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# COVID-19 and its impact on students with disabilities: A social justice expression at a South African university

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Background: COVID-19 as a pandemic has sparked robust debates within the education sector about the need to save lives, save the academic year, ensure that no student is left behind while being cognisant of issues of culture, equity and social justice.

Aim: The study explored the challenges faced by disabled students after the introduction of online teaching and learning as a concomitant part of COVID-19.

Setting: The study was conducted at a selected University of Technology (UoT) that is based in Gauteng Province.

Methods: The article employed a qualitative approach where face-to-face interviews were used for data collection. Purposeful sampling was used to select 30 student participants, five lecturers and five staff members from the Disability Unit.

Results: The study revealed that majority of disabled students are disadvantaged when it comes to assessments. It was further established that some of the special arrangements such as additional time and font enlargement of study notes are easily forgotten by the academic staff. In addition, accountability and poor communication between lecturers and support staff from the Disability Unit was cited as one of the qualitative variables that compromise students' learning outcomes. Online teaching and learning was considered a mode that can be beneficial to both disabled students and their counterpart, normal students.

Conclusion: Online teaching and learning is beneficial to the academic project. However, all the necessary resources should be put in place to ensure that no one is compromised in the process. Communication should also be maximised within all the relevant stakeholders.

Contribution: The article will profoundly contribute to ensure that there is alignment between policy and practice, especially within the context of teaching and learning that involves students with special needs.

Keywords: COVID-19; disabled students; Disability Unit; online teaching and learning; assessments; Higher Education sector; resources; healthy communication; students' learning outcomes and social justice.

Introduction
Background

Crous (2004) as cited by Mutanga (2017:136) reports that few people with disabilities participate in higher education and the small number that do access higher education face many challenges. This is partly because policy provisions regarding disability matters are fragmented and currently there is no national policy. According to Kamga (2021:1), the COVID-19 pandemic poses one of the severest global challenges that the world has in recent times experienced. To deal with this crisis, empowered by the *South African Disaster Management Act 57 of 2002* (DMA), the executive on 15 March 2020 declared a state of disaster, which paved the way for the national lockdown declared on 23 March 2020. At the time of writing this article, the country, Republic of South Africa was in Lockdown Level 5 as a concomitant part of the third wave.

In terms of this article, there is a noticeable relationship that can be realised between the works of Mutanga (2017) and Kamga (2021). The other one cites policy-related problems that do not promote full participation of students with disabilities, while the other one mentions the COVID-19 pandemic that intensified the problem. It is against this background that this article concerns itself

with the impact of the aforementioned pandemic on students with disabilities at a South African university.

The World Health Organization (WHO) confirms that persons, including learners, with disabilities will be 'impacted more significantly' by the pandemic (WHO 2020:1). There may be additional barriers to people with disabilities in implementing social distancing, underlying health conditions may put them at greater risk of developing more severe cases of COVID-19 if they become infected or they may be disproportionately impacted because of serious disruptions to the services they rely on (WHO 2020:2).

It is for this reason that Khumalo, Singh-Pillay and Subrayen (2020:188) articulate that the pandemic has sparked robust ethical debates within the education sector regarding the need to save lives and the academic year. In the process, the Department of Higher Education, Science and Technology committed itself that no student will be left behind while being cognisant of issues of culture, equity and social justice. The COVID-19 enforced lockdown has required universities to suspend contact sessions to contain the spread of infections among the university population and to embark on remote-online teaching and learning.

Taking cognisance of the above-mentioned, this article argues that the normal teaching, learning and assessment for students who are differently abled is through contact teaching where they receive support from specialists, peers, carers and the Disability Unit. Specialized equipment and physical support for students who are differently abled are located in the university facilities and mostly occur within the university environment. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted face-to-face contact teaching and in an effort to contain the spread of the virus and save the academic year, universities were required to shift to remote-online teaching and learning (Khumalo et al. 2020:188).

Within the parameters of this article, it needs to be stipulated that the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa was promulgated and accepted as the supreme law of the country. Section 29(1) of the above-mentioned Constitution, *Act No. 108 of 1996* states that everyone has the right:

    (a) To a basic education, including adult basic education.

    (b) To further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible. (Republic of South Africa 1996:n.p.)

In addition to the above-quoted clause of the Constitution, McKinney, McKinney and Swartz (2020:8) add that the *Bill of Rights*, which forms part of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (1996), states that all people, including people with disabilities, are equal, that everyone has the right to access healthcare services, that everyone has inherent dignity and the right to have their dignity respected and protected, and that everyone has the right to life.

Similarly, the UN's *Disability-Inclusive Response to COVID-19*, published in May 2020, states that people with disabilities should also be included in COVID-19 responses, which is in line with international commitments that the countries have signed. These include the *United Nations Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (UNCRPD), the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* and the *Agenda for Humanity* (2016) and the *United Nations Disability Inclusion Strategy*. The United Nations' (UN) stance emphasises that non-discrimination is a fundamental right for all people, and for this reason COVID-19 responses must ensure that they are not biased against disability (United Nations 2020).

Based on the foregoing, a critical issue to be explored in this article is to establish how South African Higher Education sector responds to the challenges that may be faced by students with disabilities. This is in line with the introduction and implementation of online teaching and learning that was encouraged after the emerging of the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of this article, the author argues that the Higher Education landscape in the South African context seems to be silent on how the universities should deal with the above-mentioned type of students.

Conversely, the authors argue that the civil rights law prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in all areas of public life (jobs, school, transportation and all spaces open to the general public) to ensure that people with disabilities have the same access and availability as anyone else. The researchers' view is supported by McKinney et al. (2020) when expressing that people with disabilities experience discrimination and hardship in all spheres of life, including employment, education and access to healthcare. In addition, it can be opined that people with disabilities are more likely to experience increased health needs, worse health outcomes and discriminatory laws, as well as stigma when compared with their counterparts, normal people.

By sharing a similar perspective, scholars such as Armitage and Nellums (2020), Kittay (2020) and Kuper et al. (2020) emphasise that the above-mentioned issues are likely to be intensified during the COVID-19 epidemic. It is for this reason that the present article aims to look into the technical challenges that may be experienced by students with disabilities. Within the parameters of this article, the authors cogently argue that within the South African Higher Education sector, students with disabilities may also be disadvantaged when compared to their counterparts, normal students, when it comes to online teaching and learning.

