

The implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*: rural university students' experiences

By

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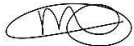
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DEDICATION

To start, I would like to send my outmost appreciation to my supervisor Dr Cias Tsotetsi. Your patience and support throughout this academic journey has been incredible and I will forever be grateful. Without your support and assistance this journey would not have been possible.

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ABSTRACT

As an immediate response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many universities in South Africa had to create COVID-19-specific policies. Many of these policies outlined the precautions that both students and staff had to follow to keep safe. This also entailed restricted access to university campuses and mandatory vaccination. To give background to this, students from rural-based university campuses, predominately come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Therefore, this study has attempted to understand the experiences of rural university students from one campus when a COVID-19-specific policy was implemented. Because of the disadvantaged nature of rural-based university students, it is essential to understand how the implementation of this policy affected them. Currently, there are limited studies that have attempted to understand the experiences of rural-based students, from a policy standpoint. Hence, this study aimed to explore students' experiences with the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* on a rural University campus.

Different studies have indicated that the pandemic did in fact widen the already existing inequalities between rural and urban-based universities. And across the world, different universities employed similar strategies in managing the spread of the virus and the main objective was to ensure the safety of students. Similarly, in countries like the United States of America, Nigeria and China students were removed from their university campuses and institutions enacted COVID-19-specific guidelines and policies to manage the spread of the virus on their university campuses. Of course, this came with some problems, for example, in a country like Nigeria, online learning and teaching presented some challenges.

Therefore, with reference to realist social theory, this study has used the qualitative approach to collect data. Two data collection strategies have been used, which are focus group discussion and document analysis. Stratified purposive sampling was used to select participants from a rural university campus. In addition, data was analysed using thematic analysis and critical policy analysis. Results obtained from this study indicate that to a certain extent the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and*

Required Vaccination Policy did present students with some challenges. Students did not have the knowledge or the resources to learn successfully online, and they felt that the policy took their away their autonomy when it came to choosing whether or not to vaccinate. To add to this, policy analysis indicated that the policy was more specific when it came to employees but with regards to students, there were many omissions and silences. In brief, the institution did have an ethical moral obligation to keep its community safe however other less coercive alternatives should have been explored rather than mandating vaccinations.

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CHAPTER 1

ORIENTATION

1.1 Background

The first cases of the coronavirus or SARS-CoV-2 were discovered in Wuhan in December 2019 (WHO, 2020a) and the field of education found itself in uncharted waters. To avoid the spreading of the virus, many institutions of higher learning found themselves forced to close for some time (Babbar and Gupta, 2021; Agasisti and Soncin, 2021). By March 2020, education institutions in 169 countries, including South Africa, Egypt, Canada Spain, Germany, and many more, had closed their institutions (Babbar and Gupta 2021). In Italy, schools closed for a total of 18 weeks (Agasisti and Soncin, 2021). This also occurred in South Africa when the government mandated a national lockdown and all schools and universities had to close (Mhlanga and Moloji 2020; Ndevu, 2020; van Schalkwyk, 2021).

As such, the main question became: how will schooling continue during a pandemic? Many universities turned to remote learning to ensure that teaching and learning continued during the pandemic (Jili, Ede, and Masuku, 2021; Mhlanga and Moloji, 2020; Babbar and Gupta, 2021; Perrotta, 2021; Ndevu, 2020). According to Whittle *et al.* (in Jili *et al.* 2021), emergency remote teaching or ERT is intended as a temporary method of instruction during a crisis, and it is not the same as “pre-planned online learning”. For this reason, a lasting solution had to be found and for many universities in South Africa, it was the enactment and implementation of mandatory vaccination policies. For example, universities such as the University of the Free State, Stellenbosch University, University of Cape Town implemented such policies (Daily Maverick, 2021). These policies were enacted despite there being some vaccine hesitancy from university students (Silver, Bradberg, and Lemay, 2021).

Professor Ahmed Bawa stated that universities cannot force students to vaccinate, as it is a violation of their rights, but this would in turn, be for the good of society (SABC

News, 2021). However, for universities to return to face-to-face classes, mandatory vaccination policies had to be implemented. The University of Western Cape implemented its *Interim COVID-19 Vaccination Policy for the Western Cape for 2022*. This policy outlined that for any employee, student, service provider, or visitor to gain access to campus, they needed to be vaccinated (2022). Stellenbosch University also implemented a similar rule, which is outlined in their *Stellenbosch University Institutional Rule Regarding Vaccination Against Novel Coronavirus Disease*. This rule was to be implemented on 1 of April 2022 and it also indicates that for any person to gain access to their campus they need to provide proof of vaccination (2022: 4). Lastly, the University of the Free State also enacted and implemented its own *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*. This policy was approved by the UFS council and it came into effect when the academic year started in 2022.

The University of the Free State has three campuses, the Bloemfontein and South Campuses which are in an urban/ city area, and the Qwaqwa campus which is in a rural area. In South Africa, we have rural universities. We say a university is rural, based on its geographical location and its history of discrimination from the past apartheid governments' segregation and settlement policies (Marongwe and Garidzirai, 2021; Uleanya and Rugbeer, 2020; Nkomo, 2007). Furthermore, a university can also be considered rural based on certain characteristics (Dani and Shah, 2016). For example, these include the employment rate in the area, detached settlements, untarred roads, poor network, and others (Uleanya and Rugbeer 2020). During the pandemic, many students from rural universities were faced with immense challenges. Marongwe and Garidzirai (2021), state that "COVID-19 exposed and widened South Africa's pre-existing inequalities between rural and urban universities".

These pre-existing inequalities became very evident during the pandemic. For example, in India students who reside in rural or remote parts of the country constantly experience challenges of power outages and slow internet connections (Mukherjee, Belousova, and Maun, 2021). Members of staff at Kolkata's Jadavpur University were also encouraged to be considerate of students' socio-economic backgrounds as some did not have access to computers at home (Mukherjee *et al.* 2021). Additionally, in

Nepal, students from rural areas also experienced “inequalities in access to and participation in online and distance education” (Devkota, 2021). Again, Perrotta (2021), explains that, in Argentina, the pandemic also widened the “inequality gap” amongst students. Similarly, in South Africa, Ndevu (2020), further identified that there was a “digital divide” between students who fall under different social classes. Despite this, there is little to no literature that investigates how these policies affected rural university students, especially considering all the challenges they faced during the pandemic.

The conception and implementation of any policy involves various steps. For instance, when implementing a policy, the affected populace needs to be consulted, meaning it takes a bottom-up approach (Mthombeni and Ogunnubi, 2020). Mthombeni and Ogunnubi (2020) further elaborate that those in management positions in a university or the senate need to involve the university community for the sharing of stakeholders’ opinions. If this does not take place, then, “it suggests that it [the policy] was drafted and finalised by the elite”. Unfortunately, this was the case with the implementation of the *Bilingual Language Policy* of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (Mthombeni and Ogunnubi, 2020: 191). Mabokela and Mlambo (2017), further argue that historically disadvantaged groups remain marginalised in higher education. Therefore, when policies are enacted, we need to be cognisant of the existing inequalities, especially considering our country’s history of discrimination; policies need to redress and not further encourage inequalities (RSA DHET, 2001: section 1(1.4)).

It is important to distinguish how rural university students experienced the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy 2021*. Very little research has been conducted in trying to understand students’ experiences when it comes to mandatory vaccination policies. For instance, if you look at databases like EBSCOhost web or even Google Scholar, there is a dearth of literature that discusses anything that has to do with COVID-19 and mandatory vaccination policies for university students. So far, there is research on the analysis of the impact of covid-19 pandemic on rural university students in South Africa and Uganda (Marongwe and Kabusingye, 2022), the challenges that remote learning brought to students in rural universities (Marongwe and Garidzirai, 2021) and how institutions of education

responded to the pandemic (Babbar and Gupta, 2021; Kele and Mzileni 2021; Mbhiza, 2021). Although the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* of the University of the Free State has been lifted this will remain a policy of the university as the UFS council approved it on 26 November 2021 (Loader, 2022). Therefore, it is still important that we understand how students experienced the implementation of this policy.

1.2 Research interest

Literature does indicate that rural university students face different challenges compared to other students (Marongwe and Garidzirai, 2021). Therefore, I needed to understand how rural university students experienced the implementation of the CRRVP. This is because the likelihood of future pandemics is very high (Piret and Boivin, 2021; WHO, 2020) and this study could provide us with the necessary information about how to prepare for future pandemics. In brief, I was interested in this study because, if we could understand how students experienced the implementation of the CRRVP we could better equip ourselves for the next pandemic.

1.3 Theoretical framework

A theoretical framework consists of theories that experts have discussed in a certain field of study, and it provides the basis for how a researcher analyses and interprets their data (Kivunja, 2018:46). The realist social theory was first coined by Margaret Archer (1995) in which refers to the morphogenic approach. As stated by Archer (2003: 31) society is not a simple system that assumes a certain structure capable of carrying out “goal-directed, feedback regulated, or error connection”. However, all of these are different types of systems and society is another. Society is open, meaning that it involves people, and the involvement of people indicates that society can be reshaped multiple times as society constantly changes. Therefore, morphogenesis indicates the shape ‘morpho’ and ‘genesis’ is the shaping of societal relations.

