RETHINKING INCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: LESSONS FOR THE SOUTH AFRICAN ACADEMIC SPACE

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ABSTRACT

Academic exclusion within higher education institutions has been an alarming global issue that has resulted in a vast number of policies aimed at combating the exclusion. In South Africa, exclusion is deeply rooted in the historical inequalities that continue to render access to higher education a complex process as visibly evidenced by structural and personal constraints even after 27 years of democracy. Content analysis in this article illuminates various factors that contribute to the exclusion or loneliness students feel in higher education. This manifests as poor performance, high dropout, and low throughput rates attributable to unsuccessful negotiation, integration, and adaptation to face-to-face and virtual academic spaces. Over the years, South African universities introduced academic mentoring programmes aimed at eliminating epistemic exclusion through a more responsive, integrative, and inclusive higher education system. Nonetheless, students' emotional and mental wellbeing, and their ability to integrate and establish interactional relationships have been compromised by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the article rethinks inclusion in higher education, it interrogates the meaning of academic mentoring programmes for historically excluded students in a context where teaching and learning are spontaneously shifting to virtual spaces due to the pandemic.

Key Words: academic exclusion, COVID-19, digital exclusion, higher education, online learning

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND: ACADEMIC EXCLUSION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Education is a source of growth and employment for individuals coming from disadvantaged and poverty-stricken backgrounds (Hajiyev, Ersin Soken, and Yenal Vural 2015, 5; Maila and

Ross 2018, 1). For that reason, the late former South African President Nelson Mandela viewed education as an avenue through which "the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine; and the child of a farm worker can become the president of a great nation" (Soudien et al. 2014, 978). Thus, access to education in South Africa, like other countries, is declared in the constitution as a fundamental human right due to its importance in personal development. Despite the recognition from a human rights perspective and some corresponding legal reforms, academic exclusion of certain social groups from higher education institutions has been an alarming and complex issue globally (OECD 2012, 9; Mzangwa 2019, 2; Lambrechts 2020, 804). Academic exclusion refers to being prevented by certain principles of the higher education institution from participating in higher learning and because of this global challenge, many students are often unable to realise their own goals (Smit 2012, 372).

Academic exclusion should not be reduced to issues of physical enrolment for it encompasses financial exclusion among other perspectives (Du Plooy and Zilindile 2014, 189). For instance, the British government can offer scholarships and financial aid to only a limited number of university students which further excludes those that cannot afford exorbitant fees from accessing higher education (Barr 2004, 265). A study that was conducted at Appalachian State University in the United States of America (USA) revealed that the region of Appalachian in North Carolina faces economic development challenges which impact on college going rates among young people who aspire to enrol into universities (Hand and Payne 2008, 4). Despite concentrated efforts towards achieving equality in Indian tertiary education, there is growing concern regarding the social exclusion of marginalised groups of Muslims and Other Backward Class groups, whose backgrounds and individual contexts alter their interactions within the higher education system (Sinha 2014, 1175; Sheikh 2017, 39). This reflects the larger socio-political reality of India which coerces the marginalised groups out of all public spaces. Hence the urgent need to develop intervention strategies aimed at ending academic exclusion in India (Sinha 2014, 1173) and other similar contexts.

Broadening the scope of academic exclusion beyond students and their participation in higher education, this article points at gender inequality that leads to gendered exclusion of academics across the globe. A study that was conducted in the USA illuminated the realities of unequal opportunities for women and minorities due to previous policies of exclusion in higher education that discriminated against them (Johannessen et al. 2016, 33). These trends of academic exclusion in the USA have also been observed in Australia because ongoing discriminatory practices in both countries are attributed to the context of historical evolution, former and current policies, and for both countries, the roots for the marginalisation of

minorities and females began at the onset of their first universities that were established for elites (Johannessen et al. 2016, 33). In many African countries, exclusion in higher education is evident in the very high ratio of male to female academics. For instance, the 8:1 male-female ratio in Nigerian universities is influenced by gender stereotypes which socialize women into gendered supportive roles that might hinder their personal progress or career aspirations (Osezua and Agbalajobi 2016, 121). The gendered exclusion, in addition to a history of patriarchy and cultural demands, is deeply rooted in organisational cultures that discriminate against women (Osezua and Agbalajobi 2016, 119). Consequently, men and women are exposed to differentiated competing social demands such that the availability of and access to a unique mentoring system remains crucial to career advancement and positioning of females in decision-making roles in the university system (Govinder, Zondo, and Makgoba 2013, 9; Osezua and Agbalajobi 2016, 120).