This contention is supported by Zhang (2020) who argues that the impact of COVID-19 on students has been enormous, with an increase in worries about fiscal and physical health, a rapid shift to online learning, and increased isolation. In addition to these changes, students with disabilities and/or health concerns face accessibility problems with online learning or communication tools, and their stress may be compounded by additional risks such as financial stress or pre-existing conditions. He adds that the findings of this study show that students with disabilities were more concerned about classes going online than their peers without

disabilities. In addition, students with disabilities and/or health concerns also reported that they have experienced more COVID-19-related adversities compared to their peers without disabilities and/or health concerns. We argue that students with disabilities and/or health concerns in higher education need confidence in the accessibility of the online learning tools that are becoming increasingly prevalent in higher education not only because of COVID-19 but also more generally.

To add to the above-mentioned, McKinney et al. (2020) aver that in addition to prevalent prejudice related to race, gender and socio-economic factors; people with disabilities experience discrimination based on their disabilities. This includes a lack of access to education or appropriate support within schools, lack of access to employment opportunities and a lack of access to healthcare. Curtis and Lawson (2001:22) add that in on-campus study, students have access to interactions with academic teachers in seminars and in individual consultations.

It is against this backdrop that the authors explore the technical challenges that students with disabilities faced since the introduction of online teaching and learning as a concomitant part of COVID-19. It also needs to be mentioned that the article will in addition establish if psychological implications may be suffered and experienced by students with disabilities as a result of lack of inclusive and coordinated plan that will make sure that everyone is accommodated by online teaching and learning. It is against this background when United Nations (2020:4) confirms that people with disabilities are disproportionately impacted by the COVID-19 outbreak more than their counterparts, people without disabilities.

Problem statement

What triggered this article is the lack of coordinated plan in the South African Higher Education landscape to deal with the technical challenges and other barriers that may be experienced by students with disabilities, particularly when it comes to online teaching and learning. The author's contention is that students with disabilities are overlooked and discriminated compared with their counterparts, students without disabilities, especially when it comes to online teaching and learning. This problem is further postulated by Kamga (2020:549) when articulating that basic and higher education, which is compulsory under international law, was inclusive of learners with disabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, it examines measures taken by the government to ensure the continuity of basic education and the extent to which these measures are inclusive of learners with disabilities. It further argues that moving education to online platforms and conducting classes via radio and television are not accompanied by related reasonable accommodation measures to ensure the inclusion of learners with disabilities. Among others, study material and numerous resources, online platforms and

media are not in accessible formats, and learners with disabilities do not have access to data or Internet broadband. It is against this perspective that the current article concerns itself with the technical challenges that confront students with disabilities.

Objectives

In taking into consideration the foregoing state of the online teaching and learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the objectives of the present article were to:

- To explore the technical challenges that may be faced and experienced by students with disabilities during online teaching and learning;
- To determine if students with disabilities may develop some psychological-related implications as a result of stress and trauma suffered during teaching and learning process;
- To establish if there is sufficient institutional support of educational technologies and other resources can be easily accessible as a way of supporting students with disabilities.

Social justice as a conceptual framework

The current article is underpinned by social justice as a conceptual framework that shapes and guides the authors' contention. Van den Bos (2003) defines social justice as the fair and equitable distribution of power, resources and obligations in society to all people, regardless of race or ethnicity, age, gender, ability status, sexual orientation, and religious or spiritual background. The fundamental principles underlying the above-provided definition may include values of inclusion, collaboration, cooperation, equal access and equal opportunity. Equally important, it is worth postulating that such values are also the foundation of a democratic and egalitarian society (Sue 2001).

In this article, there is a crucial link that can be realised between social justice as a conceptual framework and the problem statement that initiated this article. The relevance of this theory is further motivated by the fact that it gives students with disabilities to express themselves regarding some sort of discrimination they may have received in educational facilities during the COVID-19 pandemic. For several reasons, it can therefore be understood that social justice theory is relevant to the current article, especially when considering the context of discrimination that may have been suffered by students with disabilities compared to their counterparts, normal students.

Emanating from a social justice perspective, Matshedisho (2007) interrogates the challenges of access to higher education for students with disabilities from a human rights perspective. He states that one of the difficulties of redressing unequal access to higher education for students with disabilities arises out of the challenge of transforming formal rights on paper into real rights. He says that the

South African Higher Education system has been systematic in perpetuating structural inequalities and social injustice.

Similarly, Mutanga (2017:136–137) theorises that the South African government asserts that it views disability from the social model perspective. As has been argued by Mutanga and Walker (2015), proponents of the social model seem to have neglected the need to understand the challenges for people with disabilities, not only emanating from the social environment but from other factors such as the individual, environmental, economic and political spheres. As a result of the dominant perspectives on understanding disability, international scholars' attention has now shifted towards developing better understanding of disability by incorporating multiple and intersecting factors (economic, social, environmental, political and cultural barriers) that place restrictions in the way of full inclusion and success of students with disabilities in higher education landscape.

It is for this reason that Howell (2005:49–50) postulates the following:

> The first issue that should be interrogated is the lack of planning for disability at a systemic and institutional level. She found that there was not enough integration and inclusion taking place campus-wide, with a large part of the disability function residing in the disability office or disability unit. This was echoed by the Foundation of Tertiary Institutions of the Northern Metropolis (FOTIM 2011) study six years later, in which it was found that a large focus was placed on disability units (or its equivalent on campus) to provide support to students, in this way not integrating disability into key aspects of the university. Any disability-related problem, from facility and maintenance issues to academic exclusions, became a matter for the disability units to deal with. Disability was therefore not sufficiently included in the planning and functioning of all faculty, administration and support services.

Literature review

In this regard, the authors will provide a brief synopsis of how COVID-19 brought some complications to the education sector worldwide. The author will also encapsulate how students with disabilities were discriminated, after some policies and regulations were imposed as a way of managing the pandemic. Lastly, some international perspectives will also be incorporated in order to provide a comparative analysis of the phenomenon under attention.

Topical and timing of the article

It is relevant for the authors to highlight that at the time of writing this article, South Africa was one of the epicentres of COVID-19 worldwide and Level 5 was also in place as a concomitant part of Third Wave. The authors further add that online teaching and learning took place even when most of the South African universities were closed for face-to-face contact. Incidentally, students with disabilities were sent home like their counterparts to reside with their families.

Within the context of this article, what intensifies the problem is the lack of interrogation on training, knowledge and skills from the family members and the community at large on how to academically support students with disabilities. Another qualitative variable that exacerbates the current article is the noticeable relationship between disability and lack of resources. This article argues that the universities are equipped to support these students but the families are not. Yet, students with disabilities were treated the same as their counterparts when most of the universities were closed due to high rate of COVID-19 infections.

From a theoretical point of view, critics may argue that the current article aims to respond to the gap identified in the literature and it concerns itself with the technical challenges that may be faced by students with disabilities, particularly during online teaching and learning, during the COVID-19 pandemic era.

