



Equity, Dignity, and Justice in Higher Education Post-COVID-19: The Case of a Public University in Namibia

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Abstract

COVID-19 has disrupted teaching and learning and consequently introduced pedagogical changes into higher education institutions. Institutions of higher learning shifted from the traditional face-to-face, to online, teaching and learning mode. Most of the institutions of higher learning around the world, including the University of Namibia, had to re-think, re-imagine, re-innovate and re-design the provision of accessible, equitable and quality education. Despite unreliable internet connectivity and a lack of or unstable electricity supply in remote areas, institutions of higher learning resiliently continued to provide education for all students. Due to the aftermath of COVID-19, and forces from the 4th and 5th industrial revolutions, institutions of higher learning have adopted the blended learning approach, which is rooted mainly in social constructivism and classical liberal theory, which advocate for equal opportunities in education, irrespective of the socio-economic background of students. The aims of blended learning include providing different modes of content delivery to encourage interaction by students, promote the acquisition of knowledge and skills through physical classrooms, and the continuation of learning processes electronically. The blended teaching and learning approach demand that lecturers and students possess 21st-century skills in order to function effectively and build resilient mechanisms for a sustainable future. Through a desktop review, this paper explored practices of equity, dignity

and justice in general higher education, but with the focus on a public university in Namibia, during and post-COVID-19. Notwithstanding infrastructural impediments and inadequate digital literacy skills among all parties, universities are determined to provide equitable and quality education for all.

Keywords: Blended learning, equity, learning management system, Moodle, resilient, online teaching

Introduction

The Academy of Tertiary Education was founded in 1980, marking the beginning of higher education in South-West Africa, as it was then known – now Namibia. Before this, most students who wanted to pursue higher education went to South Africa or other parts of the world (Magadza, 2010). At independence, the new government of Namibia inherited an education system that was characterised by gross disparities in terms of the apportionment of resources to schools based on ethnic groups. The new government did not waste time in embarking on the setting up of policies to address inequality and injustice, in the broader context of decolonising the apartheid-led education system. One such important decolonisation policy that established the vision of the government is Towards Education for All, which contains five main goals for the education sector, namely access, equity, democracy, quality and efficiency. This specific policy, in our view, aimed at ensuring inclusivity and providing equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their ethnic background or socio-economic status. This policy is similar to the American philosophy of education from 2002 to 2015, known as No Child Left Behind, which provided inclusive opportunities to students of different races.

After independence in 1990, two separate institutions of higher learning were founded, namely the University of Namibia (UNAM) and the Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN), which comprised all higher education institutions in the country. The University of Namibia, which is the focus of this study, was established through an Act of Parliament, Act 18 of 1992 (Centre for Quality Assurance and Management [CEQUAM], 2011). The University programmes are designed to meet the needs of the country in terms of human resources through high-quality teaching, research, consulting and community services. These human resources must be competitive and productive and should lead both public and private institutions toward a knowledge-based economy, economic growth, and an improved quality of life. Higher education in Namibia, however, is still viewed as young and comparatively new (Matengu et al., 2014). Being a new university, UNAM strived to provide equitable and quality education, like any other university

in the world, even during COVID-19. This paper therefore explores the practices of equity, dignity and justice in a public university in Namibia, after COVID-19.

Contextualisation

Before COVID-19, the University of Namibia mainly used a face-to-face teaching mode. At the time, students could be taught together in one venue as there were no restrictions on physical contact. However, during COVID-19, the University of Namibia, like most of the institutions of higher learning around the world, had to re-think, re-imagine, re-innovate and re-design the provision of accessible, equitable and quality education. Thus, the university in question adopted an online teaching and learning mode. Students interacted with their lecturers and other students through online platforms such as Moodle, Teams and WhatsApp.

In its history, the University of Namibia has gone through three rigorous curriculum transformations, namely: the trimester-semester, the three year-four year and the four-year level 8 Honours composite degree transformation (University of Namibia [UNAM], 2020). The transformation resulted in the expansion of the university's campuses, the broadening of its academic programmes, and increased enrolment. It started offering acclaimed academic programmes, such as medicine, law, accounting and engineering, which could not be offered by local higher education institution. The acclaimed academic programmes clearly form part of the transformation agenda and include specific critical competencies, such as problem-solving and critical thinking skills, ethical leadership and conduct, compassion, sustainable development skills and digital literacy, amongst others. These, in our view, are examples of initiatives aimed at addressing issues of equity, dignity and justice among the higher education fraternity in Namibia. These curriculum transformations were responding mostly to the developmental objectives of the country and that of the world, and are mostly necessitated by the forces of the 4th and 5th industrial revolutions (IRs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations (UN).

