beliefs, feelings, opinions, and experiences.

In our paper writing teams, we also looked at articles by African feminist, African, and decolonial scholars, to help us to find critical ideas for thinking through the stories and opinions in the topic submissions. Each of us was tasked to write a section of the paper, to review each other' s work, and to rework it in response to reviews. Importantly, the way we worked with knowledge, using the principles mentioned, allowed us as students and former students to feel seen and heard, and to bring our dreams and capacities to this task. We believe that South African university students deserve no less.

The article starts by explaining our theoretical choices, arguing that South African academia continues to be heavily influenced by western texts and ideas that are rooted in colonialism and fail to speak to the lived realities of Black young people in Africa. It considers the idea of the university as a public good against the backdrop of a neoliberal university ethos. To undo the epistemic violence of colonial, capitalist influences, we argue for a critical decolonial lens that pays attention to intersectionality and reconnection in the university. We examine the inequalities

[4] Rhodes University was renamed the University Currently Known as Rhodes (UCKAR) by protesters and allies during the 2015/16 student protests. In 2018, the Rhodes University Council decided to halt any consultative process around renaming, and instead to keep the name. See Daniels (2015) for the argument to change the name.

in universities, emphasised by the pandemic and articulated from students' perspectives. Finally, we offer some ideas about how to use the experience of the pandemic to rethink the education system to be more socially just and sustainable in an uncertain future, through a reconnection with its students.

Constructing the lens and the nature of knowledge

Knowledge-making is an important aspect of university education and is a life skill that can equip us to deal with uncertainty and the stresses of life. In humanities courses, we learn about different theories and how to apply them, which can lead to a deeper understanding of society and ourselves, and the creation of new knowledge. The focus of this section is to critique the colonial legacies in our universities and societies, to show how they contribute to inequalities, and to explore what decolonial knowledge-making would look like. Knowledge-making is always political (Appiah, 2006), and as Tamale (2020: 280) reminds us, 'neutral knowledge does not exist'. In our experience, most of the theories we were exposed to in our undergraduate courses at UCKAR, and the methods that are employed to collect and analyse data, have histories that are loaded with power imbalances (Moletsane, 2015; Tamale, 2020; Wane, 2008). Tamale (2020: 235) notes that colonial Eurocentric thinking has dominated African knowledge production for centuries, and she argues that, 'the African decolonization/decolonial project must pay particular attention to the education sector in order to seize back the minds of its people'. This article is a contribution to this work.

Decolonising our thinking is a way for us to regain our agency amid the epistemic violence of a reliance on Eurocentric ideas and examples in the university courses to which we have been exposed. It is also a way for us to understand and address the inequalities in the sector. Linked to the idea of epistemic violence, is 'symbolic violence', which Moletsane (2015: 40) explains

> is similar to the Marxist idea of "false consciousness", and refers to a situation where, without any overt force or coercion, an individual or group accepts, internalises, and plays a role in its own subordination.

Epistemic violence refers to deliberate not only ways in which western knowledge is favoured in academic settings, but also ways in which African or indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing are rendered invisible or worthless (Pillay, 2015). Importantly, Pillay argues that epistemic violence includes the legitimisation of the use of physical violence and prejudice against others (Pillay, 2015). Epistemic violence, then, is linked to the inequalities we find in the education sector, in that when African thought, scholarship, poetry, fiction, history and experience is left out of curricula and syllabi, it is a way of reducing the value of African people. Wane argues that we need to be more inclusive of indigenous knowledge systems, and that we need to consider 'the role of the educational system in producing and reproducing racial, ethnic, religious, linguistic, gender, sexual, and class-based inequalities in society' (Wane, 2008: 194).

As a first step towards addressing the issue of inequality in the education sector, the lens we use is a decolonial one. Decolonised /decolonial knowledge can be viewed as providing a forum for African academics to research and write about Africa in an African-centric manner and in a way that fits the interests and needs of their respective communities (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, 2020). Moletsane (2015: 4) explains that

> people' s realities are often defined and explained by outsiders and that the interventions that come their way, are likely to be irrelevant to their lives' needs. To address this, what is needed is context-specific knowledge, co-created and co-disseminated with the local people themselves.