The meaning behind 'disability' as a medical condition

According to the Strategic Policy Framework on Disability for the Post school Education and Training System (2022:4):

> Disability is defined as the loss or elimination of opportunities to take part in the life of the community, equitably with others, encountered by persons having physical, sensory, psychological, developmental, learning, neurological or other impairments, which may be permanent, temporary or episodic in nature, thereby causing activity limitations and participation restriction within mainstream society. These barriers may be due to economic, physical and/or structural, social, attitudinal and/or cultural factors.

Challenges faced by students with disabilities amid COVID-19

According to McKinney et al. (2020:3), on 26 March 2020, the WHO (2020) developed a document, *Considerations for Disabled People during COVID-19*, that includes actions that need to be taken to ensure that people with disabilities are able to access healthcare services, water and sanitation services and public health information. However, the majority of these are not fully feasible in countries such as South Africa. It is against this backdrop when Khumalo et al. (2020:190) reason that the effect of COVID-19 has increased economic, physical, social, attitudinal and/or cultural barriers particularly to students with disabilities because of the shift from contact learning to online learning without physical and technological support.

Kamga (2020:559–560) warns that it is important because South Africa is party to the International Covenant on Economic and Social, Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Children's Charter) and the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). These instruments provide for a compulsory right to basic education to all without discrimination; this right being enshrined in the South African Constitution as well as numerous policy instruments.

To add on to the above-mentioned, the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training has mandated the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET 2013) to recognise the rights of people with disabilities and their participation in or access to higher education as part of the transformation process in South Africa.

Similarly, scholars such as Tremmel et al. (2020:201) propound that as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, many school districts have moved from brick-and-mortar instruction to remote instruction with little planning time and limited resources. Rural localities, already facing barriers and hardships, attempted to provide special education and related services in accordance with rapidly changing state and federal guidelines. For many schools and tertiary institutions, the transition from face-to-face instruction to remote learning during the COVID-19 pandemic was not their finest hour, particularly for under-resourced, underserved rural schools.

Khumalo et al. (2020:188) further provide that the shift in the mode of delivery from contact sessions to online learning by universities during the COVID-19 period has been hailed as a panacea for the academic year, but it restricts the inclusion of students who are differently abled. Students who are differently abled are more vulnerable than other students as they have more needs related to healthcare, safety and accessibility. In the decisions made about remote-online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, students who are differently abled have become most vulnerable and isolated.

Scholars such as Kuper et al. (2020) hold the view that some of the disabled people require frequent physical contact with others to obtain the support they require (such as carrying, lifting or feeding by care assistants), which becomes challenging in the context of social distancing and self-isolation. In terms of this article, it needs to be mentioned that students with disabilities depend on other students and staff members from the Disability Unit for teaching and learning to take place. To university lecturers, administrators, managers and other relevant stakeholders, one of the salient questions that can be posed to them is: How do students with disabilities cope with their studies when during online teaching and learning? Equally important, another critical question that may be posed is: How do students with disabilities cope with their studies during online teaching and learning, particularly when universities are closed?

Socio-economic conditions as part of the qualitative variables

According to *Sowetan* published on 18 August 2020, a new study has revealed that most university students cannot study from home during the lockdown as they lack essentials such as laptops and data. The study argued that the majority of university students lack 'critical' resources such as data and laptops and this makes it to be impractical for them to study from home during the lockdown pandemic. In this survey, a total of 362 participants consisting of students across 26 universities, as well as graduates and parents were interviewed as part of the study by Feenix, a crowdfunding platform. Therefore, qualitative and quantitative data from the report were extracted from a series of 54 online questions to help effectively measure the affect that funding has on students from an academic, emotional and financial perspective. It is against this backdrop when the research showed that the challenges faced by students have become even more apparent during the lockdown, as students who were living on campus are unable to afford laptops and data to continue their online studies.

Scholars such as Emmett (2006) and Groce et al. (2011) add that the majority of people with disabilities cannot make online purchases as they have no credit cards or funds available, cannot access online shopping platforms because of a lack of Internet or devices, or reside in informal settlements where deliveries are not made.

Kamga (2020:575) adds that apart from the very problematic absence of study materials, special programmes and qualified teachers at home, assistive devices such as Perkins Brailler or video technology for communicating remotely in sign language often are not available at home. In addition, even if these device supporting systems were to be delivered to families, not only are they not affordable, but they are not always user-friendly for parents who may be unfamiliar with them and consequently unable to assist their children. In the same vein, the home environment is not equipped with stimulating tools related to sights, sounds and notion embedded in the education of learners with sensory, physical and intellectual disability disabilities.

Apart from the issue of difficulties in teaching and learning as a concomitant part of lack of resources, Heide and Simonsson (2014) argue that open lines of communication, especially in times of crisis, can mitigate feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. Lambert and Dryer (2018) cite another problem when alluding that social life exclusion and shifting of mode of learning and teaching to online learning contribute to stress and anxiety experienced by students with disabilities. When the authors take into consideration the survey that was conducted by McManus, Dryer and Henning (2017) on barriers to learning online experienced by students with a mental health disability, one of the findings suggests that the learning environment was a major challenge for students with disabilities.

McKinney et al. (2020:1) articulate that the exclusion of people with disabilities goes against the principles established in South Africa's Constitution, in which all people are regarded as equal, have the right to life and inherent dignity, the right to access healthcare, as well as the protection of dignity. In addition, the triage policy contravenes the UN CRPD, which the South African government has signed and ratified.

Khumalo et al. (2020:196) rightly observe that connectivity, power outages, assistive devices, technical support, technical

training, teaching methods, content design, time, home environment, access, institutional support, lack of parental support, no contact with fellow friends from the Disability Unit and confidence are cited as some of the qualitative variables that threaten the quality teaching and learning that should be received by students during online engagements.

It is for this reason that the authors underscore that the above-cited challenges may underscore that some of the students with disabilities may need extra attention including personal assistants, a variety of academic support, psychological or emotional support so that they can be able to sustain their studies. The critical question that may be posed in this study is: How are these services rendered when the universities are closed?

Focusing strictly on the discrimination of students with disabilities, Ngubane-Mokiwa and Zongozz (2021) put forward that students with disabilities have been going through different forms of discrimination and exclusion in the South African Higher Education system. These include inaccessible learning materials and learning platforms, negative attitudes from lecturers, fellow students and more.

It is against this background that the United Nations Declaration Article 1 [17] on the right to development also states that: The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which *every human person* and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realised.