This theory was applicable in this study as I aimed to understand, how the creation of a policy has affected, a certain group of students. In addition, Archer makes reference to structure and agency and the distinction between the two (Carter and Sealey, 2000;

Mirvahedi, 2021). When we refer to structure, we look at rules and resources in society (Archer, 2003: 23). Again, it involves such things as political systems, religious systems, and so on (Carter and Sealey, 2000: 5). In this sense, our structure is institutions of higher learning or policymakers within the institution. Agency looks at how human beings are social actors, that is their ability to act in the world (Carter and Sealey, 2000: 5). As indicated by Giddens (in Archer, 2003: 28) “agency is the ability to do otherwise”. Therefore, this means that individuals can evaluate the structures in the society or institutions that they occupy and instigate change if needed (Mirvahedi, 2021). Therefore, I intended to understand students’ experiences with the implementation of the CRRVP (2021) which then allowed participants to evaluate how the policy affected them as rural university students.

1.4 Research questions

The **main research question** for the study was:

What are students’ experiences with the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* on a rural university campus?

To answer my research question, the following subsidiary questions were identified:

- How is a safe learning environment for university students conceptualised internationally and contextualised in South Africa?
- What is the South African policy framework for a safe learning environment for university students and how are the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* positioned within this framework?
- What are the challenges faced by students with the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* in a rural university campus?
- What comments and suggestions can be made regarding the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* for rural university students?

1.5 Research Aims

Aim: This study aimed to explore students' experiences of the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* on a rural University campus.

Objectives:

- To gain an understanding of how a safe learning environment for university students is conceptualised on an international level and contextualised in South Africa;
- To go through the South African policy framework for a safe learning environment for university students and to position the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* within this framework;
- To understand challenges faced by students as a result of the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* on a rural university campus
- To make comments on and suggestions regarding students' experiences of the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* at a rural university.

Table 1.1: Summary of the relationship between objectives and chapters.

Objective	Chapter	Data collection tool
To gain an understanding of how a safe learning environment for university students is conceptualised on an international level and contextualised in South Africa	Chapter 2	Literature review
To go through the South African policy framework for a safe learning environment for university students and to position the <i>COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy</i> within this framework;	Chapters 2 and 4	Literature Review and Critical Policy Analysis
To understand the challenges faced by students as a result of the implementation of the <i>COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy</i> in a rural university campus	Chapter 5	Thematic Analysis

To make comments on and suggestions regarding students' experiences of the implementation of the <i>COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy</i> at a rural university.	Chapter 6	
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1.6 Research Methodology

It is important to start by understanding what research methodology is and what it entails. To start, Maree (2019) views methodology as a bridge that combines a researcher's "philosophical standpoint" with their research methods. This is because research methodology serves as a guide as they embark on their research journey. This entails such things as, how the researcher will collect data, analyse it and make sense of the phenomena in question. Additionally, Khaldi (2017) explains that the kind of research methodology that a researcher selects is influenced by their "research philosophy" to which the researcher has to adhere. Furthermore, this choice in philosophy will eventually determine their research objectives and their choice of instruments. This is further validated by Kamal (2019) who indicates that methodology primarily asks questions about, how knowledge can be acquired. Kamal (2019) further indicates that methodology is the method that one employs to conduct research and these methods need to be in line with their ontological and epistemological stances. In summary, methodology entails all of the methods that a researcher employs to investigate a particular phenomenon.

5.7.6 Research Paradigm

As indicated by Kamal (2019) the word paradigm comes from Greek, and means "pattern". Maree, (2019) explains that paradigms act as a lens that researchers use to view and interpret the world. This is because a paradigm presents "a set of assumptions or beliefs about the fundamental aspects of reality which gives rise to a particular world view"; it also covers assumptions from faith, the way reality is perceived, and the connection between what we know and want to know (Maree, 2019; Asghar, 2013). Furthermore, a researcher's ontological, epistemological, and methodological standpoints shape their choice of paradigm (Asghar, 2013; Guba and Lincoln, 1994; Kamal, 2019). Additionally, Kamal (2019) simplifies this by indicating that a paradigm

has to do with how a researcher sees the world which frames their chosen research topic and evidently how they end up conceptualising their topic. Thus, a paradigm is a world view that a researcher employs in their investigation and it is influenced by their, ontological, epistemological and methodological standings.

This study has used the critical paradigm. This paradigm was first coined by Horkheimer in 1937 originating from the critical theory (Muller-Doorhm, 2017: 253). For instance, Horkheimer (in Asghar, 2013), states that this theory aims to free individuals from conditions that limit them, either consciously or unconsciously. This paradigm challenges power relations in society and strives for a balanced and democratic society (Asghar, 2013). In addition, Cohen *et al.* (in Maree, 2019:70), claim that critical paradigm is acceptable only if it meets the following three criteria. Firstly, it must indicate what the problem is with the current reality and the individuals who can bring change. Further, it should provide real and attainable goals to have social transformation. Therefore, this paradigm was suitable because it allowed me to look at this policy and deduce if any changes were needed based on the students' experiences. From those experiences, I was able to identify relevant parties like policymakers, institutional forums, and members of the Senate and how they could make the needed changes when implementing such policies in order to achieve social change.

1.6.2 Research Approach

According to Taherdoost, (2022), there are three different ways a researcher can explain their study as well as their findings from that study, and this can be done through numbers, "descriptive style" or by mixing both. This way of explaining one's study and findings is referred to as a research approach. We have three research approaches, the qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-method approach (Taherdoost, 2022; Maree, 2019; Khaldi, 2017). Khaldi further classifies these approaches into two, inductive (qualitative) and deductive (quantitative) approaches. However, this research has used the qualitative research approach. Firstly, this approach looks at people in their social situations where interaction occurs (Maree, 2019: 59; Flick, 2018a: 2). Secondly, the qualitative approach aims to answer questions about people's experiences, and perspectives from their standpoint (Hammarberg, Kirkman and de Lacey, 2016: 499).

Therefore, this approach was well suited for this study because to fully understand the challenges that students faced with the implementation of the *CRVVP* (2012), I needed to find participants in their natural setting, which is the campus where they could easily recall their experiences.

1.6.3 Research Design

Kekeya, (2021), indicates that research design is primarily “concerned with procedures employed in a research paradigm”. Maree (2019) also explains that a research design is a plan that a researcher follows based on their philosophical stance, which influences their sample, data gathering methods, and data analysis. Yazan (2015), also supports this notion by explaining research design as a sequence that connects the study’s research questions up until its conclusion. Kekeya (2021) also elaborates that researchers who employ the qualitative approach are likely to use the following research designs, “ethnographic, grounded theory, mixed method and case study”. Furthermore, when looking closely at the qualitative case design, Kekeya (2021) explains that this design focuses on techniques used to collect data, its analysis, and ethical measures that ensure the truthfulness of a researcher’s work.

This study has used the case study design. Miles and Huberman (in Maree, 2019: 89) state that, “a case is a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context”. This means that a case can be several things. For example, a case can be an individual, a group, a family, a class, or an institution (Kekeya, 2021) and it can also be an event or any social phenomenon (Maree 2019:89). Merriam (in Yazan, 2015: 139), also mentions that a case can be a number of things, like people, groups or policies. As such, this design was suitable as I was investigating the implementation of the *CRRVP* (2021), which was the phenomenon in question and the policy itself was also a case worth investigating.

1.7 Data Collection

Qualitative data collection is the production of written or visual material for analysing and understanding phenomena (Flick, 2018b: 11). For example, it does not only entail collecting data from participants in interviews or focus groups but, different tools can be

used (Billups, 2021: 7). Furthermore, data can be collected by taking account of individual or group experiences. This can be their lived history, their everyday professional lives, or their everyday experiences. These experiences can be observed by the researcher or they can be recorded as “practices of interacting and communicating” (Flick, 2018b: 3). Qualitative data also collects data from, documents, text, films, sounds, to name a few (Flick, 2018b).

1.7.1 Data collection methods

This study has used two qualitative data collection methods: focus groups and documents or textual data. To start, focus group discussions allow for group interaction, this interaction widens the responses from the participants. It also allows participants to recall certain information that they might have forgotten as they interact in the group (Maree, 2019:110). Furthermore, focus groups give space for the emergence of different opinions based on the given topic (Billups, 2021: 9). Because I was looking at students’ experiences, this method was suitable as they were able to give their different opinions about the policy implementation.

I used documents as another source for collecting qualitative data. Documents can be divided into two areas, “the actual textual and extra-textual content of documents” (Rapley and Rees, 2018: 2); of these two, it is the latter in which I was most interested. Extra-textual contents of documents allowed me to look at how documents are “active agents” in organisations and people’s everyday lives. (Rapley and Rees, 2018: 2). This means that I looked at how the policy affected the everyday lives of students.

1.7.2 Selection of research participants

This study has used purposive sampling to collect qualitative data. According to Maree (2019: 93) in purposive sampling, people are chosen with a certain purpose in mind representing a phenomenon or a question that needs investigating. In addition, Schreier (2018: 5) indicates that purposive sampling selects situations where vast amounts of information will be obtained. Furthermore, I used stratified purposive sampling. In this type of purposive sampling, “the aim is to select groups that display variation on a

particular phenomenon but each of which is fairly homogeneous so that subgroups can be compared” (Maree, 2019: 94).