Academic exclusion in South Africa can be traced back to the apartheid system that was mainly characterised by racial inequalities (Menon 2014, ii). The apartheid system gave white people an education that was of superior quality guaranteeing them of opportunities relative to black people who only had access to Bantu education (Gallo 2020, 4). Bantu education was free low-quality education that ensured that black people only qualified for low paying jobs to keep them under the control of the colonisers (Gallo 2020, 4). Each race had its own separate university with "white universities" being more highly resourced than "black universities" (Boughey 2012, 133). The racial divide birthed what has been known in post-apartheid South Africa as "historically white universities" such as the University of Cape Town and Rhodes University; and "historically black universities", which include the University of Fort Hare (Boughey 2012, 133; Gururaj et al. 2020, 66–67). Contrary to experiences from the USA and Australia where discriminatory practices marginalised the minority (Johannessen et al. 2016, 33), the black Africans who were and are still the majority population, are marginalised and excluded in South Africa (Van Zyl-Schalekamp and Mthombeni 2015, 32).

Fast-forward to post-apartheid South Africa, the new government came up with a vast number of legislative policies aimed at combating exclusion in higher education (Scott and Letseka 2010, 41). The South African higher education sector has been focusing on post-apartheid transformation through policy development and structural reform intended to contribute to the development of enlightened and critically constructive citizens (Scott and Letseka 2010, 41). The policy reform introduced a wide range of institutional manifestos and conditions in the White Paper on Higher Education of 1997 that aimed at being more responsive to the needs of society through bringing equity and excellence and ideas of transformation in higher education (Scott and Letseka 2010, 41). Student enrolments in tertiary institutions have

increased significantly in the last two decades leading to widened access into tertiary education for diverse students (Mngomezulu, Dhunpath, and Munro 2017, 131). South African student enrolment increased from 425 000 in 1994 to just below one million students in 2013 (Council on Higher Education 2010, viii). Although the post-apartheid government has made enormous progress in terms of widening access into tertiary institutions, increased access alone is not sufficient because that has not resulted in successful outcomes (Mngomezulu et al. 2017, 132). Widened access to tertiary education should be accompanied by the successful adaptation of all students, which can be reflected, in part, by improved academic performance; decreased dropout rates; increased graduation rates; and less protesting behaviour (Mngomezulu et al. 2017, 144; Wood and Su 2017, 453). Thus, gaining access into a university is not a problem; rather, the problem lies in being excluded from and within the university space. This perpetual challenge is evidenced by the current manifestation of intersecting forms of exclusion from various pockets within the university, which include the lecture and tutorial rooms. The exclusion produces negative experiences and perceptions of the higher education institution that also contribute to high dropout rates, poor performance and increased protest behaviour (Council on Higher Education 2010, 5; Murray 2014, 1).

What comes to the fore is that while widened access is essential and may have been achieved to a greater extent, this cannot be reflected in the outcomes (Machingambi 2011, 17), which to date have been unambiguously negative (Murray 2014, 1). The violent protests that South African university students engaged in between 2015 and 2016, which led to the Fees Must Fall and the Rhodes Must Fall movements, and the Higher Education shutdown in 2021, further attest to unequal and exclusive access to higher education (Booysen 2016, 114; Langa 2017, 6; Moosa 2021). During the 2015–2016 protests, multiple buildings at various university campuses were torched, many students were arrested and there was great disturbance across South Africa (Langa 2017, 8). Scholars interrogated why these students put their academics on hold and endangered their lives in violent protests; and what the students were trying to voice out which led them to burn and destroy their own campuses. The violent protests were attributed to the exclusion of certain groups of students from higher education due to financial deficits; systematic exclusion resulting from poor performance closely linked to one’s basic education background and the location of high school matriculated from. Furthermore, exclusion was attributed to a colonised curriculum and the tensions between home language and the language of instruction. Combined, these layers of exclusion illuminate why almost three decades into democracy many South African students still experience and perceive higher education as exclusive. Thus, Moosa (2021) reads student protests as a perpetual problem: “different year, different students – same old issues that do not get fixed”.