Theoretical framework

This paper is underpinned by the classical liberal theory of equal opportunities advocated by Sherman and Wood, who championed the need that all students receive equal opportunity in education (Tuffour et al., 2021). This theory holds the view that every student is born with an inherent capacity that cannot easily be changed. It is therefore expected that the education system is structured in a way that eliminates barriers or obstacles of any form that hinder the full participation of students from less privileged backgrounds from taking advantage of their inherent talents to achieve social

advancement. According to classical liberal theory, the equal opportunities provided by educational frameworks would encourage social mobility in any student. Based on this theory and the associated philosophical thoughts, education systems and structures should be planned on the understanding that they should remove impediments or obstructions of any form. The outbreak of pandemics like COVID-19 and related infectious ailments, which led institutions of higher learning to implement unexpected, prolonged closures, generated a lot of problems for underprivileged and less fortunate students. With Namibia being documented as being an unequal society, the parents of students from affluent families could afford expensive digital gadgets such as iPhones for their children to continue learning from the comfort of their homes, while the opposite was not true for destitute students (Tuffour et al., 2021). The outbreak of COVID-19 revealed the true reality of Namibian society in relation to access to education and the right to human dignity. It is therefore nearly difficult to ignore the idea that uneven involvement in education will worsen the situation of disadvantaged and vulnerable students when it comes to access and equity issues (Njeru & Orodho, 2003, cited in Tuffour et al., 2021).

Classical liberal theory was deemed fit for this paper, as the barriers imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic affected the more unfortunate, less privileged and susceptible parents and guardians; consequently, the effect trickled down to their children, because they could not afford the basic necessities, both at home and at the university. The situation was worsened by the digital divide, as the well-to-do students were being taught through radio, Moodle, videos and YouTube, among other digital means. The less fortunate were struggling with unstable electricity and connectivity issues, and hence did not have an equal opportunity to access education. This is directly in conflict with Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution (Government of the Republic of Namibia, 1990), which provides for the right to education by every child in the country. Even though the University of Namibia tried to provide devices to all students during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is still evident that learning opportunities for students living in remote areas were minimal. This makes it clear that the country has an unequal society in which well-to-do students will continue to have access to education.

Methods

This paper employed a desktop study as research methodology to systematically review the secondary data on equity, dignity and justice in higher education in general, but with a focus on a public university in Namibia. We specifically reviewed secondary sources, such as government and university directives, policies and peer-reviewed journal articles, which

deal directly with the provision of accessible, equitable and quality higher education during and after COVID-19. The review resulted in a thematic analysis of practices of equity, dignity and justice during and after COVID-19.

Results and discussion

The COVID-19 pandemic: Navigating through crisis

In late December 2019, the outbreak of coronavirus (COVID-19) was reported in Wuhan City, China (Kaisara & Bwalya, 2020). COVID-19 spread across the globe in a short period of time, including to countries such as Thailand, the Republic of Korea, Japan, the United States, Philippines and Vietnam, and then to other parts of the world including Namibia. This led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) on 30 January 2020 (WHO, 2020). Like everywhere else in the world, the Namibian government also declared a state of emergency – on 17 March 2020. This introduced strict measures such as the closure of all borders, schools and institutions of higher learning, and the suspension of public gatherings and of all economic activities (United Nations, 2020). For the government to prevent the transmission of the virus, the country went into a full lockdown on 28 March 2020 (Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture [MoEAC], 2020). Measures were put in place such as enforced social distancing, self-isolation, quarantine, working from home, wearing of masks in public places, and temporary places of worship and educational institutions (Di Gennaro et al., 2020).

Globally, the COVID-19 situation disrupted schools and institutions of higher learning, and many learning institutions were closed because of the pandemic (UNESCO 2021). According to UNESCO (2021), the closure of institutions of higher learning and other educational institutions was enforced because large gatherings constituted a serious risk to public health during the pandemic. During this closure, institutions of higher learning shifted from face-to-face to an online teaching and learning mode. With many resources constrained, African countries, including Namibia, were struggling with limited infrastructure that could not accommodate all prospective higher education students (Lwoga, 2012). This situation led to some students missing out on education, which further amplified the inequalities inherent in many education systems, including that of Namibia (Adebayo et al., 2020). Most of the students, especially those from rural areas and disadvantaged backgrounds/communities, were affected greatly by the shifting of face-to-face to online teaching and learning. Although the University of Namibia tried to provide students with devices, not all students were able to make use of them due to the shortage of electricity and poor internet connectivity, a situation that is more prevalent in the remote and rural areas of Namibia. As

a result, students were not able to engage in lecturer-student discussion forums on Moodle, which was adopted by the University of Namibia as the official learning management system (LMS) for teaching and learning. This generally meant that students were not able to complete their assessment tasks on time.

