Reflection on student drop-out against the backdrop of COVID-19 in the South African Educational context amongst marginalised groups of students

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Abstract

This paper aims to engage the issue of student drop-out in light of COVID-19 which has disrupted schooling at all levels and impacts heavily on students from deprived background who do not have access to technology that have become the dominant means of teaching. In engaging the issue, the paper reviews the literature on student drop-out generally to highlight the factors that have been shown to be significant in student dropping out of school at primary, secondary and university levels.

Keywords: *social challenges, dropout, marginalized/impoverished communities*

Résumé

Cet article vise à aborder la question du décrochage scolaire à la lumière de COVID-19 qui a perturbé la scolarisation à tous les niveaux et a un impact important sur les étudiants issus de milieux défavorisés qui n'ont pas accès à la technologie qui est devenue le moyen d'enseignement

dominant. En abordant la question, le document passe en revue la littérature sur le décrochage scolaire en général pour mettre en évidence les facteurs qui se sont avérés importants dans le décrochage scolaire aux niveaux primaire, secondaire et universitaire.

Mots-clés: *défis sociaux, abandon, communautés marginalisées/appauvries*

Introduction

This paper addresses current hinderances within the South African education sector that various communities and academics continue to grapple with on daily basis. Despite the mechanism, and strategies implemented by the Department of Basic Education, universities and the Department of Higher Education there is increasingly high students' dropout at an alarming rate. The existing situation is worsened due to the emergence of several social ills including the Covid-19 pandemic that has engulfed the entire world. The focus of this study is about reflection on student drop-out against the backdrop of COVID-19 in the South African Educational context amongst marginalised groups of students

that is threatening to trigger students' dropout mainly experienced by students from impoverished communities. Given the South African government interventions to keep the education sector alive, the emergence of COVID-19 has exacerbated the challenge as online classes had to be adopted across the board. The paper shows how students coming from historically marginalized communities are affected by the institutional systems, coupled with COVID-19. It also identifies support interventions at in-order to reduce the probability of dropout at both schools and universities alike.

Student dropouts continue to persist. Supporting this notion further, Tinto (1993; 2012) model identified students retention as primary drivers of student dropout. The model further adds that inability of individual to adjust to social demands and expectations within the academic climate are some of the focal point of the problems. Other notable interrelated factors influencing university students' adjustments include: students' expectations, academic staff and parents (Smith, 2004; Yorke and Longden, 2008; Palmer et al., 2009; James et al., 2010; Briggs et al., 2012; McEwan, 2015; Neeves and Hillman, 2017); the degree to which students are prepared for university-level study (Harvey et al., 2006; James et al., 2010; Briggs et al., 2012; HEPI/Unite students, 2017); and a sense of "fitting in" or belongingness (Harvey et al., 2006; Palmer et al., 2009; HEPI/Unite Students 2017). Similar remark by Kori (2015) suggests that relations with other students as well as several institutions play critical role in student dropout. For instance, students with higher level of academic or social integration are at lower risk of dropout (Chen, 2012). Similarly, school and campus environment is also cited as one of the factors that could cause stress and therefore influences dropout (Johnson et al., 2014). According to McGhie (2012)

and Kori (2015), social integration of students and other social factors are known to influence individual social psychology while integrating students add to the social embeddedness of learning. Stress levels in the college environment and emotional exhaustion, part of the burnout syndrome, could further influence dropout. Equally, students' satisfaction is also influenced by the perceived quality of education and prior individual expectations (Kori 2015:444). The cited scholars' assertions may be correct as this paper addresses the same observations. The study discussed the Vroom's Expectancy Theory (VET) to further highlight students' dropout at institutions of higher learning. Justifications for using VET stems from the fact that school attendance is linked to increasingly high students' expectations. This paper is presented in three sections namely the introductory section which presents the main conceptual frame of discussion. The key factors of the section that leads to student's dropout amongst previously marginalized students are discussed. This leads to the second section with deeper discussion of the reasons for students' dropout and the consequences thereof to the community and society at large. The discussion highlights that students' personal experiences from the time they enter school or university up until they decide to depart educational institutions; a repetitive historical occurrence that has seen academically capable student leaving higher education due to marginalizations emanating from the apartheid regime. Next, the authors examine the impact of dropout on students as well as the dire consequences on the country's economy, followed by concluding remarks. Lastly the concluding remarks were outlined based on the recommendations.