We have taken these ideas to heart in our collaborative research and while constructing this article. We have worked with students from the historically and currently disadvantaged communities we come from, to think critically and creatively about recognising and shifting the marginalisation of the poor.

Pillay (2015) is of the view that decolonising teaching and learning – pedagogy as well as content – will play an important role in the production and the rise of decolonial knowledge, which will contribute towards a more inclusive and just university experience for many students. He explains that the decolonisation process should open and create an inclusive academic atmosphere that encourages pluriversal knowledge production, so that the west can learn from Africa. This shifts the purpose and power of higher education away from western methodologies of objectification, extraction, appropriation, and exploitation (Grosfoguel, 2020). And as we go on to argue, it opens the possible return of the idea of the university as a public good (Badat, 2001).

To undo the epistemic violence discussed by Pillay (2015), Moletsane (2015), and Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020), we argue that we need critical thinking that employs a process of 'unlearning' and 'conscientisation' (Tamale, 2020: 272). This process of debunking what is familiar and taken for granted, to pay attention to alternative narratives and histories, will allow us to see more clearly from an African perspective how our societies are influenced by oppressive colonial ideas. The South African economy, based on western-inspired capitalism, continues to favour the few, and the country is regarded as one of the most unequal societies in the world (Sguazzin, 2021). How is higher education in South Africa contributing to the necessary critical thinking around the economy, and the process of socio-economic development? How is critical thinking addressing the social and educational inequalities in society? Capitalism emphasises the role of the individual to get ahead by means of a meritocracy. And yet we know that in South Africa, where colonial legacies continue to influence race, gender, and class hierarchies and inequalities, meritocracy is not the only factor that leads to success. As Diale (2019) and Galal (2023) show, Black young people are the least likely to find work, even if they have degrees, and this raced (and gendered) pattern signals that 'meritocracy' is not the whole story. The identity trends of who succeeds

and who fails economically is not about what is deserved, but linked to race, class and gender inequalities that are legacies of our past and were exacerbated by the pandemic.

The focus on the individual so valued in capitalism is repeated in other western institutions and knowledge-making, and runs counter to many African communities and ideas, where the emphasis is on our mutual constitution and responsibility. African knowledge-making emphasises the communal aspect of African societies, where, as Ntseane (2011: 313) explains, research and learning need to be 'responsive to an African worldview which is collective and one in which the community itself will influence and shape the method'. Our understanding, as ES students who were exposed to a more communal approach to teaching and learning, and now as co-authors of this article, is that the academic journey is not an individual one: we think, learn, and write in community. This is in contrast, we believe, to South African higher education, which is arguably captured by neoliberalism with its emphasis on individualism and the economic and market function of the university, rather than on the social function (Baatjes, 2005).

We echo the calls made in the #FeesMustFall protests of 2015/2016, where students, working in solidarity with each other across provinces, were not merely fighting for free education, but also for decolonised education (Mkhize, 2015). For us, education is a chance to improve our lives and that of our families and communities. Education for many of us is not only the way to escape poverty, but importantly, also to contribute to society. We argue strongly that the exposure to African thinkers and theories will resonate more profoundly with us, and expand our critical thinking so that we are able to address the social issues in our communities. This way of thinking about higher education – its communal aspect and its focus on addressing social issues – shifts the neoliberal focus to the university as a public good.