An article that seeks to analyse pockets of academic exclusion within the higher education landscape will be incomplete without reference to the forms of exclusion stemming from the introduction of technology in higher education and the COVID-19 crisis. The World Health Organisation declared COVID-19 a pandemic in March 2020. Subsequently, the pandemic put the world to a standstill as many countries, including South Africa, implemented lockdown restrictions and social distancing measures to contain the spread of the virus globally (Di Pietro et al. 2020, 4). The restrictive precautionary measures witnessed the shutdown of everyday operations in different sectors of the economy, which for universities in South Africa like other parts of the world meant adopting new ways of teaching and learning (Dube 2020, 137). The education institutions were forced to "temporarily" shut down and resort to remote or online learning to avoid physical contact in line with the precautionary measures. The pandemic-related massive revamp of teaching and learning has upset the education system and routine worldwide (Di Pietro et al. 2020, 7). Over 160 countries had to temporarily close schools leaving about 1.6 billion children and youth out of school as learning institutions in South Africa for example shifted to online platforms at the beginning of the COVID-19 lockdown (Mhlanga and Moloi 2020, 3).

The success of measures such as online or remote learning relies mainly on the use of 4th Industrial Revolution (4IR) tools. Since COVID-19 was a sudden and new occurrence, there was insufficient time for universities to adjust to the sudden shift and neither was there adequate knowledge on how to adopt 4IR tools during a pandemic. There is no doubt that the migration to online learning in the context of COVID-19 has perpetuated the existing forms of academic exclusion in higher education institutions in South Africa. It is against the historical and contemporary backdrops that this article explores how the different forms of academic exclusion, including digital exclusion, play out in academic spaces in South Africa. As the article rethinks inclusion in higher education, it interrogates the meaning of academic mentoring programmes for historically excluded students in a context where teaching and learning are spontaneously shifting to technology-driven virtual spaces due to the pandemic.

THEORISING DEMOCRATIC INCLUSION

Conceptual and empirical arguments in this article are guided by theory in and about democratic inclusion in higher education. Scholars assert that definitions of inclusion and exclusion differ according to context, therefore the concept of inclusive education differs between theoretical approaches (Caspersen, Smeby, and Aamodt 2017, 24; Rapp and Corral-Granados 2021, 4; Matolo and Rambuda, 2022, 14). That notwithstanding, inclusion is not only a fundamental tool for the legitimacy of democratic communities (Camicia 2020, 16) but also a key characteristic

of a healthy democracy (Camicia 2009, 137). Arguments for inclusive education highlight the importance of social justice and democracy such that approaches towards inclusive education target and challenge all forms of discrimination that perpetuate the exclusion of people from diverse genders and cultural backgrounds (Sturm 2019, 2; Hernández-Torrano, Somerton, and Helmer 2020, 2; Rapp and Corral-Granados 2021, 5–6). Thus, inclusion encompasses long-term transformation, and the democratisation of education aimed at providing good education and reducing all forms of exclusion (Rapp and Corral-Granados 2021, 3).

As this article theorises democratic inclusion, it is cognisant of the social context in which the process of democratising education takes place. Luhmann's system theory, which is sometimes used in research on inclusive education from a social-constructionist perspective (Rapp and Corral-Granados 2021, 587), recognises society as homogenised by social systems that affect how constructions of inclusive and exclusive processes are experienced (Hilt 2017, 594). In these social systems, inclusion and exclusion are connected through systems of communication that interlink and define social actions and dynamics in complex environments and in meaningful contexts (Luhmann 1977; 1995, in Rapp and Corral-Granados 2021, 6). This means that social systems are formed and informed by meaningful actions and dynamics that shape and affect each other, and different meanings can be attached to the outcomes of the system based on different lived realities. Hence the need to theorise about the ways in which students integrate in higher education and access opportunities not only to talk and listen to each other's responses to questions, to the teacher and to guest speakers but to also share and learn through drawing on their personal experiences and beliefs (Wrenn and Wrenn 2009, 260; Miovska-Spaseva 2016, 210; Novita 2021, 98).

Theories of socio-cultural integration – that are inspired by the seminal work of Dewey (1904/1974); Vygotsky et al. (1978) and Freire (1970/1994) – emphasise the use of active learning techniques as a way of exposing students to subject specific learning content in stimulating and interactive environments (Wrenn and Wrenn 2009, 259). Vygotsky et al. (1978) states that human learning, mental development, and knowledge are embedded in social and cultural contexts which involve sharing insights and reflections with peers under the teacher's supervision (Seligmann 2008, 27; Wrenn and Wrenn 2009, 259). Miovska-Spaseva (2016, 215) brings to the fore Freire's (1970/1994) seminal work on the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which supports environments where teachers and learners engage in an active practice of teaching and learning from one another in dialogue. In this setting, students are not only learners but co-teachers as well. Wrenn and Wrenn (2009, 261) draw on Dewey's (1904/1974) argument that students need to be individually integrated into social life through a curriculum that supports initiatives of openness, enterprise, as well as developing capabilities for flexibility, adaptability

and problem solving both in the classroom and in real life experiences. Dewey (1904/1974) emphasises that active teaching approaches and practices equip students with knowledge not only from others but through independent inquiry and solving the problems that they or those in the group they belong to formulate (Wrenn and Wrenn 2009, 261). Combined, the foregoing analysis lays the theoretical foundation for empirical interrogations that advance theory in and about inclusion in higher education.