Reasons and factors causing student dropout

According to Hartnack (2017) literature suggest that from the USA, there is high dropout rates for people from poor neighbourhoods where social amenities are limited, housing is run-down and rented rather than owned, crime is high. (De Witte, Gabus, Thyssen, Groot and van den Brink 2013) positive or negative influences of peers groups (high achieving and motivated peers versus peers involved with crime, drugs and violence) (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack and Rock; 1986; Hammond 2007); the pull of early employment opportunities (especially in poor households where the opportunity cost of schooling is high) (De Witte et al. 2013; Rumberger 2004); and social discrimination and prejudice, especially that aimed at minority or underprivileged learners (Herbert and Reis 1999).

In South Africa, being characterised by colonial/apartheid legacy of "separate development", labour migration, "Bantu education", family and social disarticulation, coupled with continued spatial injustice and extreme levels of inequality post-1994 (see Beinart 2001; Bond 2005), exacerbated the dropout challenge, community-related factors of school dropout are particularly profound, and are linked to individual, family

and school-related factors. Moses et al. (2017) show in detail how the structure of South Africa's economy perpetuates poverty along racial and spatial lines, with black South Africans living in former "Homelands" remaining the most poor, while black and coloured communities living in townships remain similarly marginalised. They argue, along similar lines to Spaull (2015), that most black and coloured South Africans are trapped in a spatial and structural position in which access to a quality education is nearly impossible, exacerbates their poverty and inability to be progress academically. For many black South Africans living in poor rural and urban communities, teenage pregnancy is a particular risk factor, and according to Spaull (2015: 37) it "accounts for 33% of drop-out amongst female learners". Linked to high levels of teenage pregnancy is the role of negative peer pressure, pulling young people into drug/alcohol abuse, anti-social or delinquent behaviour and negative attitudes towards remaining in school. While De Witte et al. (2013) found that positive pressure from high-achieving peers can have a beneficial effect, the opposite is true where negative peer influences prevail, as they have been found to do particularly in poor urban communities in South Africa (Mnguni 2014).

In the context of growing unemployment and the knowledge that the education on offer is highly unlikely to translate into opportunities for social and economic advancement, young people are facing a crisis of expectations, which can cause many to leave school early (Spaull 2015: 37; Moses et al. 2017:3). As cited above, VET argues that individuals are expected to display specific behaviours in the learning environment based on outcomes that depicts expectations of individuals. The theory further argues that personal beliefs depend on individual's effort as an essential stimulus for good performance that spur individuals to reach the desired outcomes. VET further states that participative decisions and dropout from learning institutions by students are critical. Justification for using Vroom's Expectancy Theory for this study is that school attendance is linked to individual student's expectations and personal readiness to meet prime requirements, hence, where the learning environment is unable to support and stimulate active learning, students become demotivated and consequently decisions are made to dropout from the learning environment. This theory also maintain that the level of motivation is often determined by the value and meaning a student places on the outcome (Bergh 2011; Lunenburg 2011).

With pressure on households to earn enough for survival and other household requirements, young people renounce from school activities very early in search of income-generation opportunities (Gustafsson 2011: 23; Sabates et al. 2010: 13). In South African townships, particularly in the Cape Province, other social drawbacks including drugs and gangsterism poses a very powerful withdrawal factor for school-going youth. The crisis of "expectations", where teenagers (and whole communities) lose faith in the school value system fail to envision a healthy life and career path, not only pushes many into drug use, but also provides fertile grounds where gangsters exploit

younger generation with alternative source of belonging, self-esteem, and livelihood (Steinberg 2004; Pinnock 2016). The activities and culture established by these gangsters also have insightful negative impacts on individuals, families, and schools, reinforcing the risk of dropout on many levels. Even where gangsterism may not be ubiquitous, high levels of alcohol and substance abuse have also been linked to high rates of school dropout, for example in farming districts of the Western Cape (Fleisch et al. 2009: 41). Hartnack (2017) further asserts that family dynamics also provide several "pull-out" factors in relation to school dropout. For example, families of low socio-economic status, especially those with limited social capital, in socially and geographically marginalised positions, and where key adult members are unemployed (De Witte et al. 2013: 10), certainly struggle the most to keep their children in school. Family structure is important when it comes to staying-in or dropping out of school (Branson, Hofmeyr and Lam 2013: 13): children living in a home "where the head of the household is a parent or grandparent are much more likely to attend school than those living in other types of homes". In international literature, it has been found that dropout is lowest amongst children growing up with two biological parents (Rumberger 1983). Learners with large numbers of siblings, however, have been found to be more at risk of dropping out (Hammond 2007: 4).