Two ideas emerge from this discussion on decoloniality and contribute to our understanding of the inequalities that continue to oppress young Black students: intersectionality and reconnection. Intersectionality is a theory and methodology used by African feminists, that allows us to see that oppression is multifaceted, in that the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, language, ethnicity and so on, affect the extent and nature of oppression in inseparable ways. Inequality as we experience it in South African universities today, is rooted in the triple and mutually constituted oppressions of colonialism (with its racialised implications), capitalism (and its effects on class) and patriarchy (which enables gender and sexuality advantages and disadvantages) (Tamale, 2020). Tamale (2020: 66) explains that 'for many disadvantaged social groups, discrimination is an inextricably blended experience'. As we have explained above, the dominance and normalising of White, male, elite, western theorists in knowledge-making disadvantages and marginalises many students in ways that overlap and intersect – their race, class, gender, location, language and so on, fall outside of what is regarded as legitimate or authoritative knowledge-making. In tracking how colonialism (interlinked with capitalism and patriarchy) was internalised as authoritative, Tamale (2020: 250) notes that certain knowledges that supported colonialism and justified discrimination, 'were allowed to evolve as "science" while other indigenous knowledges were simply labelled as lore, superstition and quaint fancies'. Other strategies of colonialism involved 'othering' and 'invisibilisation' (Tamale,

2020: 246,247). These strategies created and embedded race, gender and class hierarchies that are profoundly interlinked, along with various other identity markers that articulated colonial preferences. The intersectional lens, according to Tamale (2020: 73,74), 'helps African people understand why our "truths" do not always match with the official "truths" constructed in Eurocentric-capitalist-heteropatriarchal master narratives'. She urges us to 'take into account the complexities involved in issues of inequality and Othering', and also to notice the complexities in identities, to avoid essentialising people based on one or more of these socially constructed categories. As Kulundu argues, intersectionality allows us to examine intragroup differences, and she warns against an analysis that rests on a single axis (Kulundu, 2018). Our understanding of intersectionality has encouraged us, in the WDIOH project and in the process of writing this paper, to listen to young Black people's experiences, and notice ways in which they are similar to, or differ from, official discourses and each other. It has encouraged us to use theoretical ideas of African women and value the opinions of African young people in our quest to unlearn colonial discourses and conscientise ourselves about the longstanding mechanisms of oppression.

The second idea is reconnection. This idea is based on the distinctly African notion of *Ubuntu* which is loosely translated as: I am because you are. This idea that we are mutually constitutive as human beings expands to being connected to everything – Graham (in Tamale, 2020: 21) explains it as 'oneness of mind, body and spirit; and the value of interpersonal relationships' and Ntseane explains the spirit as 'the ultimate oneness with nature and the fundamental interconnectedness of all things' (Ntseane, 2011: 313). The idea of connection runs counter to the Eurocentric ideas of individualism and separation of the mind from the body, which dominate western academia (Collins, 2003). It is an orientation that we find useful in our analyses because it points to ways that we can heal and enable some of the damages of inequality in the education sector in South Africa. We use this idea of reconnection to seek out ways that validate the experiences of young Black people, reconnecting them to each other, and to re-affirm them as legitimate knowledge-makers. We think through ways in which the university can reconnect with students, and with the idea of the public good, as a way towards a decolonial future. For the authors of this paper, the connectedness that we experienced as ES students while in our first year, and the connectedness we felt with each other while working on this project during the pandemic, encouraged us to see how reconnection could be a way to address the inequalities in the sector.

Our research focus: Inequalities in the education sector

We have explained our project, and the lens we used to examine social problems. Many of our discussions and the submissions to topics in the WDIOH project dealt with the frustrations of dealing with inequalities in the university. This was particularly difficult in the shift to online, remote, emergency teaching and learning in response to the pandemic. Our approach to this is to notice that the pandemic exposed inequalities that were already there, and perhaps gives us the opportunity to address these with more energy now.

As was the case with many countries, South Africa adapted its educational provisions in response to pandemic conditions to 'distance learning' and 'remote, emergency learning' (Commonwealth of Learning, 2020). This applied to schools and universities. Online learning can be explained as teaching delivered on a digital device that aims to promote and support learning (Ferri, et al., 2020). South Africa was perhaps doomed to fail in its aim to provide all learners and students with this kind of learning, given the high levels of inequality to start with. A study by Mpungose (2020) revealed that only a few students had access to the online learning platform. This stalled their shift from face-to-face learning to remote learning. So, while South Africa was quick to follow western practices, the ongoing legacies of colonialism and apartheid that have seen the widening divide between the rich and the majority poor, meant that only the elite could embrace the change without being left behind.