METHODOLOGY: IDENTIFYING CONCEPTUAL AND ANALYTICAL GAPS

The article builds on the gaps identified in a broader quantitative study on "transformation: inclusion and exclusion in higher education" that was conducted among undergraduate students at a South African University in 2018. The methodological decision to target the undergraduate student population was arrived upon fully aware of a different kind of exclusion that relatively mature postgraduate students experience. Like Mantai (2014) and Mantai and Dowling (2015, 106–107), we realised that over the years of their studies, postgraduate students establish networks or support structures that allow them to navigate and survive the challenges that characterise the higher education landscape. Evidence from Australian universities illuminates the isolation and loneliness that doctoral candidates experience such that beyond the immediate higher degree research environment and the opportunity to interact with peers, they rely on different forms of social support throughout the doctoral journey (Mantai 2014). To substantiate Mantai's (2014) observation around the increasing use of technology as facilitators of social support, Mantai and Dowling (2015, 113) single out academic, technical, and emotional support provided by the candidate's supervisors, families, friends, and colleagues in the PhD journey.

The statistical representations, interpretations and inferences from the broader quantitative study conducted at our university are deliberately not presented here because the article uses the identified conceptual gaps as an inroad into an in-depth analysis of how the dynamics of academic exclusion play out in higher education in South Africa. That way, the article avoids a narrow focus on our university to allow the process of rethinking inclusion to draw lessons for and from the broader higher education landscape in South Africa. The methodological stance also allows the article to avoid reinventing the wheel by going beyond a quantitative approach – which mainly produces positivistic-objective data (Sarantakos 2012, 31) – and embrace subjective analyses that draw parallels and simultaneously highlight commonalities, tensions, and contradictions where necessary. The subjective content analysis in this article is informed by secondary data drawn from contextual studies that have explored the different layers of academic exclusion and how these subsequently influence perceptions of academic mentoring programmes aimed at promoting the inclusion of marginalised groups of students.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: UNPACKING VARIOUS FORMS OF ACADEMIC EXCLUSION

Financial and digital exclusion in higher education

Socio-economic status, defined as the social standing or class of an individual or group often measured as a combination of education, income, and occupation (American Psychological Association 2017), is a fundamental factor that influences academic exclusion in higher education. Various studies have indicated that students coming from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to experience higher education institutions negatively and thus perceive these institutions as highly exclusive compared to students from higher socio-economic status backgrounds (Wilson-Strydom 2011, 408; Van Zyl-Schalekamp and Mthombeni 2015, 32–33; Devlin and McKay 2016, 92). South Africa has had and continues to have the highest inequality rate globally, yet many students particularly from the middle class have been enrolling into universities hoping that someday, they will live an affluent life (Mngomezulu et al. 2017, 132). Post-1994, the South African government started to provide financial relief to many young people who were excluded from entering spaces of higher education during the apartheid era. Despite the strategic funding approach, high drop-out rates and low graduation persist and many students are failing to graduate in record time (Masondo 2015; Inyathelo 2020). A report on NSFAS performance from the years 1999 to 2008 indicates that out of all the students who were funded by this scheme during this period, 72 per cent dropped out while only 28 per cent graduated (Wilson-Strydom 2011, 408). The drop-out statistics suggest that the NSFAS loans are insufficient for the students from low-income backgrounds to sustain themselves financially in South African universities (Inyathelo 2020).

Similarly, the Appalachian State University study in the USA showed that most students in the low-income region of Appalachian enrol in universities with the hopes of breaking the cycle of poverty and be able to provide for their parents (Hand and Payne 2008, 6). However, most of the students who took part in the study mentioned that even when they had a scholarship, they had to work to pay bills, which then affected their ability to get involved in campus activities and campus organisations (Hand and Payne 2008, 8). As students juggle between working and studying, they often spend less time on their academic work and getting up to speed with the requirements of their chosen field of study which further excludes them from being integrated into the learning environment. Empirical evidence from the USA echoes the inference from South Africa that loans and bursaries are not enough to cover the full costs of study, which leaves students struggling to afford living expenses such that they end up not completing their studies (Matsolo, Wilson, and Susuman 2018, 69).

