NAME: Chemunondirwa Christopher Chitumwa
INSTITUTION: Vaal University of Technology
EMAIL: chrisc@vut.ac.za
CELL: 074 225 1460/067 005 1410
ADVISOR: Prof Lindsay Clowes

PROJECT TITLE: Making teaching and learning more inclusive in a department of education during the Covid-19 era

1.   BACKGROUND OF THE PROJECT

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent suspension of formal classes in March 2020 forced South African higher institutions to shift from face-to-face teaching and learning to online platforms. This in turn increased the number of students who were excluded from academic activities. Furthermore, the crisis aggravated the digital gap, in that, not all students had access to technology, high-speed internet connectivity and electricity in their homes. Comments by some of the academics during staff meetings revealed that they were not aware of some of the students' concerns during Covid-19 and had no knowledge of how to support them. On the other hand, some students felt lonely, stressed, and socially excluded from their peers and institutional support. Teaching and learning were expected to continue with limited resources, support, and knowledge/skills for effective use of technology during online lessons. While DHET came up with the theme "No-student-will-be-left-behind" as a way to support students to complete their studies, it was not easy to implement this at the departmental level given the challenges outlined above. With only the NSFAS-funded students being given devices and data to use during online lessons, self-funded students felt excluded from this support and academic activities.

2.   AIMS OF THE PROJECT

The main aim of this project was to come up with strategies that would make teaching and learning more inclusive in one department during the Covid-19 era. Inclusivity in teaching and learning has been part of the institutional agenda, but the focus has been on the needs of students and staff with disabilities. This project sought to expand the concept of inclusivity to include able-bodied students and staff during online teaching and learning. Experiences from 2020 revealed that some students were being excluded from academic activities. Hence, this project sought to find ways to ensure equal access and opportunity to learning for all students. Thus, the main research questions for the project were: What is inclusive teaching and learning in the context of Covid-19; How can academics make online assessment inclusive; and How can academics use technology to enhance inclusivity during online teaching and learning

3.   PROJECT ACTIVITIES

This section provides information on the project activities. The project had three main activities: institutional event; inclusive online assessment; and technology and inclusive teaching and learning. All the activities were done online due to Covid-19 restrictions and meeting logistics.

3.1.   Institutional event

The institutional event was a one-off event in October 2021 with the following theme: "*What is inclusivity in teaching and learning in higher education*". During the institutional event, participants will be asked to give their views on the following: challenges encountered with the theme no-student-will-be-left-behind; inclusivity in higher education; and how can academics make teaching and learning more inclusive during Covid-19. Three departments were

involved: Education Department, CAD, and Transformation & Disability Unit. The event also provided an opportunity to identify volunteers for the project and some of the activities they were interested in.

3.2. Inclusive assessment

Assessing students online was one of the challenges that were identified during the institutional event. Discussions mainly centred on the challenges they faced with online assessment and how to make online assessment inclusive without compromising on quality. This activity was conducted in April because all the volunteers did not have a contract in January 2022 when it was initially scheduled. While focus group interviews were planned, the writer had to use individual interviews because it was not possible to bring all the participants to the same meeting.

3.3. Using technology to enhance inclusivity

The outbreak of Covid-19 shifted teaching and learning from face-to-face to online at the institution, resulting in an accelerated use of online platforms in teaching and learning. Hence, the inclusion of technology in this project. Like the previous activity, individual interviews had to be used instead of the focus groups as initially planned. This activity focused on how academics could use educational technology to make teaching and learning more inclusive. The activity also included demonstrations of how technology could be used to enhance inclusivity in teaching and learning. Data from the interviews was analysed qualitatively using thematic content analysis (Creswell, 2013; Clarke & Braun, 2013). The process involved identifying and analysing themes within data.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of the study are mainly based on discussions with academics in one department at a UoT. This project aimed to develop intervention strategies that academics could use to make teaching and learning more inclusive during the Covid-19 era. Thus, the project focused on the following questions: What is inclusive teaching and learning in the context of Covid-19; How can academics make online assessment inclusive; and How can academics use technology to enhance inclusivity during online teaching and learning

4.1. What is inclusive teaching and learning?

The institutional event enabled the academics to conceptualise what is inclusive online teaching and learning. Most of the participants had heard about *"no-student-will-be-left-behind"* from the media but did not fully understand its implications in their classes and what they could do to make teaching and learning more inclusive. Participants had limited options to address inclusivity in their classes given connectivity issues, lack of devices and data among them and their students. One of the participants has this to say: "*My other option was to use WhatsApp as some of my students had challenges using their devices on Blackboard"*. This shows the digital divide in South African higher education as reported by Global Innovation Fund (2022) and Malaba (2021).