Exposing the inequalities in universities

As South Africa went into lockdown to try to contain the spread of Covid-19, the Minister of Higher Education and Training announced the shift to online learning, leaving it up to individual universities to decide how they would implement online leaning. While online teaching and learning may appear to offer the advantage of greater accessibility, the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the depth of the digital divide and how complex and multi-layered it is (Gupta, 2020: 1).

Nationally, only 22 per cent of households have computers and 10 per cent of households have an internet connection. In the Limpopo and North West provinces, only 1.6 per cent and 3.6 per cent of households have internet access in their homes respectively (Amnesty International, 2021). Country-wide, school children and students from wealthier communities and homes with computers and internet access were able to continue with remote learning, leaving children of the working class to fend for themselves with limited access to devices, data, and stationery, to make remote learning possible (Amnesty International, 2021; Anciano, et al., 2020). Even though universities attempted to make online learning accessible by providing laptops, data, and printed materials for students, this was not enough to bridge the divide as the majority of the students' challenges were compounded by the lack of a conducive place to study in crowded homes. Some students were prevented from learning because of household chores and family responsibilities (Anciano, et al., 2020; Pillay, et al., 2021).

These difficulties are explained in some depth in Mpungose's study (2020). Firstly, he claims that only a few students had access to the online learning platform and explains the intersectional nature of this exclusion: 'issues such as socio-economic factors, race, social class, gender, age, geographical area and educational background determine the level of the digital divide in a university context' (Mpungose, 2020: 2). Secondly, he argues that learning is essentially interactive, arguing that 'students are not taken as a blank slate or passive recipients of information but are taken as active participants who can nurture, maintain, and traverse network connections to access, share and use information for learning' (Mpungose, 2020: 3). There is an overlap between this kind of thinking and the African feminist ideas of communal

knowledge-making (Ntseane 2011). While group interaction could have been exploited and expanded through different social media platforms, in most cases it was not. Mpungose (2020) explains that very little training was offered to staff, and so the resources provided by teaching staff to students depended on their connectivity. In many cases, because of a lack of exposure and training to different methods, lecturers and teachers failed to encourage the kinds of connected learning that would normally take place in face-to-face lectures, in between lectures, in dining halls and through social media group chats such as Facebook and WhatsApp.

Project participants expressed their frustrations with the move to online learning, supporting some of Mpungose' s claims. The first echoes the digital divide based on economic conditions, which is also manifest in the living environment:

> *I do not have any Wi-Fi, and this made me to depend more on limited data to keep up the output of deliverables. Not only that, but the type of environment we occupy makes it hard to maintain good learning. In a sense, for example, the state of our residences in which we reside is appalling while on the other side we are expected to excel academically* (WDIOH Submission 4: 2021).

Another participant commented on the nature of learning that took place in these kinds of conditions:

> *… the online learning that is happening has put the poor Black child from the location in a really disadvantage. In this online learning there is no learning that is done, it is just submitting and moving on … You are just reading readings to answer the questions that are asked in the assignments. The universities believe by giving students data that is making the learning equal, but there is nothing that is equal in this learning* (WDIOH Submission 5: 2021).

This submission confirms the point that Mpungose (2020) makes regarding the conversational, communal, informal learning that takes place between classes and should have taken place on social media platforms if lecturers and students were better prepared and better connected.

Another comment points to the unseen burdens placed on many students from poorer households, where academic activities were deprioritised, often in gendered ways, as female students were expected to take on caring and household chores:

> *Being a student under these circumstances has been very difficult for me. Living in a three-roomed house, where I would have to wait for everyone to go to sleep, so that I could have the space to myself, where I would then be able to learn without being disturbed. Secondly, trying to balance everything else with the responsibilities that I have – the chores, cleaning*

> *and cooking and looking after my sibling. It is not easy, but I try to balance everything out* (WDIOH Submission 7: 2021).