Similarly, the National Planning Commission (2030) articulates that the National Development Plan (NDP) of South Africa Vision 2030 [9] proposed the following:

> [P]eople with disabilities must have enhanced access to quality education and employment. Efforts to ensure relevant and accessible skills development programmes for people with disabilities, coupled with equal opportunities for their productive and gainful employment, must be prioritised. (n.p.)

Research methodology and sample population

The study employed a qualitative approach where face-to-face interviews were used as a qualitative method of data collection. The study was conducted at a selected South African University of Technology (UoT), which is based in the Gauteng Province. Participants for the article were purposively selected based on their proficiency and knowledge about the researched phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell 2017). For the purpose of this article, 30 participants, five lecturers and two Disability Unit personnel were selected to participate in the study. It is important to mention that all the selected students were in their first year of study and the lecturers who volunteered to participate in the study were those who are teaching and engaging with first-year students with disabilities.

Methods of data analysis

Descriptive and interpretative research paradigms were mainly used for data analysis. The two methods helped the researcher to make sense of the collected data and also contributed to rigourous analysis of a considerable amount of verbal responses gathered from face-to-face interviews. Verbatim responses from the participants were also provided with the intention of showing validity, reliability and trustworthiness of the collected data. In addition, dominating points were converted into qualitative themes that were also supported by the verbatim responses.

Interview as a qualitative method

'Interview' is defined by Babbie (2014:281) as a data collection encounter in which one person (an interviewer) asks questions of another (a respondent). Furthermore, Babbie (2014:281) is of the perspective that interviews are an alternative method of data collection. Rather than asking respondents to read questionnaires and enter their own answers, the researcher sent interview assistants to ask questions orally and to record participants' answers. For the purpose of the present study, 37 participants were interviewed and recorded.

Results

The primary aim of this section was to focus on the technical challenges that may be faced by the students with disabilities during online teaching and learning. It is important to mention that at the time of writing this article, most of the South African universities including the university under attention were still using online as a platform to deliver teaching and learning. The analysis from this section is qualitative because face-to-face interviews were used and analysed narratively. The quantitative data were also taken into consideration because the responses of students and lecturers combined were also calculated percentage wise and represented in figures and pie charts. In this article, Q stands for question and IQ will mean interview question.

The IQs asked were qualitative because they comprised both closed-ended and open-ended questions.

For this article, 30 students were interviewed and recorded in face-to-face situations. Five lecturers and two personnel from the Disability Unit were also interviewed and recorded. There were eight qualitative questions that were directed to the participants. The first four research questions were directed to student participants. The second set of questions (two questions) were meant for lecturer participants. The two interview questions (IQs) were directed to personnel from the Disability Unit.

What follows next are the four IQs directed to student participants.

Research question IQ1

Are there any technical challenges that you are experiencing since the implementation of online teaching and learning? Elaborate.
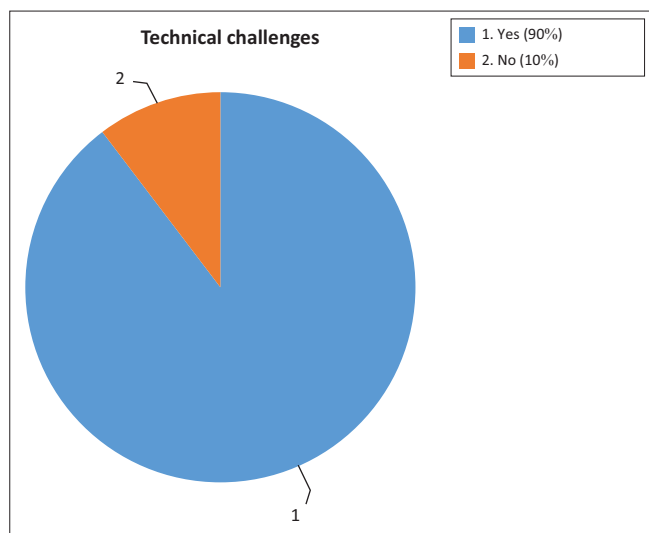
FIGURE 1: Technical challenges experienced by students with disabilities.

In terms of this article, this question is the one that initiated the topic under attention. The significant majority (90%) of students who participated in this study articulated that they are experiencing technical difficulties when it comes to online teaching and learning. However, it is fair to mention that there are those students who held a view that they experienced no technical difficulties. In this regard, a student participant expressed:

'It is extremely difficult to deal with the two issues at the same time. COVID-19 is affecting almost everyone, whether physically or psychologically. However, when it comes to some of us, you have to deal with the fear and anxiety like everyone else and at the same time you have to cope with the difficulties that are brought by lack of resources so that you can actively participate on teaching activities like other students. Now things are better because I can always go to the Disability Lab in order to attend my online classes but back then it was extremely difficult since we were not allowed to be on campus.' (P9, male, student)

In addition, another student participant articulated that:

'I so wish people can learn to understand that we are not like other students. I am not saying that we should be given a special attention when it comes to assessments but other lecturers forget that there are students with disabilities in their classes. The lecturer will just upload the assignment on Brightspace (online teaching platform) and decide to not send that particular assignment to a staff member who is working at the Disability Lab so that it can be brailed or enlarged accordingly. The very same lecturer will expect you to submit the assignment on the same day as other students and that is not fair because we did not receive it on the same day.' (P17, student, male)

The views and perceptions of the minority cannot be ignored and undermined. One of those students (P6) opined that:

'I personally do not experience any technical difficulties with regard to online teaching and learning. I can cope with my own but I have to admit that most of my friends are suffering and sometimes I feel so bad that I am not in a position to assist them; especially when we are at home. I can feel for my friends but I hope the university will start to treat us like those students who

are always prioritized when it comes to phase in approach of returning students to campus.' (P6, student, male)

In support of this student, P4 stated that:

'I am fine with online classes but it is important for people to understand that the nature of our disabilities is not the same. Other students need help of others in order to survive the university environment. This is the reason why Residence Administration make sure that they pair us according to our situations. The one who can cope is paired with the one who cannot cope so that they can assist each other.' (P4, student, female)

In taking into account the views and perspectives expressed by the above-excerpted students, it is arguable to state that online teaching and learning has some negative implications on students with disabilities. It is interesting to notice that even those who articulated that they are not experiencing any difficulties admit that some of their friends are really struggling when it comes to online sessions. Social justice as a theoretical framework that is used to guide and buttresses this article argues that no one should be left behind or discriminated because of race, gender, ethnicity, disability, etc. However, critics may support that students with disabilities are in this case quite disadvantaged than their counterparts students without disabilities.

The literature consulted in this article argued that there is a relationship between socio-economic conditions and the success of students with disabilities. The intersection between the two phenomena is that students with disabilities require some special learning devices, which largely depend on the financial stability of the funder. In most cases, these students tend to be compromised when it comes to the student learning outcomes than their counterparts students with disabilities. The reason behind this is that they have to acquire the aforementioned devices before learning can take place.