1.7.3 Sample size

My sample size consisted of ten students. The first group of three students were students who in 2022 were doing their first year of studies. The second group of three students were students who were registered during the years 2020 and 2021. These were students who had to continue with their studies online, during the COVID-19 lockdown. The final four students were those who were registered in 2019 or before then. This final group consisted of students in their undergraduate studies or postgraduate studies, these were also students who experienced university before the pandemic and during the pandemic.

1.8 Data analysis, interpretation, reporting, and quality assurance

5.7.6 Data Analysis Approach

This study has used the deductive approach to thematic data analysis. Morgan and Hoffman (2018: 9) indicate that, with thematic analysis, “the researcher reads and codes the data to understand what the participants have to say about the research topic”. However, with the deductive approach to thematic analysis, the researcher creates codes based on preconceived ideas or existing literature on the topic. For instance, according to Broun and Clarke (in Morgan and Hoffman, 2018: 9), the researcher needs to fully absorb themselves in the data and repeatedly read the transcripts. The data then needs to be coded. From there, pilot themes were created and then revised until the final product. Lastly, data was organised according to the themes. Therefore, as the researcher I carefully read my transcripts and from then I created themes based on their similarities.

1.8.2 Data Interpretation.

This study has used the crystallisation of qualitative data. This tool entailed looking at the world not only in two dimensions but, just like a crystal a phenomenon can be interpreted in various ways. When interpreting data, the researcher looks for similar patterns that emerge from their findings. These patterns will explain why these similarities occur and what they entail (Maree, 2019).

1.8.3 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is concerned with ensuring the quality, authenticity, and truthfulness of your research findings (Kyngas, Kaariainen, and Elo, 2020). To make sure that my findings are of quality, they had to satisfy the following four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Marre, 2019; Kyngas *et al.* 2020). Credibility entails the use of good research methods, design, and theories (Maree, 2019). For that reason, this study has adhered to the same methods, designs, and theories throughout the study. Dependability refers to the stability of data under different conditions. It also looks at the consistency of data from the beginning of the research, to collecting data and its analysis (Kyngas *et al.* 2020). Furthermore, to ensure dependability, my study was peer examined, and this entailed allowing other researchers to analyse the collected data and assess how the results compared to the original findings, (Kyngas *et al.* 2020).

Confirmability looks at how the study findings resemble the collected data, meaning that the researcher should not solely focus on a response from one participant, (Kyngas *et al.* 2020). Therefore, I made sure that my findings directly resembled the data collected and I did so by remaining neutral throughout my research. Transferability entails the extent to which the findings are applicable in other fields or contexts (Kyngas *et al.* 2020). To ensure transferability, I as the researcher provided the readers with an account of the design used as well as the kind of sampling. Therefore, I was transparent about the methodology used and data collection methods.

1.9 Value of the proposed research

This study is valuable for the Department of Higher Education, policymakers, university management, and students. This study is also important to the department as it will outline whether the CRRVP actually benefited students. Furthermore, by understanding students' experiences, different higher education institutions could make changes for future pandemics. Lastly, this study was beneficial to students who are at rural universities. By understanding their experiences with the policy, we could deduce what changes have to be made; either with the implementation of the policy or the actual policy contents.

1.10 Ethical considerations

1.10.1 Permission to gather data.

“Qualitative data collection brings complex ethical issues to the surface because of the personal nature of this activity” (Mertens, 2018: 2). Because of this reason, I needed to make sure that I obtained permission from all the relevant parties. For example, I needed to obtain permission to conduct research from the university. This meant that ethical clearance needed to be obtained. I also needed to get permission from the participants.

5.7.6 Informed assent and confidentiality

The most important aspect of ethics is the welfare and safety of participants. Therefore, it was important to ensure the best practices throughout the research (Maree 2019: 48)”.

- The participants had to consent to take part in the research study. These were students above the age of 18 years.
- They were also informed that they could withdraw from participating at any given time.
- Their identity and responses were regarded as extremely confidential.

As the researcher I followed appropriate procedures and protocol with participants and informed them about the data that would be used, the safe-keeping of data, and destruction of unused data.

1.11 Chapter Layout

This study consists of six chapters and they are organised as follows:

Chapter 1: Orientation: this chapter provides an overview or summary of what the rest of the study will look like.

Chapter 2: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework: the second chapter provides the theoretical standpoint in detail and it also provides a detailed literature review.

Chapter 3: Methodology: this chapter also goes into detail about the methodology used, the reasons for the choice of methodology, and how it is appropriate for this study.

Chapter 4: Document Analysis: this chapter provides a detailed analysis of the CRRVP using the critical policy analysis approach.

Chapter 5: Thematic analysis: this chapter provides an in-depth analysis of the focus group discussion using the thematic approach to analyse data.

Chapter 6: Discussion of findings, recommendations, and conclusion: this final chapter provides the findings from this study coupled with recommendations, suggestions for future research, some reflections from the researcher, and conclusions

1.12 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter aimed to provide an overview of what the study looks like. It provided the supporting literature in the background, then proceeded to indicate what the research interest is in this study. This was then accompanied by the research questions and objective. The aim of this study as indicated (cf. 1.5) is **to explore students' experiences of the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy on a rural University campus***. Methodology, quality assurance, and ethical considerations were all chosen to provide the best answers to respond to the research aim.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will attempt to respond to the first research objective (cf. 1.5) which is “To gain an understanding of how a safe learning environment for university students is conceptualised on an international level and contextualised in South Africa”. This will entail reviewing literature from different scholars who present similar ideas to that of this research. But first, the chapter will start by discussing the theoretical framework and the choice in theory and how it is relevant to this study.

2.1.1 Theoretical framework

Before going into details of the theoretical framework, it is necessary to first start by understanding what a theory is. Kivunja (2018) provides a well-explained definition of a theory. They indicate that a theory is a “generalized statement of abstractions or ideas that asserts, explains or predicts relationships or connections between or among phenomena, within the limits of critical bounding assumptions that the theory explicitly makes”. In addition to this, Collins and Stockton (2018) also affirm that a theory is an idea which organises other ideas with a “high degree of explanatory power”. A theory can be understood in three levels, and that is “micro-level, meso-level, and macro-level” (Kivunja, 2018). For this study, we will attempt to understand our theory from the meso-level.

Kivunja (2018) explains that at the meso-level theories are used to explain the interactions that occur among people of different groups at an institutional level. For example, these can include theories about how an educational institution function. Incorporating theory when conducting research is very important. Firstly, a theory allows for the formation of the epistemological standpoint. Secondly, it provides logic for the chosen methodology and it acts as a framework for the research (Collins and Stockton, 2018). Therefore, a theoretical framework uses the chosen theory in a study to depict the researchers’ values and goals and it provides a lens for the research and how new

knowledge will be interpreted (Collins and Stockton, 2018). After understanding our theory, this paper will then provide a theoretical framework of what other scholars have discussed about the theory in question and how they have applied it in their different studies.

This study will use the realist social theory as coined by Margaret Archer (1995). This theory entails work from philosophers in the social sciences, such as “Archer *et al.* (2013), Bhaskar (1998), Byrne (2011), Carter (2000) Elder-Vass (2012), Layder (1997, 1998), Sayer (1992, 2000, 2012)” (Carter and Sealey, 2015). In this theory, Archer refers to the morphogenic approach. According to Colledge, Morgan, and Tench (2014), “Morphogenesis, refers to cycles where the interaction draws on prior structures of social relations in situational logics that result in significant change or transformation of both the structures of relations and the form of agency”. In addition, this theory is central to the human constitution, but this framework is also multidimensional and touches on several theories that can be seen as individualistic in nature, thus the morphogenic approach (Tsetetsi and Mile, 2021). Archer indicates that by looking at the realist social theory as a framework, one can come up with several theories aimed at introducing change (Tsetetsi and Mile, 2021). This framework looks at the relationship between the individual and society or in simple terms, micro and macro (Archer and Fuchs, 1997). Buckley (in Archer 2003) further elaborates that this approach is not only concerned with the causes and consequences of a phenomenon under study. It also looks for functions, either positive or negative that come from decisions made by individuals or groups, either directly or indirectly so.

As stated by Archer (2003: 31) society is not a simple system that assumes a certain structure capable of carrying out “goal-directed, feedback regulated, or error connection”. Society is open, meaning that it involves people, and the involvement of people indicates that society can be reshaped multiple times as society constantly changes. Because of this constant change in society, there is no “preferred state” which means “our actions are informed by the society in which we exist” (Tsetetsi and Mile, 2021). Therefore, morphogenesis indicates the shape ‘morpho’ and ‘genesis’ is the shaping of societal relations, thus the ability to instigate change. Therefore, Cater and

Sealey, (2015) explain that this social theory is concerned with the relationship amongst “social relations and social action, or between social change and social stability or between structure and agency”.