One of the project participants compared the experiences of online learning between students from different institutions. She contacted friends of hers at different universities to gain a picture of the similarities and differences between universities in the Eastern Cape Province. Her first observation was that even within universities, inequalities flourish:

> *… even if students are enrolled in the same university, it does not mean they are equal or the same. Different backgrounds or social statuses may have different impact on how students respond or receive [to] institutional measures* (WDIOH Submission 9: 2021).

She outlined the different timeframes for starting online teaching and learning, noting that two of the four public universities in the Eastern Cape began soon after lockdown, whereas the others two took months to begin. Furthermore, she noticed a discrepancy in the provision of data:

> *Students from some universities received little to no data to cover online learning, while some received a lot of data…. However, I do acknowledge that universities differ in their capacities, abilities and sponsorships, but we cannot turn a blind eye to how this negatively impact on students from other universities. I believe that the Department Education needed to fill in the gaps to ensure that all students in universities are provided with all resources needed for online learning and resources that would sustain them throughout the whole process* (WDIOH Submission 9: 2021).

Based on the above realities of these students, online learning during the Covid-19 lockdown has been shown as not the most inclusive method of learning for university students from low socio-economic backgrounds. As one of the project participants concluded:

> *South African universities have also proved to show lack of comprehensive understanding of our unequal societies and its students, and it is the duty of universities to inform decisions that will close this gap, as universities deal with knowledge* (WDIOH Submission 16: 2021).

The inequalities in and between universities, established by colonialism and apartheid and exacerbated by the pandemic, failed to recognise, and support the challenges experienced by the majority poor, leading to disastrous consequences. As an academic community, decolonising our thinking in how we approach the emergency shifts during a pandemic and how and what we teach, is, as Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020) and Pillay (2015) claim, a way to bring about epistemic justice and also to find relevant and sustainable solutions to issues of inequality. Our contribution to this

work has been to expose the inequalities that we and others like us have experienced, using the decolonial lens that values embodied knowledge, communal knowledge-making, and finding an African-centred perspective.

Reconnection of university to society as a public good

We argue that because of the pandemic, and how it changed our approach to teaching and learning, we can use our insights into the unequal provision of education to rethink how to go forward. Reconnection is a useful idea when we consider the role of the university in society, and we emphasise its importance in contributing new ideas that can assist our society to reduce the inequalities that marginalise the majority poor.

Higher education has long been considered a public good. Kant (1979) argued that universities played a critical role in holding state bodies and the professions to account. With this understanding of its role, the university could have had a critical role to play as the state responded to the pandemic, often in ways that did not make sense to ordinary people. If university leaders were more connected to who their students were/are, they might have had insight into how many poor Black students would struggle with the switch to online learning.

The definition of public good in relation to higher education has shifted over time. For example, universities have thrived in the modern period as central public institutions and bases for critical thought. At the time of pandemic adjustments, universities were confronted by a variety of social forces and were compelled to undergo changes in their structures and their association with the rest of society. How universities coped with pandemic conditions is important to us as academics because the ongoing transformation of universities will affect (or not) the intensification of social inequality, privatisation of public institutions, and reorganisation of access to knowledge. Losing our way in the understanding of our purpose as a public good fundamentally challenges the nature of higher education. Arendt (1954) suggests that education plays a role in training new groups of students into the knowledge of a pre-existing world for them to make anew; and now, in a different century, post-pandemic, there is even more urgency and reason to facilitate this process.

Giroux (2010) supports Arendt (1954) and adds that higher education could be a space for making alternative futures, whether through study, research and discovery, teaching, professional learning, managing, organising, leading, consulting, and engaging with various communities of practice, the communities we live in and with industry. Giroux (2010) theorised neoliberalism, and foresaw that universities would increasingly be locations of inequality. These inequalities were exacerbated during the lockdowns in South Africa. Only the relatively rich could access the key combination of goods such as data, laptops, and a favourable environment to study. Zheng and Walsham (2021) support this claim, and argued that during times such as the pandemic ‘digital inequality operates at the intersection of the multiple fracture lines of differences that mediates the various spaces of inclusion/exclusion’.