South Africa is a country which for years experienced one of the highest rates of HIV infection, and AIDS related deaths in the world. This disease, along with other related illnesses such as tuberculosis, impact severely on families – both in terms of the deaths of breadwinners and the burden this has placed on young people. Richter (2004: 26) found HIV/AIDS to have placed a burden on children to care for sick family members, and to become breadwinners in their households. Orphanhood is a major risk factor: as Fleisch et al. (2009: 44) found, 32% of children out of school have one or both parents' dead (Case and Ardington (2006). Child-headed households are likely to be out of school, or drop out of school, than counterparts living with close adult relatives (Fleisch et al. 2009: 44). "Shocks" at family level, such as illness, death and loss of employment can play a major role in the decision to dropout (Branson et al. 2013: 12). Compounded by the Covid-19, the "shocks" becomes excessive as students are compelled to depart from education.

The educational levels of parents also plays a key factor related to the risk of student dropout (De Witte et al. 2013: 10), with studies showing that girls with more educated mothers received more schooling than those whose mothers were poorly educated (Sabates et al. 2010: 13). Likewise, Rumberger (1983) asserts that more reading material in the house resulted in less dropout (quoted in November 2010: 8). For marginalised communities in South Africa, with their multi-generation legacy of low quality "Bantu Education", low levels of education among older generations poses a very clear risk relating to school dropout. Another important family factor is the family's stress levels, the warmth and supportive environment. Furthermore, the level of parental support

and involvement with a student's education and life in general, as well as the "emotional climate" of the parent-child relationship has an impact school dropout, either positively or negatively depending on the nature of the relationship (De Witte et al. 2013: 11; Duchesne et al. 2009). Kori's (2015) report suggests that relations with other students and that of the institution has a role to play in student dropout, that is: students with a higher level of academic or social integration have a lower risk of dropout (Chen, 2012).

The campus environment for university students is also cited as one of the factors that could cause stress and therefore influences dropout (Johnson et al., 2014). The social integration of students in an institution is important because it refers back to the social embeddedness of learning (McGhie, 2012:27). Social risk issues refers to demographic factors associated with higher likelihood of school failure such as minority-language status, family income, parents' education and family structure. The family has been recognized as one of the contributors to children's education (Baumrind, 1971; Rumberger, 1995; Steinberg, 2001, Blondal 2014, Lowe and Dotterer (2013) also attests to the same notion that families play a crucial role in supporting adolescents' academic outcomes. Parenting practices namely parental monitoring bears sufficient positive linkages to academic findings among the minority of youth groups (Gonzalez et al. 1996; Henry et al. 2011).

Recent studies reveal varying association between high poverty rates and students' dropout (Dieltiens and Meny-Gilbert, 2008/09). Equally, several factors such as race, gender and poverty, among others are contributors to students dropping out from the Higher Education Sector (Klein, 2010). Students' dropout can be caused by three broad factors, namely, personal, family, social based and macro or general according to (Cunningham, McGinnis, Gacia-Verdu, Tesliu and Verner, 2008). As Majumder (2016:91) put it parental role in children's education represents one of the primary issues that are of utmost significance to researchers in the field of education and child development. Education researchers and policy makers have been claiming over the years that parental involvement helps children to ascertain better education outcomes (Stacer and Perrucci 2013). Similar sentiment is shared by researchers Winding and Andersen (2015:02) suggest that one of the strongest risk factors of students' dropout is parental socio-economic position. The study further add that the depth of parental educational status, occupational prestige, and family income point to growing indirect relationships with the youths' later educational outcomes. Previous studies have shown that parental involvement in their offspring's schooling is an important determinant of both later academic achievement and dropout. Previous studies revealed that heavy and chronic use of drugs, has psychoactive effects that impair the cognitive development and functioning of humans (Fried, Watkinson, James and Gray 2002; Pope and Yurgelu-Todd, 1996; Rosselli and Ardila, 1996; Henry, Knight and Thornberry (2012). Henley et al. 2012 further suggest that drug use may also lead to dropout by speeding up the transition to adult roles and responsibilities, such as pregnancy, parenting and work. According to