As highlighted in the preceding discussions, universities and other higher education institutions continued to provide online instruction and learning as an alternative to in-person instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic (Munna & Shaikh, 2020). As a result, online pedagogy has become increasingly relevant. In light of this, UNAM encourages the global use of technology-enhanced learning to increase equity, boost productivity, and raise the standard of teaching and learning.

Online pedagogy consists of the methods, techniques and strategies utilised to deliver content online (Archambault et al., 2022). Moodle, Microsoft Teams and Zoom were used the most in the majority of institutions of higher learning. Universities mainly used these applications because they helped them communicate more effectively with students during the pandemic (Alakrash & Razak, 2021). However, most higher education institutions worldwide were faced with challenges of minimal online teaching experience, prior preparation, and support for educational technology (Bao, 2020). Ensuring proper utilisation of virtual learning environment such as Moodle, Blackboard, Canvas, etc., along with live virtual lecture-delivery software like Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Cisco WebEx, etc., posed a big challenge (Munna, & Shaikh, 2020). At the University of Namibia, internet connectivity remained a challenge for most students, particularly those who migrated back to rural and remote areas (Kadhila & Nyambe, 2021), during the lockdown. One of the numerous difficulties lecturers face when teaching online is a lack of computer literacy. Few lecturers have had official training in information technology and computer usage, let alone online teaching (Amoako et al., 2022). This enormous problem could make online instruction more difficult. Online teaching necessitates the creation and application of more-inclusive techniques that consider various learning styles in addition to technological constraints (Sithole et al., 2019). To keep students engaged and informed while teaching online, lecturers must use a range of techniques (Sithole et al., 2019).

Given the fact that the online teaching and learning mode is a relatively new concept for both experienced and novice educators, professional development is necessary, which may include effective course design, instruction, implementation and evaluation (Mbongo et al., 2021). When compared to industrialised countries, developing countries have less access to the internet, making the problem even worse (Marthrani et al.,

2022). A study done at a Botswana university found unreliable internet access as a main obstacle to online teaching and learning (Mathew & Iloanya, 2016). Similarly, Dube (2020) discusses how the unavailability of internet connectivity hampered online teaching and learning in some rural areas in South Africa. Due to connectivity issues, lecturers in Namibia also communicated with students through SMS and WhatsApp platforms to ensure that quality, equity and justice in teaching prevailed during the COVID-19 pandemic (Nuuyoma et al., 2020). However, due to inequality in internet access, injustice is inevitable for students from less-privileged settings. Dias et al. (2022), who conducted a study in Brazil, concluded that since students with good internet access experienced less suffering than those with poor internet access, the dignity of destitute students was compromised.

After COVID-19: Future pedagogical and epistemological approaches

The University of Namibia has not only recognised the aftermath of COVID 19, but has also acknowledged the forces of the 4th and 5th industrial revolutions (IRs). The University of Namibia (2020, p.5) admits that:

The new IRs are bringing radical, disruptive change to higher education. COVID-19 has taught us hard lessons, 4IR and 5IR technologies may offer effective ways to deal with and cope with complex and ever-changing worlds as well as global threats. Our curricula should include highly potent digital tools, skills and competencies such as research and innovation, adaptation which harness our graduates' capabilities to be able to create solutions to current and future global threats.

Although COVID-19 has disrupted teaching and learning at institutions of higher learning, it has forced universities, such as the University of Namibia, to rethink and redesign their teaching and learning strategies to ensure equitable, accessible and quality education for all. Blended learning has now become the new normal and pedagogy, in which a combination of face-to-face and online teaching and learning approaches are utilised. From an educational perspective, blended learning refers to courses that are taught by integrating two separate paradigms: classroom-synchronous and online-asynchronous learning (Chowdhury, 2020). Chowdhury (2020) emphasises that, in a blended learning environment, teachers integrate online with traditional face-to-face activities in a planned, systematic manner that adds value to the overall learning process. For example, theoretical components may be offered online with students on campus, while practical subjects such as sciences, technology and mathematics may be offered face to face. The aims of blended learning include providing different modes of content delivery to encourage student interaction, promote the acquisition of knowledge and skills through physical

classrooms, and continue the learning processes electronically (Hadiyanto et al., 2021). This paradigm shift demonstrates the commitment of higher education institutions, including UNAM, to using technology to facilitate flexible, adaptive learning environments and to empower students with hands-on digital literacy which, is a key element of the actualisation of SDGs (Dhawan, 2020). Digitalisation in higher education allows lectures to be streamed online and for lecturers and students to interact in virtual environments; however, not everyone is ready for this (Strielkowski, 2022).