As the most unequal society in the world (Sguazzin, 2021), the majority of South African society falls into the category of poor. Who then is the public, and what is the “good” that

universities will recommend and support? If most students also fall into the category of "poor", then we argue that rigorous attention needs to be paid to the socio-economic arrangements of these students when provisioning educational support, not only during times of a pandemic, but as we plan for sustainable educational systems going forward. There needs to be a reconnection between the university and the public good, and a reconnection with who the students are and how to support their aspirations.

There are three recommendations we make as contributions towards reconnecting the university to its students, as the "public" in public good. None of them are new ideas, but they are emphasised here as a timely reminder. Firstly, universities must lead the fight against injustices and inequalities in our communities through education and through focused research. South African universities already do this, and what we argue for is a greater emphasis on decolonised models of education and research. When students are engaged in thinking critically, and research methodologies are geared towards local issues with community participation, sustainable change can happen. Research could be guided Mkabela's principles of collaborative practice, where she argues for research happening *with*, and not merely *in*, a community (Mkabela, 2005). Moletsane (2015) argues that this kind of decolonial re-ordering leads to greater agency and empowerment, and critical thinking amongst participants:

> ... in recognising the contested nature of local interpretations and knowledge generally, we actively enable participants to confront, critique, and challenge such understandings in order to develop alternative understandings. This means that members of communities must be able to meaningfully participate in all activities meant to achieve this (Moletsane, 2015: 45).

Our research project, WIDOH, was a participatory collaboration between students, former students and a lecturer, where we worked towards mutual agency and responsibility. We believe that these kinds of research approaches can have helpful outcomes for the researchers as well as the communities they work with and are part of.

Secondly, curricula that speak to students' lived realities are more likely to encourage and inspire solutions for inequalities in society, especially if African and decolonial scholars form the core of curricula (Okech, 2020). Reconnecting with who the students are, means rethinking curricula and theories to make them representative of us. Local examples to illustrate concepts would be a way to connect students to their lived realities. The critical thinking skills we learn in university can be more effectively applied to localised social issues that have been introduced to demonstrate how Afrocentric theories work. We ask for a much greater emphasis on decolonised pedagogy and curricula, to undo the ways that university education has tended towards western ideas and neoliberal notions of economic effectiveness and individualism, resulting in a disconnection from the majority of students.

Thirdly, poor students are best placed to understand the complexities and struggles of our lives. We assume that the urgent shifts and plans to cope with pandemic lockdown conditions

are not the last time that the university will be called upon to make urgent changes in response to outside forces. Students are not blank slates; we are not ignorant of how to cope with crises. We ask that all students, especially those whose vulnerabilities are compounded by national or global emergencies, should be consulted on how to manage crises. We believe we have contributions to make and should work collaboratively to strategise on how to adapt teaching and learning during these times. We recommend working collaboratively with students, including those who are rural, and/or poor, to come up with relevant interventions during times of crisis.

Reconnection between universities and schools – teacher training, and the transition between school and tertiary education

We claimed at the beginning of this article that students arrive at university with contributions to make, but they are often unprepared for what is expected of them in the university system. We have argued in the previous section that this is partly to do with the unpreparedness of the university, and a lack of understanding who their students are. We argue that decolonising curricula and pedagogy is a move in the right direction, and that greater consultation and collaboration with students is necessary. In this section, we ask if the university has a greater role to play in the school system. This links to the role of the university as a "public good", in that schooling is also part of the "good" that requires the attention of higher education. Our experience as learners who were unprepared for university (and one of the authors now as a teacher in a rural school) leads us to the conclusion that there is the need for more attention to the connection between universities and the school system. Jansen (2008) noted that there is substantial evidence that current school preparation is insufficient to ensure a successful transition from high school to higher education. As a group, we discussed and concluded that a key purpose of school is to prepare children for university and/or their career paths. Schools are set to provide for the fullest development of each learner to live morally, creatively, and productively in a democratic society (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2013). However, we have witnessed learners struggling to adapt to universities due to a lack of career guidance and preparedness for university – and thus we believe that there is not enough relationship between the school system and the tertiary education system.