Newcomb and Bentler (1988), "drug users tend to bypass or circumvent the typical maturational sequence of school, work, and marriage and become engaged in adult roles of job and family prematurely, without the necessary growth and development to enhance success with these roles" (1988: 35-36). Adolescent drug use is associated with the early assumption of adult roles, including teenage pregnancy and parenthood, marriage, and living independently of parents or guardians prematurely (Krohn, Lizotte, and Perez, 1997; Newcomb and Bentler, 1988). According to Blue (2010) early entry into parenthood is associated with increased school dropout rates and decreased educational achievement (Somers, 2006). Hasnain and Krantz (2011) suggest that dropping out of school or college does not only impede economic prosperity but also add to the acquisition of poor knowledge and awareness about sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Although it is common for boys and girls in many low-income countries to drop out of school, mainly for economic reasons. Early marriage and childbirth, especially teenage pregnancies, are further related to school dropout among girls.

Dropping out of school may lead to poor life skills which may manifest as behavioral problems, such as conduct disorders, or unhealthy behaviours, such as intravenous drug use. Letseka (2008:93) states that on average,70% of the surveyed students came from family backgrounds of low socio-economic status (SES). Their parents'/guardians' level of education ranged between 'no formal education' to 'some secondary education', and their monthly income ranged from 'no income' to between R1-R400 and R801- R1 600 per month. Altman (2007) argues that in South Africa earnings from employment and self-employment are low relative to the cost of living. Despite the projected 6% economic growth rate, 6.5% of working people still earn less than R2 500 per month, the same as a decade ago. In a study conducted by Thomas (2002) it is pointed out that the relationship between financial issues and withdrawal is currently receiving considerable attention in the United Kingdom since the abolition of student grants, total reliance on student loans and the introduction of tuition fees. (Ozga and Sukhnandan 1997). Kori 2014 also suggest that students who received aids or grants have the lower probability of dropping out and dropout is higher for those receiving loans. Social risk factors have been shown to negatively impact a students' academic performance and thus linked to student dropout (McKee and Caldarella (2016). Thabethe (2017) also asserts that socio-economic experiences may leave students feeling disempowered as a result of being discriminated against and lack of support could lead to failure as students (Karimi, 2015).

Conceptualising student dropout

The dropout of a student is defined as when an individual who is out of the academic system, prior to the end of a specific academic programme for which he or she is registered (McWhitter et al., 2007). According to Letseka (2007), the dropout rate of students can

also be seen as a situation within the academic climate where individuals are out of the academic programmes either on a temporary or permanent bases prior to the final academic period for which they are enrolled. In sum therefore, students' dropout can be defined as inability of individuals to complete a learning programme that creates a path towards successful graduation (Daniel, Walsch, Goldston, Arnold, Reboussion and Wood 2006). Drawing from these definitions, the term "student dropout rate" in this study refers to individual students who are registered for specific academic programmes but are unable to successfully complete the programme owing to some challenges.

Cain (2013) suggests that the most basic definition of student dropout is leaving an institution for any reason before completing the programme of study. According to Tinto (1993), the term 'dropout' implies failure. However, because students leave institutions for various reasons, the term dropout cannot be applied to all students. For the purpose of this paper, the concept of dropout is defined as any student who does not complete his or her chosen programme of studies at the institution of enrolment within minimum timeframe. According to Meens, Bakx, Klimstra and Dennisen (2018), two main reasons for high student dropout in education is lack of motivation and making erroneous educational choices (Wartenbergh and Van den Broek; Watenbergh, Bending-Jacobs, Braam, and Nooij, 2015). These high rates lead to a drain on public finances and also a deterioration in wellbeing of these students and their failure experience. Agherdien, Mey and Poisat (2018:57) posit that motivation plays an essential role in student success. In their study, different theories of motivation were used in relation to readiness and success. These included cognitive evaluation, self-efficacy and expectancy theories. Theories of motivation are significant in understanding student performance, as well as understanding how these students can be motivated. Motivation affords students the necessary drive to overcome any obstacles they may encounter (Eysenck, 2004). The problem of student dropout is disturbing because it is perceived to reflect inadequacies in the education system in terms of both quality and quantity (Letseka 2007; Sibanda 2004). Daniel (2006:507) defines a dropout as an individual who does not complete a learning programme or who takes a path that does not lead him or her to graduate successfully with the associated qualification.