There has been a rapid growth in the adoption of e-learning in higher education using smart devices that connect to the internet as these make it possible for students to have access to learning resources at any given time (Khalid and Pedersen 2016, 615; Du Preez and Le Grange 2020, 92–93). Although e-learning strives to make teaching and learning efficient through distance and open online courses that transcend time and space (Khalid and Pedersen 2016, 615), the adoption of digital technologies and the move to virtual learning in line with the 4IR exclude some people (Warren 2007, 374; Brown and Czerniewicz 2010, 357; Masinde and Roux 2020, 33–34). For instance, the wide gap between the rich and the poor in South Africa translates into different access to computers and the internet for the two groups. Digital exclusion is evident in how numerous financially disadvantaged South African university students lack digital literacy or familiarity with the use of computers and the internet, which affects their ability to navigate through course material (Naidoo and Raju 2012, 34; Du Preez and Le Grange 2020, 96). Naidoo and Raju's (2012, 39) study revealed that Durban University of Technology students found it hard to attend courses on information literacy aimed at improving their computer competencies. While the move towards online learning in the context of 4IR is continually becoming popular (Brown and Czerniewicz 2010, 359) and argued to increase the possibility of completing degrees, it is not always beneficial as it tends to digitally exclude students who struggle financially. In the recent past, students have further been excluded from digital academic platforms as universities migrated to virtual learning with the outbreak of COVID-19.

Although there are efforts to bridge the exclusion gap between students from a high socio-economic status and a low socio-economic status through the provision of data for online learning, students from rural areas in South Africa are geographically excluded because of unreliable broadband network connectivity in those areas. This perpetuates exclusion for a population that was historically excluded, and sabotages concrete initiatives meant to overcome socio-economic, cultural, ethnic, and gender gaps that create exclusion (Warren 2007, 376–377). The causal effect is attributed to the inherent vicious and intersectional relationship between the factors, such that they perpetuate and exacerbate one another (Warren 2007, 376–377; Du Preez and Le Grange 2020, 100). Digital transformation also excludes students with different learning needs such as the challenge of interacting with the information due to dyslexia, language, or cultural barriers; and inability to make direct use of computer equipment due to physical, visual, or mental disabilities (Khalid and Pedersen 2016, 619). The foregoing illuminates the multiple layers of challenges that come with e-learning and lack of access to smart devices and the internet, which have been exacerbated by the move towards online pedagogy in the context of COVID-19.

Geographical location and type of high school matriculated from

Geographical location and the type of high school one attended or matriculated from are considered a contributing factor to academic exclusion in higher learning. Literature reveals that students from poverty-stricken rural areas are vulnerable and find it hard to be socially and academically integrated into the university space (Mpofu 2015, 16). Subsequently, these students, who are predominantly Black, are more likely to perceive the university space negatively and feel academically excluded within the institution. An explanation for this stems from the fact that schooling in rural areas has not improved since the apartheid era (Boughey 2012, 143). Schools in rural areas are usually characterised by shortages of teachers, poor infrastructure, lack of school equipment and lack of essential resources for quality learning necessary in addition to poor school management, which translate to high levels of absenteeism amongst both teachers and learners (Boughey 2012, 143). The limited resources that students from rural areas experienced contribute to their negative experiences of the lecture room as well as the negative perceptions of higher education institutions (Machingambi 2011, 19). For instance, they perceive the lecture room as highly exclusive because they are expected to compete academically with students from urban-based high schools, who are better prepared for tertiary level education (Machingambi 2011, 19; Van Zyl-Schalekamp and Mthombeni 2015, 32; Inyathelo 2020). Thus, students who matriculated from a rural-based high school, which often charges low fees, are "handicapped" not because of lower intelligence but because they had few and poor opportunities in their pre-tertiary schools, making them highly underprepared for tertiary education (Machingambi 2011, 19; Boughey 2012, 136–137; Van Zyl-Schalekamp and Mthombeni 2015, 32; Masondo 2015; Matsolo et al. 2018, 69).

Although most studies, including those cited above, "maintain that students from schools with lower fees tend to perform poorer" due to different structural realities (Van Zyl-Schalekamp and Mthombeni 2015, 31), an earlier study found that rural school students performed as well as, if not better than, their peers in urban schools (Fan and Chen 1998, 3). The dated findings are validated by more recent studies, which point at other factors beyond geographical location that influence performance such as students' aptitude, intelligence, personal values, and aspirations that motivate them towards pursuing and realising certain goals (Whelan-Ryan 2019, 2; Tomás et al. 2020, 191).