Central to this theory is the analytical dualism which forms the basis for the morphogenetic approach. This dualism is a reference to structure and agency and the distinction between the two (Carter and Sealey, 2000; Mirvahedi, 2021). When we refer to structure, we look at rules and resources in society (Archer, 2003: 23). For example, structures in society can involve such things as political systems, religious systems, educational institutions, amongst others (Carter and Sealey, 2000: 5). Hence Archer (1995) explains that “Society is that which nobody wants, in the form in which they encounter it”. Societal structures, therefore, have a way of enforcing certain consequences. That is why Carter and Sealey (2015), further indicate that structural properties of society depend largely on “material resources such as land, food, weapons or factories” of which people cannot live autonomously; this can also include institutions of learning. Unfortunately, current societal structures that constrain individuals are a result of past actions or people who have long died (Archer 1995; Carter and Sealey 2015). Hence it is within the characteristics of social structures to cause difficulties and complexities and they last over “a much greater timescale than the life of any individual”.

For example, within our societies, we have social structures that have been around for many years. These include belief and political systems like churches, governments, (Carter and Sealey, 2000), and institutions of learning. Within these institutions, there are certain norms, standards, and expected behaviours from individuals. That is why, Tsilipakos, (2015), indicates that critical realists are mainly interested in questioning the “causal powers social structures” might have on society. In addition, Carter and Sealey, (2000) further explain that structured social relations are features of the human reality which extend beyond our consciousness and well as our control. That is why Mirvahedi, (2021), indicates that it is important to investigate and understand how social structures interact with individual agencies and what actually occurs when the relationship between structure and agency is appealed. Archer, (1995) explains that structures “pre-

date” the actions that transform them. Therefore, despite structures being old in society, for any change to occur, agency is needed. For any real change to occur in structures like educational institutions, it takes a very long time. Thus, we need to understand the kind of impact that takes place when change occurs in a short period of time, especially for societies and individuals who belong to those structures.

Agency looks at how human beings are social actors, that is their ability to act in the world (Carter and Sealey, 2000: 5). As indicated by Gidden (in Archer, 2003: 28) “agency is the ability to do otherwise”. Therefore, this means that individuals can evaluate the structure of the societies or institutions that they occupy and instigate change if needed (Mirvahedi, 2021). Furthermore, Mirvahedi (2021), asserts that agency is viewed as a process of social engagement that is informed by the past to bring about change in the present. Therefore, this ability of humans to evaluate their structures and become active agents of change indicates that we have the power to evaluate structural constraints and act accordingly, which can result in a changed reality. This is also because people as social actors are able to come up with ideas and present their ideas through their language and engage with others as a means to contribute to the “socio-cultural interaction” and evidently the “cultural system” (Carter and Sealey, 2015).

Throughout the years this theory has been used and applied by several scholars in their studies. For example, Mirvahedi (2021) used this theory in their study looking at “Examining family language Policy through realist social theory”. In this study, the theory was used to examine how linguistic ideologies and practices of mothers of young children in Iran, use their language to enact a family language policy in response to the structural powers in their society. Furthermore, in another study conducted by Tsoetsi and Mile (2021), they applied this theory in their study, which aimed “to explore mentors and mentees experiences in teaching practice during the COVID-19 period”. In addition to this, Carter and Sealey (2015), also used the realist social theory in exploring multilingualism in Europe. They looked at how culture, agency, and structures within this theory can be used to create language as a cultural frame of “emergent properties”.

Their paper looks at how these ideas can be used to enact a language policy or planning of it in Europe and the possible methodological implications.

This theory has relevance to this study. For instance, Archer and Morgan (2020) indicate that in Archer's recent works, she looks at how society is potentially experiencing too much social change and the role that new technology plays in that societal change. With that in mind and my earlier discussion, this theory will prove to be very applicable to this study. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about changes to institutions of higher learning. Universities had to respond quickly in an attempt to ensure the safety of students. The majority of these institutions responded by enacting COVID-19 policies (structure) which were implemented with new regulations for students which included social distancing, wearing of face-masks, limitations to campus access, and online learning. What remains to find out is how students and institutional management (agency) to whom these policies were applied can actually use their experiences to help institutions of higher learning in creating future policies which will be needed in an emergency situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this entails looking at our institutional policies and conducting a thorough analysis of any constraints that this policy might have had. From this analysis, we can then deduce if any agency is needed.

2.2 Literature Review

2.2.1 Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic spread all around the world, issues of safety became evident. For example, universities and schools had to ensure that students and learners were safe within their institutions. But what is a safe learning environment?

Domalewska, Kobylinska, Yen, Webb, and Thiparasuparat (2021) describe a safe learning space as a climate that is accommodative and respectful of all individuals' feelings, and opinions. This space is supportive and learners do not need to fear any kind of violence or harassment. Haidari and Karakus (2019) also explain a safe space as a "metaphoric attribution to a learning environment". Similarly, Belay, Melese, and Seifu (2021) describe safety from a psychological standpoint, they indicate that "institutional safety is individual's basic need for learning and development...safety as a

basic need of school community comprises school safety rules and norms, physical safety and social-emotional safety”. This means that a safe learning space comprises of many aspects, such as emotional or psychological safety as well as physical safety, which is safety from outside factors (Domalewska *et al.* 2021; Belay *et al.* 2021).

In addition, Maffini and Dillard (2022) further explain that in their study, campus safety referred to “the myriad of physical and psychological experiences that influence students’ security, sense of belonging, mental health, and academic performance while attending their college or university”. Furthermore, Chan and Dishman (2011) divide institutional safety into two categories, namely “physical safety and strategic safety”. Physical safety entails, the proper maintenance of different structures in an institution, and strategic safety entails the rules and policies that are put in place to ensure the safety of all persons in the institution (Chan and Doshman, 2011; Belay *et al.* 2021). In this dissertation, it is the latter that will be discussed, which is policies and rules that are placed in different institutions to ensure the safety of all persons.

2.3 International conceptualisation of a safe learning environment for university students.

All around the globe, different institutions have their own conceptualisations of what a safe learning environment is. There are many benefits to having a safe learning environment, such as improved academic performance and improved mental health to name a few (Chan and Dishman, 2011; Belay *et al.* 2021; Domalewska *et al.* 2021). That is why when the COVID-19 pandemic spread, the World Health Organisation (2020b), issued guidelines that had to be followed before learners could be sent back to school. These were indicated in the *Checklist to support schools re-opening and preparation for COVID-19 resurgences or similar public health crises* (WHO, 2020b). This checklist was intended for all 194 states under WHO. They were also created in collaboration with entities like the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and, United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF).

This document recognised the importance of having learners back in their schools. This is because the longer a child stays out of school, the more chance they will usually have of discontinuation of school. These odds are even higher for female learners as they can fall victim to teenage pregnancy or child marriages (WHO, 2020b). As such before, learners could go back to school certain guidelines had to be followed, in an attempt to make sure that their learning environments were safe. These guidelines were further intended to assist in the creation of any COVID-19 policies, either in schools or universities (WHO, 2020b). The same guidelines were also applicable to institutions of higher learning. For example, during the pandemic, the WHO (2021) issued a policy *Holding gatherings during the COVID-19 pandemic: WHO policy brief*. This policy brief indicated that people should social distance for at least one meter, cover their nose and mouth when coughing, avoid crowded areas, and use face masks (WHO, 2021). Because higher education institutions or universities generally comprise gatherings of students, it meant that the normal daily activities within these institutions had to change. These changes, just as in schools were intended to keep students safe.

For example, according to UNESCO (in James 2022), during the pandemic, over 3.9 million international and foreign students were impacted. The pandemic created many issues not just for local students, but for those who are not studying in their home countries (Amoah and Mok 2022; James 2022). Many non-local or international students, experienced increased levels of stress and uncertainty during the pandemic as a result of the change in their learning environment (Amoah and Mok 2022). Hence Diener and Chan, 2011) explain that “Changes in the socio-physical environment can disrupt personal plans, leading to doubts about one’s self-worth and self-efficacy, which can be deleterious to one’s health and well-being”. Meaning that, because of the changes brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, a lot of institutions could not ensure the safety of students on their campuses. That is why in the US, customs and immigration enforcement issued out guidelines urging international students to go back to their respective countries if they were learning from online modes (Mok, Xiong, and Ke, 2022). As such providing a safe and healthy learning environment is crucial to ensuring that students succeed. This is also recognised by Maslow 1943, who identifies

safety and psychological needs as being one of the fundamental needs in his Hierarchy of Needs of Human Motivation (Chan and Dishman, 2011).

Therefore, it is important to understand how institutions of higher learning ensured student safety during the pandemic. To understand this, I looked at three countries, the United States of America, China and Nigeria. I opted for the USA because it was important to understand how a first world country (World Population Review 2024) like the USA responded to the pandemic and if there are any traits that can be adopted to South Africa. Similarly, it was also important to look at China as another developed country and because it was where the pandemic originated. Finally, both South Africa and Nigeria share similar challenges when it comes to their higher education institutions (Uleanya 2020). Therefore, it was important to establish how a country that is somewhat to similar to SA responded to the pandemic.

2.3.1 United States of America

Before the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, American universities did have pre-existing safety issues on their campuses. These issues ranged from racial hostility to sexual assault and gun safety on their campuses (Kyle, Schafer, Burruss, and Giblin 2016). According to Maffini and Dillard (2022), “racial diversity in higher education has been accompanied by greater racial tensions which can manifest through microaggressions, discrimination, threats, and violence”. They claim that campus safety for black students is a growing concern in several American universities. A large number of black students are subjected to “racial stereotypes regardless of their leadership status or academic performance” (Maffini and Dillard 2022). For example, in the United States of America, there is currently a growth in the number of Black students in institutions of higher learning (Maffini and Dillard 2022). Unfortunately, African American students still experience some “racial hostility and aggression, self-segregation, and microaggressions” and these ultimately result in them feeling unsafe on their university campuses (Maffini and Dillard 2022).