Impact of COVID-19 to South African students and dropout

According to Schleicher (2020) the COVID-19 pandemic has also had a severe impact on higher education as universities closed their premises and countries shut their borders in response to lockdown measures. Although higher education institutions were quick to replace face-to-face lectures with online learning, these closures affected learning and examinations as well as the safety and legal status of international students in their host country. Importantly, the crisis raised questions about the value offered by universities

which among others include networking and social opportunities as well as educational content. Reopening of schools and universities brought about unquestionable benefits to students and the wider economy. In addition, reopening of schools and universities brought economic benefits to families by enabling some parents to return to work. With those benefits, however, caution had to be taken against the health risks and the requirement to mitigate the toll of the pandemic. The need for such trade-offs called for sustained and effective coordination between education and public health authorities at different levels of government, enhanced by local participation and autonomy, tailoring responses to the local context. Several steps had to be taken to manage the risks and trade-offs, including physical distancing measures, establishing hygiene protocols, revising personnel and attendance policies, and investing in staff training on appropriate measures to cope with the virus. Despite government protocols, access to computers and the internet in South African homes was very low. Whilst it is true that 90% of South African households is perceived to have access to mobile phones, only 60% have access to the internet via their mobile phone. It should further be emphasised that these rates are for adults in the household. It cannot be assumed that during lockdown, children in a household would have full or unlimited access to the cell phone to access educational content. There is also the issue of multiple children in the same household needing to share a mobile phone, and the elevated cost of data, although there are now some free educational sites (Duncan-Williams 2020). Spaull and van der Berg (2020) posits, that 4.5 million individuals lost all labour-market income as a result of job loss or furlough. This has profound impacts on household welfare and hunger in particular. From the news and media, it became evident that household had run out of money to buy food.

Some families indicated that someone in the household went hungry in the last 7 days, and 15 reported that a child went hungry in the last seven days (Spaull et al. 2020). Increased financial stress during economic recessions is also associated with increase in domestic violence. The added complications of the lockdown and permanent presence of children in the home increases the likelihood of children falling victim to such behaviour. As Fegert a Vitiello, Plener, and Clemens (2020). The Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) and a University of Johannesburg team analysed the mental health consequences of the lockdown for adults in South Africa, based on an online survey. They derived two latent variables from the responses they obtained about the emotions people felt. The one they termed psychological distress (including stress, being scared, irritability, feeling depressed, sadness, anger) and the other isolation (boredom and loneliness). Further the components of psychological distress are higher amongst individuals that reported feeling hunger.

Hill and Fitzgerald 2020 postulates that there was consistent learning material available via Blackboard and sufficient technological networks for students to collaborate and remain interactive online, it is impossible to deny the feeling of isolation that COVID-19 exerted in the final semester of our studies. Utilising an online platform for learning, while facilitating other personal commitments such as family life, working full time and striving to complete the mandatory teaching hours for the course made it difficult to stay motivated at times. Students felt confused, unsure of how to proceed but rarely sought clarification from academic staff due to the absence of face-to-face interaction and continued to the best of their abilities. With online learning, it was difficult to achieve this 'sense of belonging' as time spent with peers online was limited, as some students were less engaged due to other commitments as they tried to juggle life in lockdown with learning. Engagement between students and lecturers was significantly hindered by moving the workshops online, as the face-to-face time allowed relationships to be built with each of the lecturers. Building relationships between students and lecturers can be beneficial for active engagement in classes (Dismore et al.,2019; Bramble et al., 2018). However, it was challenging to continue to build these relationships with lack of contact, and therefore achieve full engagement within the online learning environment. With online learning, it was difficult to achieve this 'sense of belonging' as time spent with peers online was limited, as some students were less engaged due to other commitments as they tried to manage their lives in lockdown with learning. This lack of engagement during online learning between students and between lecturers and students was challenging (Bowcock and Peters, 2016).