The economic and social inequalities in schools means that there is an uneven preparation for post-school life. Learners who can afford to go to private or elite schools are given career guidance or relevant preparation for the tertiary level of their studies. As Modiba and Sefotho (2019) point out, career guidance is part of the Life Orientation (LO) offering, but teachers outside of the few elite schools are underprepared. They argue that 'LO teachers seem to experience confusion, feelings of incompetence, and insufficient training that points to a need for training and professional development' (Modiba & Sefotho, 2019). These teachers and the learners they teach are faced with challenges that make information about, and preparation for, tertiary education difficult, if not impossible. As a project participant explains:

> *I went to a public school that never offered career guidance, only top performing learners would be chosen to go to career expos and even those career expos were not as detailed and significant as they needed to be. In high school I thought the only courses I could do when I get to tertiary were law and psychology based on the subjects I did. Little did I know that there were so many career paths that I could follow, as a result I got to understand what I was passionate about when I got to my final year of undergraduate study. Fortunately, for me I had the option to choose from three different subjects I had done through my undergraduate studies*. (WDIOH Submission 9: 2021)

Many schoolteachers, including those who teach Life Orientation, are trained in universities, and it seems that there is work to be done to reconnect this provisioning of the university to the teachers who need to feel more equipped and secure about teaching senior learners more rigorously about what to expect at university, or post-school.

Besides the exposure to career guidance, there are other factors that work against an easy transition from school to university. In the WDIOH project the language issue came up. For example, one participant explained the difficulty in engaging with difficult concepts, or of asking the relevant and important questions about content, because of a lack of exposure to English in the schooling years:

> *All of my life up to that moment I had communicated in vernacular languages. Even the English I encountered, I engaged it in my vernacular language… So before one even engages with Karl Marx, one was confronted with English itself. Reading was much easier than raising a hand to ask a question in Barrat I must confess … . So, to avoid this seemingly apparent embarrassment on raising a hand to ask, say, why Marx' s 'Historical Materialism' pays no regard to problem of race in society for instance. Not asking at all felt safe* (WDIOH Submission 10, 2020)

The transition from school to university means a shift in the kind of language competencies that are expected. More research on the complexities of multilingualism needs to be undertaken in this regard in universities (see for example Mkhize & Balfour, 2017) and in schools (see for instance, Setati, et al., 2008) on how to include and intellectualise indigenous languages (see Kashula & Maseko, 2017; Knowles, et al., 2023). There are many reasons why teachers teach the way they do, including the institutional cultures of their schools, but importantly it would seem that teacher training, undertaken in universities, could and should pay more attention to the potential lived realities of some school communities, to be inclusive of diverse South African contexts. A decolonial approach to teacher training would facilitate a more contextual focus, including the complex issue of language. There needs to be greater synergy and connection between departments in the university that are addressing this issue – for instance the collaborations between the African Languages and the Political and International Studies

departments at UCKAR (see Knowles, et al., 2023), and the Education Faculty who oversee teaching training.

Besides English being the language of choice, there are other alienating aspects of the institutional culture at UCKAR showing a western bias, that affect the day-to-day experiences of African students. These issues are being addressed over time, but a number of the participants shared their experiences of alienation when they first arrived at UCKAR. A project participant explained:

> *I remember my first day sitting at the dining hall and all I could see was a fork and knife, and I wondered what is going to happen when I chose the option to eat pap. Am I going to use a fork and knife to eat pap? And that was obviously a no because that was not something I was used to. However, as time went by and being in residence leadership the next year we asked for more diversity and inclusion, because we wanted to feel at home and be comfortable. So, these are some for the kinds of factors that makes the transition from school to university difficult for some learners. There needs to be a smoother transition in terms of cultural practices, including language, between a more forgiving school system and the university system.* (WDIOH Submission 18: 2021)