After COVID-19, the pedagogical and epistemological approaches to learning and teaching at the University of Namibia shifted toward social constructivism (UNAM, 2020). Thus, the University intensified the use of blended learning through learning management system (LMS). An LMS offers “user-friendly platforms that save instructors’ time by sparing them from the task of learning programming languages and setting up the programs” (Yu et al. 2010, p.333). An LMS ensures the use of both traditional teaching techniques and digital learning resources, and at the same time offers students individualised e-learning opportunities (Aljawarneh, 2020). At the University of Namibia, Moodle is the official learning management system (LMS). It is well documented that Moodle, which is open-source software and amongst the top 20 best LMSs, is popular and has a high rate of acceptance in a number of institutions of higher learning (Sergis & Sampson 2017; Henrick 2018; Altinpulluk & Kesim, 2021), including the University of Namibia. Moodle has a number of features that are commonly used at the University of Namibia, such as Video, Discussion Forums, Chat, Materials and Quiz. With Moodle, students can have discussions with lecturers and other students on forums. In addition, lecturers can upload material/notes and videos for students, interact with students through Chat, and assess students through different types of quizzes. Moodle, which allows for blended learning, means that lecturers do not need to physically meet the students in the classroom. Thus, the Moodle platform made teaching and learning flexible for both lecturers and students.

The shift in teaching and learning pedagogies, as discussed above, has drawn the attention of the world to skills that are in high demand, such as innovation, teamwork, digital literacy skills, learning and innovation skills, socio-emotional skills and flexibility in the face of uncertain and complicated problems (Kim et al., 2019; Yasuv et al., 2020; Ata, et al., 2021). The blended teaching and learning approach adopted by the University of Namibia requires that lecturers and students possess 21st-century skills in order to function effectively and build resilient mechanisms for a sustainable future. These skills comprise a set of 12 competencies that students and lecturers today need to master for their future careers (Ata et al., 2021; Ratten, 2023). These skills include creativity, collaboration, communication,

information literacy, media literacy, technology literacy, flexibility, leadership, initiative, productivity and social skills. It has become necessary for people to learn new skills in order to adjust to changes in today's world, and education is not an exception in this regard (Mulenga & Marbán, 2020). However, Ratten (2023) and Sulaiman and Ismail (2020) argue that the demand for these skills makes teaching in the 21st century a challenge for many academics, as they are now required to use the relevant skills to engage students in the learning content by using digital resources and innovative tools.

In an effort to ensure that lecturers and students thrive in the 21st century, the University of Namibia, through the transformation of its curriculum, incorporated core modules such as Digital literacy, Education for Sustainable Development, Sustainability and Environmental Awareness, Ethics and Morality and a Skills Portfolio that are offered to all first-year students. These modules are taught with the intention to develop students' creative and critical thinking, ethical and moral leadership, compassion and decisiveness, adaptability and flexibility, environmental awareness and social responsibility, technological and digital literacy, and global citizenry based on an international perspective and resilience (UNAM, 2020).

Despite the efforts to virtually upskill lecturers and raise student's digital competence by integrating digital skills across subject curricula, Sulaiman and Ismail (2020) maintain that digital skills remain a top priority to ensure no one is left behind in the transition towards a digital economy. However, the 'digital gap', which is shown in the fact that roughly half of the world still lacks access to a computer or the internet, presents a significant barrier to the teaching and learning of digital skills and contributes to growing inequalities in learning opportunities and outcomes. While radio- and television-based learning in underdeveloped nations offers short-term solutions, Yasuv et al. (2020) emphasise that students in the most vulnerable environments are required to be resilient, inventive and flexible to overcome obstacles and maximise progress in the 21st century.

In summary, it appears that the future pedagogies and epistemological approaches will be inspired by blended learning, digitalisation, forces of the 4th and 5th IRs and equity, dignity and justice.

Conclusion

Following the COVID-19 pandemic and the pressure from the 4th and 5th IRs, the education landscape in higher institutions had to change rapidly. The outbreak of COVID-19 specifically forced institutions of higher learning to rethink and subsequently redesign their teaching and learning approaches to ensure equity, inclusivity and accessibility for all – as enshrined in the universal principle of the right to education. COVID-19 has

brought features of inequality in our institutions of higher learning to the surface. Generally, it could be observed clearly that disadvantaged and vulnerable members of society and people living in remote areas were unable to access education fully. In order to ensure readiness for future crises, institutions of higher learning, including the University of Namibia, need to continue to create resilient environments that enable blended learning, taking cognisance of poorer socio-economic groups within society. Hence, integrating blended learning into the offering of the University of Namibia is of critical importance, as it has the potential to provide both face-to-face and online learning opportunities for all. By doing this, the University of Namibia will contribute to the fulfilment of the overall vision of the government as postulated in the Education for All policy, namely access, equity, democracy, quality and efficiency.

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