Language of instruction as a tool for academic exclusion

Language of instruction is another factor that influences academic exclusion despite the constitutional and legislative framework that advocates for a multilingual education in South

African higher education institutions (Mkhize and Balfour 2017, 133). Majority of South African citizens speak languages other than English and Afrikaans, but these two languages continue to be used in official public institutions, universities included (Seligmann 2008, 6; Mkhize and Balfour 2017, 133). The exclusion of African languages in education institutions and the fact that these languages are not recognised as “academic languages” have dire consequences on African language-speaking students (Seligmann 2008, 25; Moloi and Chetty 2011, 2; Boughey 2012, 144). In their 2016 study, Sader and Gabela (2017, 237) found that students who have English as their second or third language perceived their tertiary institutions as highly excluding. The use of English as a medium of instruction at most university institutions poses as a source of participation exclusion within the lecture rooms (Kiggundu and Nayimuli 2009, 350; Sader and Gabela 2017, 237). Such students may continue to be differently excluded because of the language they speak and although this is usually overlooked, it has far-reaching effects on the students’ overall achievement in higher education (Boughey 2012, 144; Sader and Gabela 2017, 237).

Using African languages has therefore been argued to address the exclusion that some students may feel in the university space. Many students, mainly from rural areas, often use African indigenous languages daily and this causes them to face disadvantages and exclusion when it comes to learning in tertiary institutions (Machingambi 2011, 16). This disadvantage comes about as such students tend to experience serious difficulties in expressing abstract ideas and concepts in their lecture rooms (Machingambi 2011, 16). For instance, interviewees in the study by Sader and Gabela (2017, 237) asserted that English as a medium of instruction is a challenge for them because they think in *isiZulu* (their home language) and there is no time in class to translate their thoughts into English and respond, resulting in them not participating in class discussions or responding to questions. Students end up with a negative picture of the “lecture room” where their perceptions of academic exclusion are formed and sustained (Seligmann 2008, 20; Sader and Gabela, 2017, 237). Hence the debatable inference that students who come from homes where English is not a first language experience the lecture room as excluding relative to students from homes where English is a first language (Sader and Gabela, 2017, 237). On the other hand, students who are more familiar with the medium of instruction are prone to have a positive picture of the lecture room because it is easy for them to engage in class discussions without any hindrance (Sader and Gabela 2017, 237). Ironically, “the realisation of multilingual education as a right has remained a controversial issue in South Africa” (Mkhize and Balfour 2017, 133).

Academic literacy and academic mentoring

Academic literacy, defined as the ability to read, write, understand, and communicate to gain useful knowledge (Castillo-Martínez and Ramírez-Montoya 2020, 1015; Weideman, Read, and Du Plessis 2021, 1), is needed for university students to perform academically better. For this reason, several scholars suggest putting in place academic programmes that support students and facilitate their learning to ensure competent communication in written format, and when reading and speaking the language (Seligmann 2008, 31; Mkhize and Balfour 2017, 133; Sader and Gabela 2017, 234–235; Masondo 2015). This is particularly relevant in the context of South Africa where English, as alluded to earlier, is used as a language of instruction yet most students in universities have it as a second or even third language. Thus, guided engagement and participation in academic mentoring programmes in a language that permeates learning and teaching enhances academic success (Seligmann 2008, 262). Through academic mentoring programmes, students can critically reflect and challenge the content and literacy of what is being learned or taught (Seligmann 2008, 24). Furthermore, students become academically literate as they are involved with their mentors in social relationships that help them form a social identity and positioning where they interact in less formal settings. Thus, mentoring must happen in such a way that learning experiences are meaningful, intellectually relevant and students get into the social practices of their discipline through supported interaction so that they become proficient in those discourses (Seligmann 2008, 19; Mashifana 2020). The concluding section discusses ways in which the introduction and continuous enhancement of academic mentoring programmes help students and staff bridge the gaps produced by pockets of exclusion in universities and create spaces for rethinking inclusion in higher education.