In addition, another safety issue on American university campuses is whether or not guns should be allowed (Kyle *et al.* 2016; Dahl, Bonham, and Reddington, 2016; Bennett, Kraft, and Grubb, 2011; Arrigo and Acheson, 2015). The presence of guns on

campus poses a threat and does not encourage a safe learning environment. But this view has received varying attitudes. For instance, in America, different states have their own legislature about safety in both schools and in colleges. In the United States of America, there is a *Conceal and Carry* policy, which allows citizens who are licensed to carry a gun in public as long as it is hidden from the eyes of the public (Dahl *et al.* 2016). With regards to institutions of learning, there are two policies that prevent the carrying or the position of guns in or around schools. These policies are “the *Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990* (GFSZA) and the *Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994* (GFSA) (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2014)”(Dahl *et al.* 2016). However, in America different states can have their own different laws which complicates matters. By 2009, about 23 states left it in the hands of the universities to enact their own gun policies, and the other 24 states totally banned guns in any institution of higher learning (Bennett *et al.* 2011). By 2014, at least 23 states had introduced legislation that allowed for the concealing and carrying of guns but the decision was still left to individual colleges and universities (Dahl *et al.* 2016). Finally, in 2017, 18 states prohibited the carrying of guns, including concealed and carry firearms on college campuses (Kyle *et al.* 2017).

Furthermore, another way that the USA is keeping its campuses safe is through the *Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act* (1990). This policy obligates all institutions of higher learning to disclose yearly all crimes that occur within their campuses and to create programs that ensure the safety of students on their campuses (USA Federal Register DoE 2014; Shariati and Guerette, 2020; Arrigo and Acheson, 2015). To ensure that their campuses promote a safe learning environment, most of the colleges and universities have campus police present at their institutions (Kyle *et al.* 2017). Others have information on their websites that give tips on how to stay safe (Linder and Lacy 2020). It is evident that the creation of different legislatures and policies is key to ensuring the safety of students. As stated by the Association of College Union International (2011), “We must continue to work collaboratively in order to promulgate policy and practice that supports rather than impedes the work of those serving on our campuses so that the threats to learning environments are minimized”.

When the COVID-19 pandemic occurred both the institutions of higher learning and the government offered insight into what needs to happen to ensure the safety of students. The majority of universities in America relied largely on the information which came from the Centre for Disease Control (O'Shea, Mou and Aikins, 2022). During the spring term of 2020, the majority of institutions of higher learning were quick to empty out their campuses because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This meant that students could not have access to their university campuses for some time (Illanes, Law, Mendy, Sanghvi, and Sarakatsannis, 2020; O'Shea *et al.* 2022; Raffo, Gerbing, Raffor and Berry, 2021). In the meantime, the solution was to move classes online or use a hybrid mode of teaching classes (Steimle, Sun, Johnson, Besedes, Mokhtarian and Nazzal, 2022). Of course, these measures were undertaken to ensure the safety of students. However, online classes could not be a lasting solution. For example, according to Lederer *et al.* (in Raffor *et al.* 2021) researchers at the Tulane University found that when students did not have access to their university campuses, they faced challenges such as housing and food insecurity, difficulties with their finances and a lack of a sense of belonging. Moreover, some students did not have access to resources like computers and the internet (Raffor *et al.* 2021)

To ensure the safety of students, a lot of institutions enacted policies or guidelines that both students and staff had to follow. This included guidelines like the wearing of masks, social distancing, sanitizing of hands, reducing the number of students in a class, and other similar measures (Scoulas, Carrillo and Naru 2022). In addition, Junge, Li, Samaranayake and Zalesak (2022) further state that “various models were developed to help guide policy and predict outcomes. Policy decisions ultimately struck a balance between forecasts, campus safety and comfort, and university resources”. Furthermore, Illanes *et al.* (2020) argues that there should be a joint relationship among universities to “advocate certain policies or to coordinate communications or workforce initiatives”. Therefore, it was important to make sure that the policies which were put in place actually benefited both students and staff members. Kyle *et al.* (2016), explain that campus policymakers and state legislature need to consider the opinions of campus communities before imposing any policy. Therefore, in a study conducted by Steimle *et al.* (2022), at the Georgia Institute of Technology, it is indicated that students were

willing to comply with some of the health protocols which were put in place, especially those that limited the number of social gatherings.

Lastly, one of the more common ways which institutions ensured the safety of students was through constant communication. In a study conducted by O'Shea *et al.* (2022), Situational Crisis Communication Theory was used to observe how universities in three countries responded to the pandemic. In the USA, they looked at nine institutions of higher learning and those institutions relied on information from the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention. Some of the information sent to students included, communication about "intercollegiate athletics, advisories for students in study abroad programs, concern over the cancelation of commencement ceremonies, and the occasional condemnation of incipient racism and xenophobia" (O'Shea *et al.* 2022). Summing up, the creation of different policies and guidelines as well as constant communication ensured the safety of students during the pandemic in the USAW.

2.3.2 China

It is also equally important to look into Chinese higher education and their safety practices as it was the epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since early 1900 there has been an increase in enrolment in Chinese higher education institutions. The enrolment for undergraduate students increased from 3.41 million in 1998 to 13.33 million in 2004. There was also a growth in the number of adult students, from 2.82 million to 4.20 million during the same time period (Wan, 2006). Therefore, it is important to ensure that their institutions are conducive and safe for this growing number of students. In a study conducted by Gong (2019) it was observed that there is limited research into the safety culture of Chinese undergraduates. In addition, research which does exist is more with regards to safety in relation to the medical field, safety in laboratories or the safety of employees in Chinese universities or colleges. Gong (2019), further indicates that in China many undergraduate students reside and study at their campuses. Therefore, incidents of fires and electric shock are common features in Chinese universities (Gong, 2019).

Therefore, it is imperative to see into how Chinese institutions of higher learning responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and how they ensured the safety of their students. This is because students rely on the emergency planning made by policymakers and institutional personnel when a disaster occurs (Stough, Kang, and Lee, 2018). However, before looking at institutions of learning it is also equally important to try and understand how the Chinese government responded to the outbreak. On the 31st of December 2019 the Wuhan Municipal Health Commission reported several cases of unknown pneumonia cases in the Wuhan area. It was still unknown if there was human-to-human transmission. On the 11th of January 2020 the same health committee released a report outlining the cause of the pneumonia cases and they were classified as a new coronavirus. Then, on the 20th of February, it was confirmed that there was human-to-human transmission (Deng and Peng, 2020). Following this the Chinese government enacted community confinement measures of “40 to 60 million residents of Wuhan and 15 other surrounding cities within Hubei Province” (Wu and Mcgoogan, 2020).

According to Li, Chandra, and Kapucu (2020), one of the many ways that the Chinese government responded to the pandemic is through the use of social media, where a specialized channel was created for people to post information about the pandemic. In addition to this, “makeshift hospitals were created and they also introduced what is called a “grid-style social management”. This entailed dividing districts into smaller zones and each with a grid manager who reported to the local government (Li *et al.* 2020). Similarly, by March the government had restricted the sale of alcohol, restaurants were given guidelines about the number of people allowed and some leisure establishments were requested to stay out of operation. This also led to the prohibition of social gatherings and in-person retail stores were ordered to close (Hartley and Jarvis, 2020).

On the 25th of January primary and special schools closed and there was also a postponement of secondary school examinations (Hartley and Jarvis, 2020). The government then implemented an emergency policy initiative, called “*Suspending Classes without Stopping Learning*” (Yang 2020). For universities in China this meant

that classes moved online (Yang, 2020; Wang, Cheng, Yue, Mac Aleer, 2020; Kan and Zhou, 2020; Zhu and Liu, 2020). Luckily the concept of online teaching and learning in the Chinese context was not a new one. For example, by 2015 68 universities in China already had online learning incorporated into their respective institutions (McConnell, 2017). In an attempt to bridge the digital divide “universities negotiated deals with network providers to subsidize the data plans of their lecturers and students”. This meant that many students were able to learn and be safe in the comfort of their own spaces. Chinese universities even went further by creating specific policies or guidelines in their respective institutions. For example, the Chengdu Sports University enacted an “*Emergency Plan for Epidemic Prevention and Control of New Coronavirus Infectious Pneumonia of Chengdu Sport University*” (Kan and Zhou, 2020).

Though the concept of online learning was not new in the Chinese context, there were still some challenges faced during the pandemic. Because of the suddenness and the emergency nature of online learning during the pandemic, students did experience some challenges (Yeung and Yau, 2021). Before the pandemic online learning in the Chinese context was purely on voluntary basis. For instance, Yeung and Yau (2021), indicate that China has more than 500 “Massive Open Online Courses” that are provided to almost 300 million people. These range from students who use online courses with minimal interaction with their lecturer, to those who interact fully and collaboratively online with their peers and lecturers. As such when the Ministry of Education in China implemented its policy “*Suspending Classes without Stopping Learning*” all learning had to be conducted online (Zhang and Yu, 2023; Lin, 2022). Challenges were present, for instance, Lin (2022), discusses the experience of first-time online students during the COVID-19 pandemic. These students experienced challenges that impacted their confidence and their success in learning online. This is because learning fully online was not the normal mainstream way in China (Lin, 2022). As such students, indicated that they experienced increased levels of anxiety which affected their academic performance. In a study conducted by Yeung and Yin (2022), students indicated the following challenges with regards to online learning; problems with connection, difficulty concentrating, and poor time management. In another study by Han, Zhou, Shi and Yang (2020), students indicated challenges with their learning

environment as they were easily be distracted, not having enough interaction with teachers, network congestion and connectivity problems. Therefore, this indicates that though the government and institutions acted swiftly in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in China. Those responses do not always indicate that the experiences of students were positive.