In addition to the above-mentioned, Howell (2005) shares a similar finding when revealing that one of the contributing factors that negatively affects students with disabilities is the lack of planning for disability at a systematic and institutional level. It was further postulated that the lack of proper integration between all the relevant stakeholders at an institutional level exacerbates the problem.

Research question IQ2

Which teaching platform works better for you between contact and online? Elaborate.

This question is quite similar to the above-mentioned one. The authors wanted to validate if the responses from the participants will be similar. On the issue of best teaching platform between online and contact sessions, P29 outlined:

'These two are important and they have their own advantages and disadvantages. I will always prefer face-to-face contact sessions because I have an opportunity to attend all the classes since I do not rely on someone to assist me with online connection. However, I
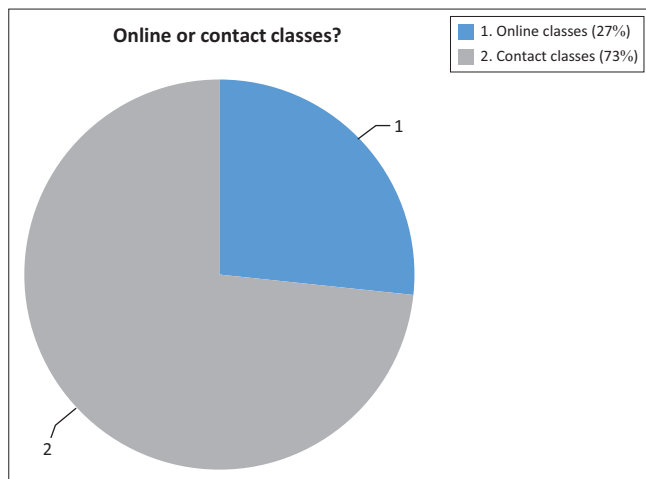
FIGURE 2: The best teaching platform between online and contact classes.

have to admit that online sessions benefit the students because they are able to download recordings after the class.' (P29, student, male)

In support of the above-articulated, P11 added that:

'Contact sessions are the best they accommodate most of us with disabilities. The teaching and learning process becomes an easy one. Online is good but it does not accommodate those students with special needs.' (P11, student, female)

According to the literature consulted in this article, scholars such as Emmett (2006), Groce et al. (2011), Kagma (2020), and Khumalo et al. (2020) cited a lack of resources such as connectivity, power outages, assistive devices, technical support, technical training, teaching methods, content design, time, home environment, access and institutional support as one of the challenges that are confronted by students in general. In this regard, it is noticed that the students do see the advantage of online teaching and learning. However, there is a need to take into consideration the fact that when it comes to students with disabilities, it is not only about the resources. There are still those who cannot touch or see and they still need to be assisted so that they can fully participate like their counterpart students.

Research question IQ3

Do you see your university doing enough in ensuring that you are on the same page with the other students? Justify your answer.

On the question of whether the university is doing enough to support students with disabilities all the student participants stated that the university's intervention is not sufficient when it comes to students with disabilities. In this regard, P15 expressed that:

'The university is failing us because we always have to remind some of the lecturers that they need to send our notes and assignments to the Disability Unit. Without doing this, we will end up not learning anything because the lecturers do not want to admit that the university has students with disabilities. I am not saying we should be treat special but at least they should just acknowledge that we are not the same with the majority of the students.' (P15, student, male)
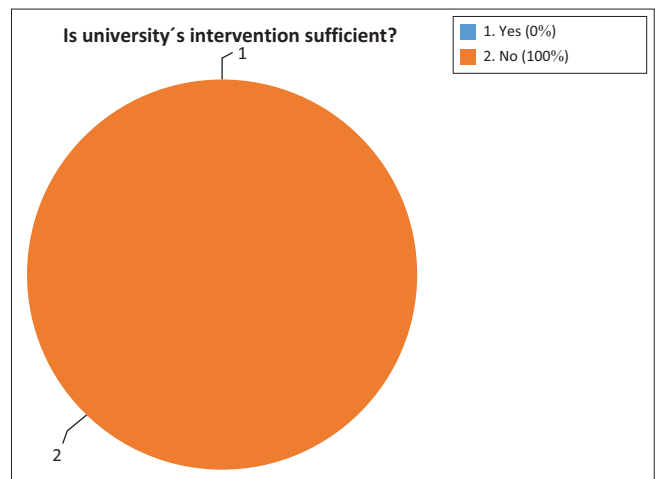

FIGURE 3: The university´s intervention on students with disabilities.

In support of this, P19 reasoned that:

'It is so unfair for the university to send us home every time the country is confronted with a new wave. We are so fine at school and the environment is conducive for us to participate in academic activities. Some of us do not have funding and we are still relying on our friends when it comes to the learning facilities. The moment you go home you do not even have that friend who will assist you with the necessary device so that life can go on.' (P19, student, female)

In addition, P21 stated:

'The university is not supporting us because we are expected to attend same classes with those students who are normal. At high school, we did not attend same classes with those who are normal because the Department of Basic Education acknowledges that it admitted students with special needs. Some of the lecturers when they teach they forget that some students cannot see in class. The pace that they teach at can also disadvantage some of the students who are normal.' (P21, student, male)

Another student participant added that:

'Sometimes I feel like they are doing us a favour by registering us. The system is not really ready to accommodate students with disabilities. The reason I am saying this because they are only two staff members who are responsible for the whole campus. Should they get sick at the same time, meaning there is no school for us.' (P6, student, male)

Expounding for the literature that has been consulted in this article, the following clauses and legislations (Republic of South Africa 1996): Section 29 (1) of the Constitution of South Africa (*Act No. 108 of 1996*), The NDP of South Africa Vision 2030 [9], The United Nations Declaration Article 1 [17], The WHO (2020), and The UN CRPD, which the South African government has signed and ratified all share a similar perspective that no one should be disadvantaged because of disability. The article postulates that it is the responsibility of the university under attention to provide a conducive environment to ensure that everyone receives equal opportunity to participate in educational facilities.

Emanating from a social justice point of view, the students' response to this question is quite concerning. The reason for this contention is that 100% of students with disabilities who participated in this article held the view that the university's intervention is not sufficient. Critics may support that in the university under attention there is no alignment between the above-mentioned legislations and the service that is received by students with disabilities. In this article, the authors articulate that there is an urgent need for the South African Higher Education sector to come up with a coordinated plan on how the students should be supported. This will ensure that their learning outcomes are not compromised as they receive the same content and write the same assessments as their counterparts.