Several credible studies have shown that to motivate and engage students including lecturer/teacher enthusiasm, interactive classes, engaging students through group activities and using effective teaching methods promote active learning climate (Collaço, 2017; Race, 2007). These conditions promote potential difficulties in maintaining when teaching is restricted to online sessions. This was particularly so for many of the classes, which previously would have been delivered face-to-face and included interactive elements, where the content was uploaded to Blackboard for students to read individually at their own pace. As engagement between lecturers and students is noted to be crucial to learning (Zepke et al., 2014), this was significantly lacking using this method. Agormeda, Henaku, Ayite, and Ansah (2020) posits that the shift to emergency remote learning/teaching in Ghana presented a number of concerns for student learning, issues of equity, internet connection, personal learning devices, student data accessibility, and the digital divide. Thus, the shift to emergency remote teaching has illuminated and exacerbated the digital divide (Trust, 2020). Likewise, according to TaylorGuy and Chase (2020), emergency remote learning hinders student cohesiveness, peer-to-peer and student-lecturer interaction beyond the real-time video or chat interactions. According to Motala and Menon (2020), several issues became evident, both in terms of access to learning and the broader societal context. Reflecting

on the university's response, factors that compromised student learning included: No access to a device inclusive of a laptop or smartphone (impacts on how to learn if the medium or means to learn is absent); either no network coverage or limited coverage; cost of data; limited bandwidth; living conditions not conducive to studying; other psychosocial factors. Issues of social capital, access, and vulnerability were also evident. These factors included poor living conditions, environments not conducive to learning, student hunger and, while not necessarily quantifiable, a possible worsening of economic conditions during the Covid-19 lockdown that would impact on the students.

Academics, staff working with students and students themselves drew attention to the problems with the universities' devising responses. Equity and access are goals that have been pursued by government as far back as the National Commission on Higher Education (1996) as set out in the White Paper 3 (Department of Education 1997). The agenda for the transformation of higher education outlined the need to 'redress inequalities of access, participation and success' and 'expand SA's competitive participation in the global context' (Council on Higher Education 2004:24). One could argue that Covid-19 has worsened social exclusion and the accompanying inequities. The lack of student access in the transition to remote learning has further cemented exclusion and created barriers to learning. 'Quality and equality' of provision is a central tenet for the university as is evident from the lessons from China; these have to be factored into this unusual shift to remote learning (Wu 2020). The sudden total lockdown left little time for the universities to lay the groundwork for both academics and students to effect teaching and learning remotely. Some academics perceived online teaching as an incredibly steep learning curve. The rapid translation of modules from traditional face-to-face to online learning surfaced a new level of under-preparedness in students. Through the multiple committee structures and frequent meetings, academics could express difficulties as well as new ways of teaching and reaching their students. This was particularly important because many students wrote and communicated with academics about their difficulties and experiences with the transition to remote teaching and learning. The inequitable resourcing of students in terms of the required technology was a peripheral factor to the universities' strategy, but one that took centre stage. This led to the provision of devices and data to staff and students on a monthly basis. Equity and inequality issues surfaced repeatedly. Some students had uncapped access to Wi-Fi, and sophisticated devices, others lived in areas where network connectivity was poor and worked off a simple smartphone. Some, who lived in remote areas, received devices only after delays. Despite this, and as data and device access improved, the level of participation on the online platforms especially for undergraduates increased to about 90%, up from an average of 50% in the first week of the lockdown. Weekly reports from deans on progress fed discussions on fine-grained issues like students' vulnerabilities; reports from academics provided insights into difficulties that students and academics were experiencing such as incidence of inconsistent performance or participation on

Blackboard, Moodle and Microsoft Teams. Additionally, academics having to cope with families, young children and care responsibilities. The gap between social equity and education equity (Motala 2014) was very evident, as were the vast social disparities that enabled or disadvantaged students.

Major issue that emerged was the psychosocial issues in an environment without human contact and touch, and the real distress that some students and staff felt with isolation, physical and social distancing. The universities had responded in various ways, but the human cost of the Covid-19 period is yet to be seen. Caring and support had to be normalised, recognising that the emotional impact of the pandemic was pervasive. The only choice for the universities was Hobson's choice – 'business as usual' – while recognising that it was 'business unusual.' Academics reflected on sessions with students and spent time 'counselling' and allaying the fears of students, often deriving comfort from the contact via online platforms. Adedoyin and Soyka (2020) posits, as a result of inequality in the socio-economic status of students, some rely on the computer and free internet in school (Demirbilek, 2014), and due to closure of schools, the migration process of these set of students was expected to be slow. It became undeniable that students with low socioeconomic background found it difficult to migrate as early as expected since the start of the pandemic. Fishbane and Tomer (2020) postulates that as the level of poverty increases in the community, the rate of internet accessibilities declined rapidly and by implications, students with no or low socio-economic power to afford broadband connection were most vulnerable to fall behind or confront additional challenges to meet up with others in online learning.