Wane speaks of the way in which her schooling and university experience alienated her from her own culture (Wane, 2008). Post-pandemic, this kind of alienation is something that we could address as we consider the transitions between schools and universities. According to Cliff (2020), the sad reality of higher education in South Africa is that only about one third of the students who qualify to gain entry into higher education are actually prepared for the academic literacy demands of a university. Much of this, we argue, can be attributed to South Africa's weak education system, and poor alignment between schools and universities. The transition gap from secondary to tertiary education is a challenge to many first-year students. The Council on Higher Education (CHE) describes this as the articulation gap, a discontinuity in the transition from one educational stage to the next (CHE, 2013). Even the brightest students who get good grades in public schools often experience conspicuously bad grades for the first time when they enter universities (Rogan, 2018), because the articulation gap has not been adequately addressed. Unfortunately, most educational institutions try to solve the problem of poor schooling only after students enrol in higher education (Lombard, 2020). Only a few institutions actively intervene by addressing this issue at the secondary school level (Bangser, 2008). Most students find the transition difficult or simply lack the skills and motivation needed to succeed in higher education.

Any education system depends on the quality of its teaching profession (Wolhuter, 2006). Wolhuter points out that the quality of the teacher is dependent on their training in universities. He goes on to argue that education is regarded as one of the main means to bring about is the desired social change (Wolhuter, 2006). As we have argued, many teachers in public schools – especially in the rural areas – are not equipped for providing intense career guidance or mentoring learners into realising their paths and preparing them for university. A study in 2018

pointed out that 'current teachers were less confident about their training, and most university faculty did not believe that they were effectively trained' (Jez & Luneta, 2018), pointing to further work that needs to be done to align the work between universities and schools. More focused research is required, to reduce the inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic in the education sector.

Conclusion

We have argued that the measures undertaken by the education sector in South Africa during the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns failed to understand and support students who were most vulnerable during this time. The inequalities that have plagued South African society were exposed, and have provided an opportunity to consider the areas that need work, going forward. Using the data from a project that was run during the pandemic with former ES students at UCKAR, we have argued that the university perpetuates inequalities by relying on Eurocentric curricula and neoliberal ideas. We recommend that a shift to decolonial thinking firstly revives the idea of the university as a public good. Secondly, we recognise students, and particularly poor Black students as part of this public. We argue for a reconnection between the university and its students by offering more representative and decolonised curricula, and by greater collaboration with students in times of crises. We also recommend a reconnection between the university and the school sector, so that a more successful transition between school and university is enabled. This includes paying attention to greater levels of engagement between universities and schools, and adequate and appropriate teacher training that empowers teachers to provide effective career and post-school advice. These measures, we believe, are some of the ways to begin to address the extreme levels of inequality in the higher education sector.

Author biographies

Corinne Knowles is a lecturer in the Extended Studies Unit at Rhodes University. Her interests are African feminisms and decolonial pedagogies, and she is passionate about teaching and mentoring. She recently obtained her PhD which considers inclusive Higher Education from the perspective of students.

Abongile James did her undergraduate studies at Rhodes University (BSS) and later obtained PGCE (IP). She is currently a teacher in a small area called Alicedale. Her aspiration is to enrich a black child coming from marginalised backgrounds, and to also develop within her field to bring about transformation in Basic Education.

Lebogang Khoza is the Education & Policy officer at the Kingdom of the Netherlands Embassy in South Africa. His interests are education policy development and mental well-being of students in higher education. He is passionate about issues of access and success in higher education. He is a PhD candidate in Education Policy at the University of Pretoria.

Zikhona Mtwa did her undergraduate and postgraduate studies at Rhodes University. She is currently a Researcher at the Human Sciences Research Council. Zikhona is passionate about community engagement and interdisciplinary Social Science research that makes a difference, and she has a keen interest in the sustainable development of rural spaces.

Milisa Roboji is a Rhodes University development studies masters graduate who currently works in South Korea as a teacher. Her interests are community engagement and development, and GBV activism. She is an aspiring developmentalist and researcher. She is also very passionate about mentoring young girls especially those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Matimu Shivambu is a young and ambitious man born in the rural villages of Limpopo. He completed his Junior and Honours degree at Rhodes University. He is currently a registered full time Master' s student from the institution. Matimu is an active student leader and community engagement advocate.

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