According to the literature consulted in this article, Crous (2004) in Mutanga (2017:136) reported that very few people with disabilities participate in higher education and the small number who do access higher education face many challenges. The student participants in this article echo a similar submission that they do not see the university's interventions as sufficient when it comes to the support that should be given to students with disabilities. From a policy implementation point of view, there is a need to get an accurate analysis of the realities on the ground to ensure that there is a synergy between policy and practice.

Research question IQ4

How is your right to education violated?

When it comes to the issue of the violation of the constitutional right to education, students had different ideologies on this matter. Other students were of the view that their right is being violated, while others were of the viewpoint that their right is protected. In this regard, P3 articulated that:

'Our constitutional right to education are not violated because the system accommodates us. When I did my application for admission, the application form wanted to know if I have disability or not. Secondly, the university invested a lot of money in making sure that we have a Disability Lab. They

FIGURE 4: The violation of students' constitutional right.

also employed people who love working with students with disabilities.' (P3, student, male)

Participant 12 held a different perspective that their constitutional right to education is not fully respected. In this regard, P12 stated that:

'Our constitutional right to education is not entirely violated because we were given a chance to be admitted. However, the quality of teaching that is received by normal students is not the same as the one that is received by students with disabilities. Normal students are not in any way disadvantaged by online teaching but we always have to struggle when we are confronted with online classes.' (P12, student, male)

By sharing a similar perspective, P1 shared that:

'Our constitutional right to education is not violated because students with disabilities are welcomed to study like other students. The university should just make sure that all the staff members are doing their part as stipulated in their contracts. The quality of education that is received by students with disabilities should not only lie at the hands of staff members working at the Disability Lab. We should also have mentors, tutors and student assistants who are physically challenged so that it can be quite easier for them to relate and understand our challenges.' (P1, student, male)

According to the literature consulted in this article, there is a noticeable relationship between what initiated this article and the constitutional imperatives on students' right to education. Organisations such as ICESCR, the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (African Charter), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (African Children's Charter) and the UN CRPD all share a similar advocacy that a compulsory right to basic education to all without discrimination is not debatable.

On this research question, what captures the attention of the authors is the students' observation on the violation of their constitutional rights. It is interesting to note that the participants acknowledge the significance of online teaching and learning because it has its own advantages. However, they put forward that proper measures should be put in place to ensure that no one is left behind. Their contention is based on the fact that the nature of their disabilities is not the same. They reason that there are those students who can cope on their own while there are those who rely on the help of their peers so that they can participate in learning activities. The theory of social justice dictates that everyone should be given fair and equal opportunity in the educational space. The implication of this theory is that it is the responsibility of the universities to ensure that whatever measures that were brought in place as a way of managing the spread of COVID-19 should be inclusive enough.

As part of the transformation of the South African Higher Education sector, there is a need for the universities to intensify their support to students with disabilities as a way of protecting students constitutional right to education. The authors put forward that to grant students admission and not
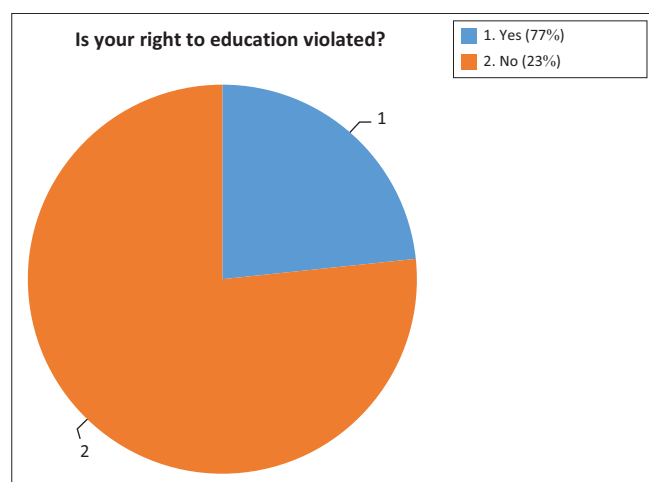
put sufficient measures in place so that they can receive quality education like their counterparts may be perceived as a violation of human rights.

What follows next are the two IQs that were directed to lecturer participants.

Research question IQ1

What is your knowledge on the challenges that are experienced by students with disabilities in your class?

On this question, all the lecturers indicated that they do know that they have normal students and those with disabilities. In this context, one of the lecturers shared that:

'I know very well that I have students with disabilities in my class and I always try by that I accommodate them when I teach and when I assess. I have to admit that I sometimes forget that I need to send their notes to the Disability Lab so that they can be designed in such a way that the students will be able to access them. I honestly feel like it should be a collective responsibility between lecturers and support staff employed at the Disability Unit.' (P9, lecturer, female)

In addition to the above-mentioned, P28 who is also a lecturer articulated that:

'The university is failing us because it expects us to deal and cope with the students with disabilities. We were not trained to deal with this type of students and this is the reason why they will always be problems there and there. The Department of Basic Education employ qualified teachers to deal with students with special needs. The dynamic are not the same and the university should take that into consideration. We are doing everything within our best to ensure that these students are supported but the university should also support us. These students deserve quality teaching and learning like other students. I understand that the resources may be a problem in order to appoint specific lecturers who will be able to attend to these students but we should at least receive a training so that we can all be capacitated.' (P28, lecturer, female)

It is interesting to see that some of the points that are mentioned by the lecturer participants were also mentioned by one of the student participants. The first issue is that the university should be able to appoint qualified people who will be able to deal with students with disabilities. The second issue is that lecturers are always reminded that they have students with disabilities in their classes. So, need to make sure that they send notes and other teaching material to the relevant support division that is working with students with disabilities. Critics may support that it is not the responsibility of the students to remind the lecturers about sending the notes, assignments and other teaching material to the Disability Unit.

Scholars such as Groce et al. (2011) and Kamga (2020) argue that one cannot advocate for online teaching and learning without taking cognisance of the socio-economic conditions of our society. In terms of this article, it was argued that a lack of access to proper learning devices, data, and other necessary resources makes online teaching and learning to be an exclusive platform because it will exclude those who are confronted by poor socio-economic conditions. It is against this background that the lecturer participants cite the issue of the university being ready to deal with the kind of students that the university is enrolling. It is reasoned that a lack of training or workshop to lectures on students with disabilities is also part of the contributing factors because the dynamics of these students and their counterparts are completely different. In this context, the article records that there is a need for universities to equip staff members to their fullest potential so that they become aware on how to deal with students with disabilities.