DISCUSSION: TOWARDS ACADEMIC MENTORING PROGRAMMES IN SOUTH AFRICA

The article has analysed how different forms of exclusion play out in higher education from financial and digital exclusion to how language and academic literacy are used as technologies or tools of exclusion. Amidst all these forms and tools of exclusion, the article acknowledged geographical location and type of high school the student matriculated from as central to exclusion in higher education. For instance, financial-related exclusion is evident in the poor performance of students from low-paying fees due to inadequate resources in the form of good teachers, computer classes, science laboratories, and large student-teacher ratios, which expose students to poor styles and quality of education (Van Zyl-Schalekamp and Mthombeni 2015, 32). Upon entering the university space, the students who have different high school experiences are faced with the reality that textual environments differ within disciplines such

that they need programmes that can help them develop academic literacy through authentic engagement in their field of study (Seligmann 2008, 23; Castillo-Martínez and Ramírez-Montoya 2020, 1016). Through such programmes, students will be able to adapt to academic spaces in higher education as they engage in their learning environments and can acquire the mainstream literacy necessary to succeed in higher education (Seligmann 2008, 26; Ishiyama, 2007, 540; Inyathelo 2020; Mashifana 2020). They will also discover what working in a field is like in a hands-on manner where they can understand processes in their field and learn in depth (Seligmann 2008, 26; Ishiyama 2007, 547).

Emerging out of the foregoing analysis is the reality that while exploring the different layers and pockets of exclusion that negatively impact on how students experience the university space, it is imperative to unpack micro-macro level interventions that bridge the gap and shift the narrative towards rethinking inclusion in higher education. These interventions can be in the form of academic mentoring which refers to initiatives and programmes implemented or introduced throughout a student's university life to redress the layers of exclusion that influence students' negative experience of the university space (Dua 2008, 318; Wood and Su 2017, 457). Academic mentoring is therefore a form of structured interaction with academic staff that increases the probability of degree completion and career success (Dua 2008, 320; Mashifana 2020). Approximately, 46 per cent of students who enrolled for three or four-year degrees in 2005 across South African Universities, excluding UNISA students, had dropped out by the year 2010 (John 2013; Mashifana 2020). The students reported that they received inadequate assistance and poor academic support over and above dealing with pressures from their families (John 2013; Mashifana 2020). Thus, the involvement of members of academic staff plays an important part in a student's life as they serve as a role model, counsellor, and friend who helps students develop personally and professionally (Dua 2008, 309; Masondo 2015; Wood and Su 2017, 462; Mashifana 2020).

Academic staff who specialize in gender may also bring certain gender values to the department, such as equality, empowerment, and reciprocity which are then reflected in the departmental programmes which prioritise the development of a peer-mentoring environment and contributing to personal development and building relationships with their peers (Dua 2008, 310; Osezua and Agbalajobi 2016, 132). These programmes are especially helpful in supporting mentees to broaden their network and feel comfortable in sharing their experiences, since they are confronted with peers and not with somebody more senior (Dua 2008, 318). Having a woman head of department is highly correlated with having an academic mentoring policy and a unique perspective of mentoring in terms of addressing gender inequality in academia due to their own experiences as students and academic staff (Dua 2008, 318). Considering the

gendered exclusion academics face, formal mentoring is particularly valuable for women as it allows them access to spheres of influence they were previously excluded from and in a way, it helps them overcome gender discrimination in academic disciplines (Osezua and Agbalajobi 2016, 119–121). Osezua and Agbalajobi's (2016, 129–30) study in Nigeria found that women with mentors had more publications, spent more time on research and had overall career satisfaction and self-confidence. Thus, academic mentoring is an area for building a scholarly contribution, particularly in areas of research, publications and how to get ahead in leadership positions in academia (Allen et al. 2004, 128). Overall, formal academic mentoring is structured, supportive and effective in contributing to an individual's career development in the field; providing junior academics with a means to find out more about career management and institutional networking; developing women's confidence, helping with the professional challenges they face, and instilling the necessary skills for academic success (Allen et al. 2004, 128; Osezua and Agbalajobi 2016, 122).

Although the implementation of mentoring policies creates a peer-mentoring environment and the establishment of collaborative peer relationships through which they work towards meeting their learning needs and achieving their goals (Dua 2008, 318), the complex intersection of home language and language of instruction influences how students fare in the academic mentoring programmes. For instance, most of Tshivenda speaking-students from our 2018 quantitative study were unable to express themselves during academic mentoring programmes. Hence the inference that students' home language determines their ability to be integrated into higher learning such that through supported interaction and learning discourse-specific language, students can communicate and express themselves better during academic mentoring programmes. In addition, students that are excluded socially either suffer physically or psychologically and this poses a threat to their abilities and confidence to participate and navigate academic spaces (Du Preez and Le Grange 2020, 100). In the absence of face-to-face academic spaces, students' emotional and mental wellbeing, and their ability to establish interactional relationships beneficial in future careers have been compromised further by the COVID-19 pandemic's demands for social distancing and reliance on online learning.