Human intrusion by family members caused the disruption or digression of online learning participants' attention during the online teaching and learning process. Students and instructors with low digital competence are liable to lack behind in online learning. According to a video file by AlkaPwnige (2020), there are situations whereby online learning participants go naked unconsciously by being in the comfort of their workstation or dressing up for the online class, and this can be linked to unconscious use of the platform as a result unethical use of digital devises that can be avoided through digital competence. Due to digital transformation of instructional activities during this pandemic, libraries had to follow the trend in order to deliver effective service faculty, student and other stakeholders through digital library might find it difficult to make optimal utilization of the digital library.

Intervention Strategies to curb student dropout

Dube (2020:149) asserts that one of strategies to enhancing online teaching and learning in rural schools in the context of COVID-19 is social inclusive learning approach as it concerns quality in the distribution of an education service, and also

concerns the nature of the service itself and the consequences for society through time (Connel, 2012:681). An inclusive approach would be the best, desirable and doable in the fight against COVID-19, and would also ensure that no child is left behind due to this global pandemic. Oloruntegbe and Collins (2011) posits that successful reforms are initiated from grassroots (bottom-up), particularly by teachers and learners who have first-hand experience of the realities of online learning in the context of COVID 19. Through such an inclusive approach, the preservation of an oppressive status quo is challenged, and social transformation that values social justice can be achieved (Ngwenyama:1991). Furthermore, there is an urgent need for the Department of Basic Education to cease assuming that all teachers are able to execute online learning. Workshops should be conducted online to equip teachers on the way to handle online learning. In addition, the education system management should be aware of their teachers' ability levels, and must set expectations accordingly (David, Pellini, Jordan and Phillips, 2020). The Department of Basic Education in South African needs to take into account where the country is, in terms of the current breadth and depth of the curriculum, learners' achievement levels, the quality of teachers and the range and effectiveness of teaching, learning and assessment processes. Furthermore, the Department of Basic Education can invest in technology that connects teachers and learners using tailor-made subjects in a language a student/pupil can understand and be able to relate to.

On the Higher Education front, in the South African context, online counseling is an important consideration as it can potentially affect student counselor therapeutic engagement, productivity, work satisfaction, and overall wellness. Student counselors can also expand students' access to generic mental health self-help materials via YouTube videos, webinars, and podcasts. SMS call-back options and toll-free Student Counseling hotlines also need to be explored for all students who, due to financial challenges, are unable to call Student Counseling Services for support. Transmission of online self-help student counseling resources via zero-rated data E-learning platforms, i.e., Blackboard and Moodle, further ensures that Student Counseling support remains available to students irrespective of physical and financial circumstances. Student counselor innovation and partnerships are also recommended in cases where students may have access to data bundles or Wi-Fi, but reside in remote geographical locations or university residences where internet connectivity and signal is poor. This necessitates partnership-building and collaboration between Student Counseling Services, government departments such as the Department of Health (Psychology and Psychiatry clinics), Department of Social Development, and community-based organizations. Paper-based delivery of student counseling resource packs as well as academic material to students via postal and courier services, also help bridge the gap between students in remote areas. Such packs could comprise a range of self- help materials, as well as information on community-based service providers in the student's area, whom they could contact for emergencies and continuity of care. Follow-up communications between Student

Counseling and community-based service providers listed in the resource pack, as well as continuous contact with lecturers can then be facilitated via online, multi-disciplinary "communities of practice" using videoconferencing platforms such as Zoom, Skype or MS Teams platforms (Naidoo and Cartwright, 2020).

Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the surge in Gender Based Violence-related incidents across South African represents a national crisis under which students live in. Given that student experiences are indelibly connected to broader social systems, the Gender Based Violence scourge highlights the important role that South African student counsellors in partnership with lecturers can assume to support and empower the student community. Multi-disciplinary partnerships between Student Counseling, student leadership, university management, external law enforcement and the justice system, is essential. Priority areas need to include GBV awareness on campus and in residences (especially for those students that are allowed to be on campus during this period), having and improving institutional reporting protocol and response mechanisms such as a user- friendly SMS callback option and GBV reporting application that is directly linked to campus security and can be downloaded onto students' cellphones (e.g. Campus Communications, University of Cape Town, 2019). On the academic front, Moore (1993:23) postulates that there is a need for active, purposeful and constructive communication between lecturers and students; the degree to which the programme responds to the needs of each student (the constructs of the structure) as well as the degree to which students are able to set goals, learn from experience and evaluate decisions.