Social justice as a theoretical framework that underpinned this article argues that no one should be left behind in the academic project. It can therefore be understood a lack of uniform way of dealing with students with disabilities from their lectures exposes the entire Higher Education sector. In the Department of Basic Education, no one will, be employed to deal with students with disabilities without a necessary qualification and appropriate training. The findings of the article establish that a lack of proper training to those staff members who are dealing with students with disabilities does not resonate well with the transformation agenda of the Higher Education landscape.

Research question IQ2

Do you see yourself doing enough in ensuring that these students receive quality teaching and learning? Elaborate.

On this question, it is interesting to note that all the lecturers' share a similar perspective that they are not doing their best to ensure that students with disabilities receive quality teaching and learning. They articulated that it is important for the university to acknowledge that training or some sort of orientation is important so that they can be fully equipped to deal with students with special needs. In this regard, P4 who is also a lecturer respondent stated that:

'My answer is No. I am not doing enough to ensure that students with disabilities are fully supported. Equally important, I am not the only one who feeling this way. It is a common thing at the university and this is also common in other universities.' (P4, lecturer, male)

In support of this view, P16 outlined that:

'I am not doing enough to ensure that the students with disabilities receive quality teaching and learning. However, going forward I will make sure that I also try to organize extra classes with these students to ensure that they are at the same page with the normal students.' (P16, lecturer, male)

In terms of this article, it is interesting to see how the lecturer participants admitted their mistakes when it comes to the type of treatment that they unconsciously provide to students with disabilities. Critics may support that in order to do the right thing one has to identify the things that he or she is not getting them right. In this article, the lecturers admission may give

them a very good opportunity to do the right thing, which is, always having in mind that the university accommodates all type of students and all of them need to be treated the same.

On this question, it is interesting to observe that the lecturer participant is in full support of students with disabilities. What captures the attention of the authors is another lecturer who admitted that he or she is not doing enough in ensuring that the learning outcomes of the students with disabilities are not compromised. A social justice theory advocates that principles of access and equity should be debatable. The lecturer's acknowledgement of not doing in enough when supporting students with disabilities is a great concern. From a policy implementation point of view, there is a need to establish a lecturer accountability when it comes to students' academic success. The authors put forward that it appears as if lecturers are not obliged to provide quality service to students with disabilities because their utmost focus is directed to students without disabilities.

What follows are the two IQs that were directed to Disability Unit personnel.

Research question IQ1

What is your knowledge on the challenges that are experienced by students with disabilities in your environment?

The two staff members who are working at the Disability Lab mentioned that they know almost all the challenges that are experienced by students with disabilities. They further mentioned that they are also familiar with the dynamics that threaten the future of students with disabilities. However, they pointed out that they are working hand in hand with other relevant stakeholders in ensuring that these issues are resolved.

Participant 34 stated that:

> 'I know all the dynamics and challenges that are experienced by students with disabilities. You can wake me up in the middle of the night and ask me any question regarding the challenges that are threatening the future of students with disabilities I will answer that particular question. I have to know their challenges so that I can try to come up with the coping mechanism that can be put in place. It is practically not possible for me to actively contribute to my environment without knowing the issues that are affecting the students.' (P34, Disability Unit staff member, female)

From a theoretical point of view, the authors articulate that what is mentioned by staff members from the Disability Unit is what should have been mentioned by lecturer participants in the previous question. One may postulate that staff members from the Disability Unit are familiar with all the challenges that are confronting students with disabilities simply because they are mandated to work with them. Therefore, there is a need to sensitise academic staff regarding the constitutional rights of students with disabilities.

In this article, it is interesting to note that students with disabilities are well taken care of at the disability centre. However, it is important for the authors to mention that this should be the service that these students receive in all the operational sectors of the university. This can only be achieved by having a proper integration between the support and academic divisions. The literature consulted in this article postulate that the success of students with disabilities rely on a collective effort of the divisions that exist in a university. The service offered by staff members at the Disability Unit is what the principles of social justice advocate for.

Research question IQ2

Do you see your environment or division doing enough in ensuring that these students receive quality teaching and learning? Elaborate.

It is interesting to see how the two participants from the support division responded to this question. They stated that their environment is doing everything within its powers to ensure that students with disabilities receive quality teaching and learning. Equally important, they also mentioned that they are receiving sufficient support from the university to ensure that these students succeed like any other normal student who registered. In this context, P36 mentioned that:

> 'Yes, our environment is doing everything within its powers to support the students with disabilities. Our university is also giving sufficient support to make sure that we achieve our main objective. The only problem that we are experiencing is the lecturers who do not want to co-operate, especially when it comes to teaching material that has to come to our office for our students. People just need to accept that the university admits normal students and those who need special arrangements. At some point, I had to run with the academic departments so that I can at least get a question paper. At that point, normal students are busy writing the assessment while my students are still waiting. These issues have to be resolved because they also bring in unnecessary psychological implication in the minds of those students with disabilities.' (P36, Disability Unit staff member, female)

In support of this, P37 added that:

> 'I am confident that I am doing what is supposed to be done as an employee of the university. I am doing everything within my powers to ensure that my students receive sufficient support from the unit. I am also certain that my other colleagues in the Disability Centre are also maximizing their support to ensure that we collectively achieve the fundamental objective of the university. However, the colleagues from the academic division should also play their part as we are playing ours. We are all committed to work for this university and we should always note that our role is to serve the people without any discrimination.' (P37, Disability Unit staff member, female)

Similarly, to the response provided in the previous question, staff members participants still maintain that their environment is doing everything to ensure that students' learning outcomes are met. The literature consulted in this article argued that students with disabilities have been going through different forms of discrimination and exclusion in the South African

Higher Education system. These include inaccessible learning materials and learning platforms, negative attitudes from lecturers, fellow students and more. On this interview question, it is interesting to note that the Disability Unit is maximising its efforts to ensure that the students under attention are well supported and do not experience any form of discrimination. In terms of this article, it can be deduced that this effort is in alignment with the principles of social justice that advocates for equity, fairness and access to everyone.

Discussion

Qualitative themes

From the findings of this article, the following are the qualitative themes that have emerged from the above-discussed qualitative data that came from students, lecturers and support staff from the Disability Unit. Verbatim responses from the participants will also be included as a way of making sense and validating the qualitative themes that derived from the analysis of interview responses.