As the article rethinks inclusion in higher education, it provokes research that revisits and interrogates the meaning of academic mentoring programmes for historically excluded students in a context where teaching and learning are spontaneously shifting to technology-driven virtual spaces due to the pandemic. Digital exclusion may result in an increase in inequalities which may affect the extent to which some students in higher education feel the sense of belonging and their ability to assimilate and be integrated in the learning space (Badat 2020, 24; Soomro et al. 2020, 1–2). Going forward, faculties should, for instance, introduce lectures and tutorials

as a form of mentoring programme that helps orientate students, especially first years, in accessing online material and navigating through the course (Mashifana 2020), and successfully negotiate, integrate, and adapt to virtual academic spaces. This will enhance existing academic mentoring programmes that were introduced by South African universities as an intervention tool aimed at eliminating epistemic exclusion through a more responsive, integrative, and inclusive higher education system.

Overall, the call to rethink inclusion in higher education in South Africa deconstructs pockets of exclusion. This strives to ensure an inclusive university space that adequately caters for students with different abilities, skills and from different socio-economic backgrounds; and breaks language barriers among other forces that hinder learning and increase in drop-out rates. If these layers of exclusion are not redressed, many South African students continue to experience and perceive higher education as exclusive and student protests, as articulated by Moosa (2021), will be a perpetual problem that manifests in a new/different year with new/different students who demand solutions to the same old issues that have not been resolved almost three decades into democracy. The article argues that student protests will be a perennial challenge until students' experiential and intellectual activists' voices are complemented by vigorous structural reforms and collaborative efforts from institutions of higher education in South Africa.

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN AFRICA

Although focus in this article was on South Africa, far reaching theoretical and empirical conclusions can still be drawn and articulated for academic exclusion in higher education. Thus, the article cannot ignore the broader implications of academic exclusion and efforts towards inclusive education in Africa – a continent that strives to set itself free from coloniality (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2020, i). Arguments for democratic inclusion in this article advance decolonial theories that debunk exclusionary structures that not only sustain the colonial legacy but are also perpetuated by what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2020, i) terms imperial global designs. The digital divide and global inequalities (Vassilakopoulou and Hustad 2021, 1) along with the longstanding history of exclusion in Africa compel this article to frame digital transformation as an important tool for advancing online pedagogy taking cognisance of the contextual realities that have implications for teaching and learning using such pedagogy on the continent. Hence the conclusion that all shifts to technology-driven academic virtual spaces, whether in response to the 4IR or the COVID-19 pandemic, should mitigate the inherent exclusion and micro and macro-level implications thereof for historically excluded students and for higher education in African contexts. Otherwise, online pedagogy remains a distant reality as digital exclusion

perpetuates inequalities in higher education which negatively influence some students' sense of belonging and their ability to assimilate and be integrated in the learning space (Badat 2020, 24; Soomro et al. 2020, 1–2).

Questions of belonging and integration are central to rethinking inclusion in higher education in Africa because theories of socio-cultural integration reinforce that knowledge is a shared process of inquiry and creation between different people in specific contexts of interaction. Given that the process of learning involves engagement with other people and sharing of ideas to further spark seeking of knowledge, academic mentoring programmes emerge as important structured interactions that foster learning processes for students in higher education (Dua 2008, 320; Mashifana 2020). The theories of socio-cultural integration, in many ways, support the need for academic mentoring programmes which occur or exist as stimulating and interactive classroom programmes and environments that encourage active learning (Wrenn and Wrenn 2009, 259) in South Africa and other African contexts. This justifies the call for ongoing active learning practices that incorporate and promote student engagement by affording higher education students the opportunity to talk and listen to each other, share, and learn from their personal beliefs and experiences – often trivialised and excluded from the list of credible sources of knowledge (Batisai 2019, 82).

In conclusion, this article acknowledges the implications of democratic inclusive for the broader society on the continent. Teachers, in the spirit of democratic inclusion beyond higher education, must strive to identify other perspectives that are not included in the school curriculum to challenge their students to think further about possible solutions to real-life situations (Camicia 2009, 137) in Africa. This reinforces Camicia's (2009, 138) call for adaptive education as part of the democratisation of education that helps students to understand and evaluate different conceptions of their society; gain relevant skills and knowledge to participate in deliberative democracy; and develop a voice and learn to be active agents of their futures and those of their different communities.

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