2.3.3 Nigeria

Just like many African countries, Nigeria was not immune to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. On the 27 of February 2020, the first case of COVID-19 was reported in Nigeria. This was when an Italian citizen tested positive for the virus while in Lagos (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020; Ilesanmi and Afolabi, 2020; Oginni, Amiola, Adelola and Uchendu, 2020). In about three weeks following this case, the Nigerian government implemented travel bans from 13 high-risk countries (Oginni. *et al.* 2020; Ilesanmi and Afolabi, 2020). In addition, the government implemented lockdowns on the states of Lagos, Abuja, and Ogun, later the Kano state also joined the other states (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020). This ultimately led to the closure of schools (Ilesanmi and Afolabi, 2020; Oginni. *et al.* 2020) and religious institutions and the prohibition of social and sports gatherings (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020). The government also created the Presidential Task Team which focused solely on matters related to COVID-19 (Ilesanmi and Afolabi, 2020). In addition to this, the government issued food parcels to the poor and disabled, and those whose daily wages were affected by the lockdown. The government also continued to provide school learners with food through their “Home Grown School Feeding Programme” (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020).

Despite the growing number of COVID-19 cases and the measures taken by the government, a large number of poor Nigerians did not believe that the virus was real. There were many conspiracy theories about the existence of the virus (Ilesanmi and Afolabi, 2020). People simply believed that the virus was just an attempt by the government to spend public funds, while others believed that it was a disease only for the wealthy (Awofeso and Irabor, 2020). Other people believed that the virus could not survive in a tropical country like Nigeria and that their God would protect them (Oginni.

et al., 2020). But the biggest hurdle was in the implementation of the lockdown policies. Oleribe, Ezechi, Osita-Oleribe, Olawepo, Musa, Omoluabi, Fertleman, Salako, and Taylor-Robinson (2020) indicate that the lockdown policies had some economic implications, especially for a developing country like Nigeria. In addition, these authors emphasise that “most of these global policies were adopted and implemented without a review of their effectiveness and implications to the sociocultural climate of the nation”. They further argue that individuals living in poverty are not willing to make “economic sacrifices” and this is not because they do not value their lives and the risk of contracting the virus but, because of the lack of resources to isolate themselves and “sacrifice economic opportunities” (Oleribe. *Et al.* 2020). Similarly, there was also a lack of enforcement of these regulations at community level and ultimately many did not abide by them (Ilesanmi and Afolabi, 2020; Awofeso and Irabor, 2020). This why after a short five weeks the lockdown restrictions were eased (Oginni. *et al.* 2020).

With regard to the education sector in Nigeria, before the COVID-19 pandemic, there were pre-existing student safety challenges. For example, in a study conducted by Aborisade (2020) intimate partner violence (IPV) among university students who cohabitate was investigated. The findings show that there are high numbers of acts of physical violence being experienced by female students who cohabitate. One of the primary reasons that female students are opting to cohabitate with their partners is because of the lack of student residences. Aborisade (2020) explains that both the federal and state government have failed to provide student accommodations, especially considering the growing number of students in institutions of higher learning. Additionally, another safety challenge is that of homophobia or heterosexism within institutions. Okanlawon (2020) indicates that because heterosexism is an issue in the broader Nigerian society, this means that acts of homophobia are not uncommon within higher education institutions. Okanlawon (2020) further indicates that such homophobic acts have “negative educational, emotional, and mental health consequences on the lives and well-being of LGB students”. Lastly, Wisdom and Tor (2020) indicate that “As a developing nation, Nigeria is not excused from the foregoing assertion as crimes have been and continue to be a danger to general peace and comfort on university campuses”. This means that crime is also another safety concern within institutions of

higher learning in Nigeria. These include acts like “stealing, occultism, Internet fraud, rape, drug abuse, forgery, arson, assault, murder, forgery, fighting, drug abuse, burglary, car hijacking, kidnapping” (Wisdom and Tor, 2020). These are just a few examples which compromise the safety of students in Nigerian higher education institutions.

Within the Nigerian higher education sector, institutions of higher learning closed on the 28th of March 2020 as directed by the “National University Commission (NUC), the leading university regulatory body in Nigeria” (Fasae, Adekoya and Adegbilero-Iwari, 2020). Though the Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria, which is responsible for the entire education in the country, directions were given for schools to close and that took effect from the 23rd of March 2020 (Majekodunmi and Zekeri, 2020). As an attempt to keep students in higher education safe, they decided to opt for online learning as a tool to ensure that the academic year still continued. According to Olisah (in Majekodunmi and Zekeri, 2020), the “Nigerian education minister and 237 Vice-Chancellors, who comprised of Rectors of Polytechnics, Provost of Colleges of Education” all meet and discussed the continuation of academia through online learning as it seemed necessary because of the pandemic. Though this was a great attempt to keep students safe and not become infected with the virus. This proved to be a poor decision from the ministry of education (Yunusa, TemitayoSanusi, Dada, Oyelere, Agbo, Obaido and Aruleba, 2021).

For years there has been mistrust when it came to the quality of education offered in Nigerian higher education institutions. This is especially worse for colleges that offer online courses only (Adeyanju, Ajilore, Ogunlalu, Onatunji, and, Mogaji, 2022). In Nigeria there are 174 universities, 43 which are public and supported by the Federal government, 53 which are supported by the State government and 79 which are privately owned (Adeyanju, *et al.* 2022). Therefore, when the move to online learning and teaching came, there were obviously concerns over the quality of education offered. According to, Akinwumi and Itobore, (2020), “The government’s plan to introduce and sustain online learning shows the typical Nigerian situation where the policies of the government are bogus and often divorced from societal realities”. This is because a large number of Nigerians did not have the necessary resources to successfully learn

through the online mode (Egielewa, Idogho, Iyalomhe and, Cirella, 2022; Adeyanju. *et al.* 2022). For example, according to the World Bank (in Adeyanju, *et al.* 2022), in 2015 only 60 percent of the Nigerian society had access to electricity. In addition, 57 percent of the population experienced daily power cuts, and only 42 percent of the population had access to the Internet as of 2020 (Adeyanju, *et al.* 2022). As a result, this can be viewed as a “policy paralysis” in countries that are developing, as they need to address the planning of changing circumstances in their education systems (Ogunji, Onwe, Ngwa, David, Olaolu, Cresantus, 2022).

Table 2.1: Comparison of the COVID-19 challenges and responses in the United States of America, China and Nigeria.

	America	China	Nigeria
Student Safety challenges	<p>Racial hostility, sexual assault and gun safety campuses</p> <p>“the <i>Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990</i> (GFSZA) and the <i>Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994</i> (GFSA) (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence, 2014)”</p> <p><i>Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act in 1990</i></p>	<p>Limited research on student safety</p> <p>Incidents of fires and electric shock.</p>	<p>Intimate partner violence</p> <p>Crime</p> <p>Lack of student accommodation</p> <p>Homophobia</p>

Student COVID-19 challenges	Housing and food insecurity, financial difficulties, Inadequate resources for online learning,	Internet connection issues, Increased levels of anxiety Poor time management,	Inadequate resources for online learning, Power cuts, Lack of internet access,
Government COVID-19 response	Customs and immigration enforcement issued out guidelines, international students to return to their respective countries.	Confinement in Hubei Province, travel bans, “grid-style social management“, primary and special schools closure and postponement of examinations. Implemented an emergency policy “ <i>Suspending Classes without Stopping Learning</i> ”	Presidential Task team, Lockdowns on the states of Lagos, Abuja, and Ogun, Kano. Federal Ministry of Education in Nigeria, directions for school closure, on the 23 rd of March 2020. Restriction on alcohol and social gatherings.
Institutional COVID-19 response	Online learning. Spring term of 2020 students were removed from campuses. Constant communication with students. COVID-19 policies and guidelines.	Online learning, Subsidized data plans, enacted COVID-19 policies and guidelines.	Meeting amongst the Nigerian education minister and 237 Vice-Chancellors. Online learning.

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2.4 How a safe learning environment for university students is conceptualised and contextualised in South Africa

2.4.1 Institutional conceptualisation of a safe leaning environment in South Africa

In South Africa as well, the safety of students and learners in schools and in institutions of higher learning is a big priority. Literature indicates that effective teaching and learning can only occur if both the teachers and learners feel safe in the schooling environment (Masitsa, 2011). However, South African schools are not immune to the occasional safety issues and concerns that occur within the schooling environment. For example, in 2022 a hand full of incidents made it to the media about incidents of teachers or learners being attacked. Headlines like “Escalating Gang violence at Northern Cape school leads to closure of school” (SABC news, 2022a) or “Gang violence disrupts schools in Maluleke village” (SABC news, 2022b). These are just a few of the occasional incidents that occur in schools.