Qualitative theme one

Online vis-à-vis contact sessions

Both the student and lecturer participants articulated that online teaching and learning is quite beneficial to students because they can always download the recordings. It was also pointed out that both of them have advantages and disadvantages. However, it was reasoned that students with disabilities should not be sent home during stricter regulations so that they can continue to learn like others students. It emerged in this article that it is difficult for the students with special needs to cope with the technical challenges that come with online teaching, especially when they are at home. Social justice as theory that has been used to fortify this article argued that no one should be discriminated in the educational space. The implication of this theory in this article dictates that there should be a proper integration between all the relevant stakeholders to ensure that whatever teaching platform is used it does not disadvantageous for students with disabilities. Regarding this theme, P13, who is a student, articulated that:

'There are several benefits that attached to online teaching and learning. One of them is access and availability of the recordings in case one missed a class. However, these recordings can also be made available to students in a face to face class. It is just a matter of benchmarking with other universities as to how do they assist students inside and outside of the class. This kind of resource will also be beneficial to normal students. If we were to say online classes only, some of us are going to suffer because we always need one's help to join a virtual class.' (P13, student, male)

P2 who is a lecturer stated that:

'I personally prefer both online and contact sessions. The reason for my submission is that online sessions alone compromises the quality of discussions that should happen in class. Other students just join the class and leave the device while others join the class and be busy with other things. It is only few of them

who will pay attention until the end of the session. So, if we were to rely on online sessions only; the quality of teaching and learning will be compromised. With regards to students with disability, I think face to face sessions work better for them since lack of resources will never be a barrier for the to learn.' (P2, lecturer, male)

In terms of this article, the researcher submits that both student and lecturer participants share a similar perspective on the advantages and disadvantages of online and contact sessions. What caught the attention of the researcher is the students' view when articulating that the issue of access to recordings should not be limited to virtual classes. They can also be available and accessible in a face-to-face class. It is just a matter of benchmarking with other South African universities.

Qualitative theme two

Fear, anxiety and psychological implications

It was found in this study that COVID-19 brought fear, anxiety and psychological implications to everyone. However, students with disabilities have to deal with the aforementioned issues and at the same time try to cope with the other challenges that come as a result of lack of support from other relevant stakeholders. The literature that was consulted in this article expounded that challenges that are confronting and threatening the future of students with disabilities are not only limited to teaching and learning. It was further argued that some of these challenges have a potential of affecting the mental health of students with disabilities. It is against this finding that the authors postulate that proper measures should be put in place in ensuring that there is a strong support structure to students with disabilities as it is the case with their counterparts.

On this theme, it was found in this article that COVID-19 did not only affect students when it comes to teaching and learning. In this regard P8 who is a student expressed:

'I have friends who study at the University of Johannesburg and they always indicate that it is quite easier for them to get professional help inside the university. However, one has to wait for more than a month in our case in order to be attended to. To my surprise, the university knows very well that COVID-19 almost everyone on earth was psychologically affected by this pandemic.' (P8, student, male)

Participant 36 (P36) encapsulated that the issue of mental health affects almost everyone in the university. However, one agrees that it may be a double crisis to students with disability since they are quite vulnerable in nature.'

Qualitative theme three

Poor communication between lecturers and personnel from the Disability Unit

Critics argued in this study that there is noticeable poor communication between lecturers and the support staff members from the Disability Unit. This is one of the qualitative variables or contributing factors that makes the students with disabilities to continue suffering. The issue

under attention was also confirmed by student participation when they highlighted that some of the lecturers have to be reminded that they have students with special needs in their respective classes. Therefore, it should be a norm for them to send the teaching material to the Disability Unit so that it can be arranged accordingly. On this aspect, P11 ventilated:

'Sometimes it is so disappointing when you hear a student with disability communicating with the lecturer regarding the question paper that was supposed to be sent to the Disability Unit maybe a day before the assessment. It is heart-breaking because they make us to feel that we are disabled every time we have to remind them about the question paper that was not delivered at the Unit. I do not remember us starting to write at the same time with normal students. In some cases, the academic departments forget to even send people who can assist some of us who cannot write on our own. You know the answers but you need someone who can put your verbal responses on the answer sheet.' (P11, Disability Unit staff member, male)

Interestingly, some of the lecturers admitted that they tend to forget that they have students with disabilities, especially when it comes to communicating with the relevant support staff members who are dealing with the mentioned type of students. Critics argued that much can be achieved if communication can be improved, particularly between lecturers and support staff members who are attached to the Disability Unit. Participated 35 (P35) raised:

'The issue of effective communication between the departments and the Disability Unit should be something that is listed as an item in all the meetings that concern teaching and learning. I think the more we talk about these issues is the more colleagues are going to realise that the university made a commitment that it will support students with special needs.' (P35, lecturer, male)

Social justice as a theoretical framework that was used to fortify the researcher's point of view emphasised the issue of fairness, inclusivity, collaboration and cooperation as some of the fundamental principles to be taken into account while dealing with people with disabilities. The above-mentioned qualitative theme validates that there is a communication breakdown between all the relevant stakeholders that are institutionally mandated to support students who need special support.

Qualitative theme four
Transformative policy on students with disability
The literature consulted in this article argued that one of the contributing factors to poor efficiency when dealing with disabled students is lack of alignment between policy and practice. In this article, the authors submit that there is a need for universities to develop transformational policies that will advocate for students with disabilities. Social justice as a conceptual framework agrees that no one should be disadvantaged because of age, race, gender, disability, etc.

Conclusion

This study explored the technical challenges that students face with disability after the introduction of online teaching and learning as a concomitant part of COVID-19. The study

was conducted at a selected South African UoT that is based in the Gauteng Province. Social justice as a theoretical framework that was used to guide and shape the authors' argument helped in ensuring that there is alignment between title, problem statement, literature review and the findings of the article. The qualitative approach and its methods of data gathering employed in this article helped the authors to meet the objectives of the article. Face-to-face interviews as a qualitative method of data collection enabled the authors to interact closely with the research participants and also to explore issues in depth, that concern students with disabilities.

The findings of the article established that students with disabilities are not only disadvantaged by online teaching and learning platform; they are also disadvantaged when it comes to assessments that are allocated and given the same hours with their counterparts, students without disabilities. It was also revealed that some of the special arrangements such as additional time and font enlargement of study notes are easily forgotten by some of the academic staff, which makes an academic project to be a difficult one to student with disabilities. In addition, accountability and poor communication between lecturers and support staff members of the Disability Units was also cited as one of the qualitative variables that put students with disabilities in a compromised situation.

This article encapsulates that online teaching and learning may be beneficial to the students with disabilities, only if there can be a healthy communication between lecturers and other relevant stakeholders such as staff members from the Disability Unit. This will ensure that a constitutional right to education of the students with disabilities is not disregarded and neglected. The literature review consulted in this article together with social justice as a theoretical framework support that there is a noticeable discrimination that can be realised on students with disabilities than their counterparts during the era of COVID-19 pandemic.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

Authors' contributions

The content of this article is an equal contribution of M.J.M., T.J.R., O.S.M., M.H.S. and L.K. who all drafted, revised and finalised the article.

Ethical considerations

Funding information

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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