In a study conducted by Netanda, Mamabolo and Themane (2017:11), on student interventions, academic support was the most crucial intervention required to improving student academic performance standard and success rate. Furthermore, module coordinators also identified library services, such as research articles and online books, as essential. According to the participants, the online library system should provide more details on how to search for and request books and other learning materials online. The technology should be user-friendly and workshops focused on skills transfer should be organised for students who are less competent in the use of technology. Another recommendation is that lecturers must be available to answer calls and respond to e-mail, and participate in online forums. University should give them access to the Internet outside of the office so that they can respond to students' queries anywhere, including at home.

Concluding Remarks

The phenomenon that schools, universities and students alike face as we enter the Fourth Industrial Revolution is to acquire knowledge in keeping with (4IR). This suggests that new skills in the use of nanotechnology, robotics and artificial intelligence will be introduced. Students coming from the marginalized communities are going to

be further disadvantaged as these new advances pose another digital challenge, leading to dropout. According to Gleason (2018:01), the automation economy, resulting from technologies of the 4IR is changing the way we live and work. Higher education, especially, is changing around the world already because of the fast shifting global economy and the types of employees and thinkers it demands (Gleason, 2018:02). It can be argued that if such disparities still exist, particularly in South Africa, student dropout will always remain a challenge. Penprase (2018:207) explains that recent papers describe how 4IR will shape the future of education, gender and work" and how the 4IR will require an augmented workforce re-skilling. The authors further alludes to the fact that the World Economic Forum has set tipping points at which technologies of 4IR will become widespread to bring societal change. These societal changes will include the spread of 4IR technologies that will make significant impacts on the lives and require a shifts in education, generally, and employment.

A considerable amount of change to the science and technology curriculum will be required to allow students to adjust rapidly to the emerging areas of genomics, data science, Artificial Intelligence, robotics and nanomaterials (Penprase, 2018:215-217). To this end, it can therefore be concluded that 4IR, together with the societal issues, coupled with the COVID-19 alluded to, in this paper, presents the education sector with a challenge of equipping pupils and students with skills to create problem-solving ecosystems that can combine the cognitive processing of many ordinary contributions with machine-based computing to establish faithful models of the complicated, interdependent systems that underlie the world's most demanding tasks. It can also be concluded that other factors such as social, household and cultural challenges, and the emergence of COVID-19 are yet to be explored further in the 4IR era as there is no clear-cut guideline yet on how they can be overcome. Finally, it may be noteworthy to mention that the potential of social networking such as WhatsApp in fostering connectedness within online student cohorts has played a pivotal role in students success in the 2020 academic year. As the pandemic still exist in 2021, and, is expected to be around for a much longer time, especially in South Africa, as no vaccine has been secured as yet. Student dropout is expected to remain high as students from the marginalised groups are still going to be at a disadvantaged. WhatsApp had been referred to as a 'lifeline' where the interactions were described as being central to student engagement and completion of the course (Stone and Logan 2018). It remains to be seen as to whether or not Whatsapp will still remain the students' 'lifeline' as it wants all users to share their data with Facebook. There has been a huge migration of Whatsapp customers to either Telegram or Signal.

The contribution this paper has made is that it has reflected on student drop-out against the backdrop of COVID-19 in the South African educational context amongst marginalised groups of students leading them to dropout. The contribution for this study was therefore to investigate how students coming from historically marginalised communities were affected by backdrop of COVID-19 in the South African context in

the midst of COVID-19. The paper also identified support interventions for both school pupil and university students that could be used to reduce the probability of dropout as it cuts across levels of education. Other South African schools and universities can draw from these challenges and understand the underpinning reasons for student dropout, without focusing only on the curriculum being the primary factor leading to student dropout. By doing so, a better understanding will lay a foundation for the education sector to be able to cater and better understand the circumstances surrounding factors that led or could lead to dropout, especially during the COVID-19 times and be able to respond to these challenges in a manner that will benefit students in the future."

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