Acts of violence and criminal activities are not just limited to schools. Within institutions of higher learning, there are multiple incidents that threaten the safety of students. In a study conducted by Gobal and van Niekerk (2018), “safety in student accommodation in South Africa remains a serious challenge”. Another growing issue is alcohol consumption among students in higher education (Pengpid, Peltzer, and Van der Heever 2013). University students are known to consume more alcohol than the general population (Inac, Lariviere, Hoque, and Van Hal, 2021; Nkoana, Sodi and Darikwa, 2016). In a study conducted by Kheswa and Hoho (2017), mention is made that female students who are heavy drinkers can ultimately fall victim to rape, violence, and mental health issues which evidently will affect their academic performance. Furthermore, another growing safety issue within institutions of higher learning is cyberbullying,

mainly because social media plays such a major role big part in the current generation's lives (Cilliers, 2021).

In the last couple of years, there has also been a growing number of student protests in many universities in South Africa. The years 2015 and 2016 saw an uprising of student protests at South African universities. According to Mpofu (2017) the FeesmustFall movement was initiated in 2015 as the Rhodesmust Fall movement. Students at the University of Cape Town were demanding the removal of a statue on their campus that they deemed to still glorify the racial discrimination of our past. After this protest, a number of protests started occurring at universities in South Africa. Then the feesmustfall movement started which originated from the Rhodesmust Fall movement and students were protesting against the financial issues in institutions of learning (Lekalake, 2016; Mpofu, 2017; Badat, 2016). Koen, Cele and Libhaber (2006) indicate that many black students cannot re-register for their studies mostly because of financial exclusion in South Africa which is a valid reason to protest. However. Because protests started becoming violent, this became the greater issue (Kujeke, 2017). A lot of these protests disrupted normal teaching and learning and they further threatened the safety of students and staff.

These are just some of the safety issues that compromise students successful learning, and it is imperative that such issues are dealt with. As in the case of the United States of America, there are different policies that are put in place to protect students. These policies range from intuitional policies to policies or acts imposed by the Department of Higher Education. For example, the University of Cape town has its own *Health and Safety Policy* (2020), which outlines that "The University of Cape Town is committed to a policy of enabling all work activities to be carried out safely, by ensuring that all possible measures are taken into account to remove (or at least reduce) risks to the health, safety and welfare of students, employees, contractors, authorised visitors, and anyone else who may be affected by our operations". Similarly, Rhodes University has a *Sexual Offence Policy for Students* (2019), which also outlines in the policy statement that all members of the university are expected to maintain an environment that is free of

sexual misconduct. This policy is in line with the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996), sections 9, 10, 12(1), 12(2), and, 35(3).

Other universities also have multiple policies that they have in their respective institutions that ensure a safe learning environment. At the University of Witwatersrand, they have the *Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault and Rape Policy and Procedures* (2013) which aims to provide a safe university environment that is free of any kind of sexual harassment or violence. Furthermore, institutions also look into factors like the emotional and mental well-being of students. For example, multiple universities in South Africa have their own policies that focus on the mental well-being of students. At the University of the Free State there is the *Policy of the University of the Free State on Student Mental Health* (2019), and at the University of Cape Town there is *University of Cape Town Student Mental Health Policy* (2018). Both these policies indicate that these institutions strive to provide a supportive environment for students who might have emotional or mental health issues, thus providing a safe and inclusive learning environment.

Therefore, when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred it became imperative for universities in South Africa to make sure that students were safe in their institutions. The first confirmed case of the virus was on the 5th of March 2020 (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020). Immediately, the South African government enacted a national lockdown as per the *Disaster Management Act, 2002, Declaration of a national state of disaster* (RSA, 2020). Soon after this, institutions of higher learning had to ensure that students were safe in their respective universities and colleges. One popular measure which was taken was social distancing. This meant that to avoid the spread of the virus in our universities, many of them moved to online instruction (Mhlanga and Moloi, 2020; Mncube, Mutungoza, and Olawale, 2021; Morongwe and Garidzirai, 2021). This was also an attempt to ensure that students were safe and did not become infected with the virus. Just like the United States of America, institutions remained in constant communication with students, either through the official learning management system or social media (CHE, 2020).

Universities also went further by implementing specific policies that focused solely on the COVID-19 virus. This was because it became evident that online teaching and learning were not feasible for many institutions in South Africa. According to Stols (2021), during the pandemic, 5.6% of students and 2.8% of lecturers indicated that they found online learning challenging because of the lack of computer literacy. In addition, some students indicated that they found online teaching challenging as it came with an increased workload. Therefore, it became evident that online learning and teaching could not be a lasting solution. For universities to make sure that students were safe when they returned to their campuses, a number of them enacted and implemented policies that focused on COVID-19. Universities like the University of the Free State, University of the Western Cape, Cape Town University, University of Johannesburg, University of the Witwatersrand, and Stellenbosch University are some of the institutions that enacted and implemented these policies.

According to the *University of Witwatersrand Mandatory Vaccination Policy (2022)*, because the university predominantly conducted contact lessons it was imperative that both students and staff are vaccinated. In addition, this would be beneficial for students whose socio-economic status favour them learning on campus and students as well “whose learning programs require in-person engagement with the University for pedagogic and professional reasons”. In the *University of Johannesburg Mandatory Vaccination Policy (2021)*, it is stated that though the university does offer some distance learning, it is a “residential university with contact teaching and research”. Therefore, if both students and staff members are vaccinated this would ensure the safety of everyone in their facilities. The same is true for the University of the Free State, in their *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy (2021)*, it indicates that the University of the Free State is not a distance or remote learning and that most of its courses are taught in person, especially for undergraduate courses. As such, these policies were created in the best interest of students and in ensuring that they learn in a safe environment. Therefore, it is important to also try and establish how students experienced the implementation of these policies. Currently, there is little to no literature that discusses the experience of students with regard to the implementation of COVID-19 institutional policies.

2.4.2 South African Policy framework

In South Africa the safety of students and learners is imperative. At the very top of the laws that govern the country we have *the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996*, and within this Act, there are numerous ways in which both teachers and learners are protected in their respective institutions, irrespective of their race or sex. However, before 1990 this was not the case. In 1948, the National Party government came into power in South Africa and for several years South Africa was under the apartheid regime. This meant that laws like the *Bantu Education Act of 1953* were implemented. These laws were racially exclusive and at the very least did not cater to the safety of students of colour (Jansen, 2001). Finally, in 1990 FW de Klerk announced the unbanning of liberation movements and the release of political prisoners (Jansen, 2001). This resulted in great policy reforms in South Africa and specifically in the Department of Education. When restrictions were lifted after 1990, there was much debate and suggestions from the public about how decisions should be made and who should be involved in the policy formation process (Moja and Hayward, 2001). Policies that were to be enacted had to ensure that they address issues of access equality and redress any past discriminatory practices (Moja and Hayward, 2001).

The Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation (1996) was then enacted to realise all these issues. This policy document amongst many other factors identified that the previous system mainly differentiated access to higher Education in terms of race, gender and geographic location (Young and Campbell, 2014). In addition, the system further discriminated against historically black and white institutions (DoE, 1996. Chapter 2 sec 2.1.1). Soon after this, the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996* was established, which also aimed at redressing past injustices. For example, in the preamble it is written “Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice, and fundamental human rights” (RSA, Preamble. 1996). This implies that currently South Africa is a country which is ruled by the constitution of the republic and any policy that is to be enacted, regardless of the institution in which it is implemented, needs to abide by the constitution’s values of democracy, social justice and the promotion of human rights.

2.4.3 South African policy framework for safety in Institutions of higher learning

In institutions of higher learning the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996* is applicable to both students and staff members. For example, under the Bill of Rights everyone has the right to freedom and security, which means being safe in either public or private institutions (RSA, 1996, Chapter 2, section 12c). This means that all institutions need to ensure that every person entering their premises is kept safe. In addition to this, under the bill of rights everyone has the right to an environment that is safe for their health or well-being and for that environment to be protected for the good of the present and future generations (RSA 1996, Chapter 2, section 24a-b). Under section 29 of the constitution, every citizen has the right to Education, which includes basic education and adult basic education (RSA 1996, Chapter 2, section 29a-b). Therefore, despite any circumstances or challenges citizens still need to have access to education, because education is seen as a basic right

In addition to this, when consulting the *Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education* (1997). This policy also touches on the concept of redressing the country's injustices and the stance that the department takes when it comes to institutional governance. For example, it explains that it remains the responsibility of individual institutions to handle their own affairs. The department will not be responsible or "micro-manage" institutions. This is because "Diversity and flexibility are important aspects of institutional responses to varying needs and circumstances". This means, every institution is diverse and their responses to certain issues will not be the same, for this reason, the department leaves it to individual institutions to handle their affairs and, the minister of education can only be involved in extreme cases (DoE, 1997, chapter 3, (3.33)).