Deciphering what is meant by inclusive teaching and learning was tricky because it has different meanings to different individuals. Loreman (2017) summed this saying inclusive education is a contested concept. The common definition that emerged from the discussion was the fact that it is linked to disability. This is understandable given that inclusive education has long been linked to disability in South Africa (Dalton, Mckenzie & Kahonde, 2012). One of the participants remarked: *"... it is connected to exclusion from teaching and learning due to their disability"*. In this project, inclusivity goes beyond disability and it also includes students who were left behind due to the pandemic. This view agrees with the concept put forward by OECD (2020) and Human Rights Watch (2021) that the experiences of Covid-19 have widened the concept of inclusive education beyond disability. Thus, academics need to understand the challenges that students experience with online teaching and learning. However, the majority of the participants were not aware of all the challenges that students were facing with online teaching and learning and their impact on their studies. *"I think the students are playing games with me"*, reported one of the participants. Students and academics have genuine challenges with online lessons as pointed out by Mndende (2021) and Letseka, Letseka and Pitsoe (2018).

4.2. How can academics make online assessment inclusive?

From the interviews, an inclusive assessment was viewed as more than evaluating students and also having ongoing activities that allow students and lecturers to understand student progress (Tufts University, 2022). Online assessment was one of the challenges mentioned participants identified during the institutional event and the discussion during

the personal interviews was an eye-opener. One participant remarked, *"This discussion has made me understand ... online assessment ... and how I can make it more inclusive"*. This shows the value of relevant staff development sessions and such workshops must target staff's needs and the issues at hand (Valamis, 2021). Several strategies were suggested that could be used to make online assessments inclusive. Some of the suggestions were giving more time for students to type and upload their work on Blackboard; being available to students; providing assessment tasks, and notes in accessible formats; setting multiple tasks for the same assessment tests; giving more opportunities for students to login to Blackboard for the same assessment tasks; providing students with opportunities for peer support; and creating question banks. Some of these suggestions resonate with the Teaching and Learning National Forum's (2022) ways that ensure online assessments are accessible and inclusive. Several challenges regarding online assessment were also identified during the interviews. All the participants expressed some concerns with online assessment even though it had been used for the past two academic calendars. The main concerns were setting quality online assessment items; the validity and reliability of online assessment; and the reluctance by students to revert to sit-in tests where they had challenges with connectivity. On the reliability of online tests, the findings agree with Buckley, Seery and Donal's (2016) observations that such tests have lower reliability than normal tests. There was agreement among participants that the utilisation of Bloom's higher levels of cognitive thinking in assessments could increase the validity and reliability of online assessments.

4.3. How can academics use technology to enhance inclusivity?

The results from the discussions showed that activities provided the participants with an opportunity to polish their online teaching skills, reflect on their practice, understand how students learn online, and, how to provide online support services to students. The use of technology is often seen as a separate activity that has been forced upon lecturers, instead of a tool that can catapult student learning and achievement when effectively integrated into the curriculum. All participants acknowledged that they had some challenges with using Blackboard and they had to adapt quickly. One of the participants said, "*I had to learn quickly ... students had not been trained*". Similar sentiments were echoed by Al Meajel and Sharadgah (2018) when they noted the following barriers when using Blackboard: technological; institutional; student; and faculty barriers. Academics had to experiment with alternative platforms to assist students who had challenges in using Blackboard. *Online attendances were much lower ... I had to use other platforms to reach my students"*, remarked one of the participants. Another participant had this to say *"... just uploading learning materials is not effective..."*. Therefore, academics must understand that uploading online materials does not guarantee their perceived benefits (Greer, Rice & Deshler, 2014; Rice, 2018). The most popular alternative platforms were WhatsApp, Facebook, Zoom and Microsoft Teams. The zero-rating for some of the academic websites and availability of online resources like Z Library and Pdf Drive was a welcome relief for both academics and students. One participant has this to say, *"I download some of the books from Z Library and share them with my students"*. While the institutional interventions managed to address some of the challenges that academics and students were facing during online teaching and learning, some of the problems persist to date like the lack of institution-wide Wi-Fi and suitable devices to connect to Blackboard, report two of the participants.

5. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study provided some policy implications on inclusivity during online teaching and learning where no-student-will-be-left-behind is a top priority and how future staff development workshops will be conducted. There is a need to review institutional inclusivity policy so that it embraces aspects beyond disability. The results also revealed the importance of ongoing in-house staff development workshops. There is a need to consider the following when planning and conducting such workshops: technical issues, resources, attracting attendees, staff composition, time for such sessions, cooperation with academics, culture in a department, securing space developing content and keeping it interactive, and collaboration with facilitators.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This project explored how teaching and learning can be made more inclusive in an academic department of a UoT during the Covid-19 pandemic. Findings from the project showed that many facets should be addressed when an innovation is introduced in the curriculum. From the discussion, a wider concept of inclusive education emerged that goes beyond disability. Several strategies were suggested that could be used to make online assessments more inclusive and provide some kind of equal opportunities and access for students with varied technology abilities and online learning experiences. The study also revealed that Covid-19 had transformed teaching and learning resulting

in an accelerated diffusion of digital technologies among students and academics. However, this transformation excluded some students from educational activities and it also intensified the need for academics to improve their technical knowledge and skills in the utilization of technology to mitigate the effects of exclusion to teaching and learning. The writer hopes that the skills and knowledge that the participants acquired during the interventions will reduce the number of students who are currently being excluded from academic activities. While the institutional interventions managed to address most of the challenges that academics faced during online teaching and learning, the project recommends stronger institutional and departmental support in the form of more staff development workshops.

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