With regards to the safety component in individual institutions. The *Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education* (1997), indicates that institutions should have their own mechanisms that deal with issues around creating "secure and safe environments" (DoE, 1997, chapter 3, (3.42)). This is why individual universities are able to enact their own policies on mental health, sexual assaults and mandatory COVID-19 vaccination policies as indicated earlier. Before a policy can be

enacted and implemented, individual institutions must take cognisance of the type of students they have as well as their needs. In other words, institutions need to contextualise their policies towards students' needs. These standards will be applicable to the entire "campus community, including but not limited to administrators, faculty, staff, students, security personnel and contractors" (DoE, 1997, chapter 3, (3.42)).

It is also important to make reference to *The Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training Institutions (2016)*. The purpose of this policy framework is to create supportive environments that promote "social inclusion in post education and training". It aims to ensure that there is social inclusion in the policies and legislations developed in institutions of learning, which is also in line with the Bill of Rights according to the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (DHET, 2016). This policy framework, calls for a critical analysis and improvement of existing policies and legislature in relation to social inclusion and advancing transformation. In addition, it acknowledges that public institutions have different policies which govern and guide them. As such this framework, does not call for the creation of new policies but for a critical analysis of current policies and the identifying of gaps that need to be addressed. However, where necessary, new policies can be developed which include mechanisms which are guided by principles of "substantive equality that aim to remove all barriers that perpetuate and create inequalities in society" (DHET,2016). Therefore, when analysing the policies which were enacted and implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is imperative to ensure that these policies did not perpetuate or create any barriers or inequalities towards students.

This policy framework also continues to make reference to the teaching and learning practices within our institutions. For instance, it indicates that the teaching and learning as well as pedagogical designs of the curriculum that occur in our institutions should reflect contexts of social inclusion in our specific institutions and the place in South Africa and Africa (DHET, 2016). Therefore, institutions need to identify the unique needs of vulnerable students and staff and provide the required infrastructure and support for teaching and learning (DHET, 2016). Many policies that were enacted during the pandemic indicated that teaching and learning had to continue through an online mode

of delivery. This policy framework indicates that institutions had the responsibility to assist students and staff with proper infrastructure for them to successfully continue with the curriculum. This was most important for those who are vulnerable such as students in rural institutions because the pandemic increased the already existing inequalities.

Table 2.2: A comparison of South African policies that support the safety of students in institutions of higher learning.

Document	Purpose of document	Safety component
<i>Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996</i>	<p>“The Constitution is the supreme law of the Republic; laws or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid, and the obligations imposed by it must be fulfilled” (RSA, 1996: Chapter 1(2)).</p> <p>This entails that all policies and legislature that are enacted and implemented in the republic need to abide by the standards of the Constitution.</p>	<p>Under the Bill of Rights everyone has the right to freedom and security, which means being safe in either public or private institutions (RSA, 1996: Chapter 2, sec 12I).</p> <p>“Everyone has the right (a) to an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing; and (b) to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations, through reasonable legislative and other measures (RSA, Chapter 2, sec 24(a,b)).</p> <p>As such it falls to the hands of individual institutions to create environments that are not harmful and that are supported by proper legislature that addresses safety.</p>
<i>Education White Paper 3: A programme for the transformation of higher education (1997)</i>	<p>This policy framework was enacted to encourage the participation of stakeholders in the creation of transformative policies in Higher education. Central to its purpose is “to redress past inequalities, to serve a new social order, to meet pressing national needs and to respond to new realities and opportunities” (DoE, 1997).</p>	<p>This policy calls for higher education institutions to “create a secure and safe campus environment that discourages harassment or any other hostile behaviour directed towards persons or groups on any grounds whatsoever, but particularly on grounds of age, colour, creed, disability, gender, marital status, national origin, race, language, or sexual orientation” (DoE, 1997, chapter 3(3.42)).</p> <p>Therefore, this policy document calls for institutions of higher learning to ensure that their campuses are secure and safe and there is no discrimination of any kind.</p>

<p><i>The Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training Institutions (2016)</i></p>	<p>The purpose of this document is to “assist post-school education and training institutions in the implementation of social inclusion and to provide a monitoring instrument to the Department of Higher Education and Training to ensure that the social inclusion priorities of the DHET are taken into account all PSET institutions”(DHET, 2016).</p> <p>Therefore, through this policy, the department intends to create supportive spaces in our institutions of higher learning that are socially inclusive and that socially inclusive policies and legislature are created, implemented, and monitored</p>	<p>“This policy framework calls for public institutions to ensure that their institutional policies include social inclusion mechanisms and are guided by principles of substantive equality that aim to remove all barriers that perpetuate and create inequalities in society” (DHET,2016:27). As such this policy calls for institutions to enact and implement policies that are non-discriminatory and to ensure that the policies which are implemented do not in any way act as a barrier to students.</p>
<p><i>The Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation (1996)</i></p>	<p>“The Green Paper signals the policy intentions of my Department in regard to the reconstruction and development of higher education in South Africa” This policy document recognises that higher education institutions had “inequities, imbalances and distortions deriving from its apartheid history and present structure” (DoE, 1996).</p>	<p>“Higher education institutions need to address the pervasive issues of race and gender on campuses through multifaceted mechanisms and policies. The major issues to be addressed are access (changing student and staff profiles), development (capacity-building and training), curriculum transformation (race, gender, context responsiveness) and institutional culture (creating an enabling and safe work and study environment)” (DoE, 1996:35).</p>

2.4.4 Student Unions and organisations

Safety for students in institutions of higher learning is promoted via different means. Despite the constitution of the republic, there are numerous policies from the department of higher learning, higher education institutions, and, student organizations that strive to ensure the safety of all students. Student organisations like the South African Students Congress (SASCO) is one such key player in institutions of higher learning that strive for equality, access, and safety of students. In the aims and objectives of the *South African Students Congress Constitution* (2011), it outlines that they aim to prioritise the general interests and rights of students. In addition, they aim to create and promote non-sexism, democracy and non-racism. Lastly, they are committed

to freeing South African woman from any oppression or abuse. Of course SASCO, is not the only student union, there are quite a number of these unions in South Africa and they play a pivotal role for students in higher education.

Student representation is one of the key aspects of higher education governance across the world, and it is essential for a complete understanding of higher education politics and policies (Klemenčič, Luescher and Mugume, 2016). Student representatives aim to represent the interests of the student body in Africa, and they have played an important role in fighting colonial rule (Klemenčič *et al.* 2016). When the COVID-19 pandemic occurred they provided students with much needed support. For example, the South African Students Congress created their *SASCO submission to COVID-19 on teaching, learning and assessment (2020)*. In this document, the congress provides their suggestions as to how institutions of higher learning needed to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. They take their stance by looking at the inequalities and unemployment rate among young people in South Africa, because many of the institutions responded to the pandemic by enforcing online learning. They argued that this was not a strategy that would accommodate all students, mostly because the vast majority of students in South African universities come from working-class families who do not have the luxury of buying devices necessary for online teaching and learning.

Therefore, when the pandemic occurred SASCO made the following recommendations making sure that students were kept safe and every student was offered equal opportunities to learn. They suggested that the government should work with network providers to provide zero-rated access to all university and college websites. In terms of devices, universities had to provide students with devices such as laptops and the deposit for the laptops would be charged to student accounts. They further suggested blended learning as a measure to prevent the increase of COVID-19 infections. For students studying in Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges, they highlighted that online teaching and learning was not a viable option. This was on the basis that TVET's do not have the necessary infrastructure and devices to successfully implement online teaching and any online teaching would not accommodate the entire student population (SASCO, 2020).

2.4.5 Department of Higher Education and Training COVID-19 response

It is evident that many safety-related issues and policies are left in the hands of individual institutions, be it colleges or universities. However, when the pandemic occurred, the department of higher learning also placed proper measures to ensure the safety of students. On the 15th of March 2020, the ministry of Higher Education, Science, and Innovation, announced the suspension of all academic activities in the post-education sector. This was then followed by the publication of the disaster management report which looked at the necessary measures which had to be taken by institutions of higher learning (DHET, 2020a). This entailed the implementation of an early recess after the declaration of the national state of disaster. This meant that students had to vacate their respective campus residences and international students had to return to their home countries (Mudaly, Mudaly and Scholes, 2021; DHET, 2021).

The only way to save the academic year was through the implementation of emergency remote teaching and learning (DHET, 2021; CHE, 2020). But remote learning came with its own issues. To start, according to the Council of Higher Education (2020), many of South African higher education institutions, either public or private are contact and residential institutions. As such, the department had to ensure that students had the devices for online learning but devices without an internet connection would be of no use. Thus, a ministerial task team was created comprising of “Higher Education, Science and Technology, and Communication and Digital Technology (Mudaly *et al.* 2021). On the 5th of June 2020, the Department of Communication and Technologies (2020) released *the Directions on zero-rating of websites for education and health issued under regulation 4(10) of the regulations made under the Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act No.57 of 2002)*. These directions for the Higher Education sector involved zero-rating of institutional websites, which were public institutions in terms of the *Higher Education Act of 1997 (Act No, 101 of 1997)*. This also applied to private institutions according to the *Higher Education Act, 1997* or a private college registered in terms of the *Continuing Education and Training Act, 2006*. Lastly, these included institutions with domains of ‘ac.za or edu.za’ (DCT, 2020).

On the 8th of June 2020, the Department of Higher Education issued out more directions for what different institutions needed to do to ensure the safety of students and staff. For example, institutions had to provide all staff and students entering their campuses with COVID-19 screening. The department of Higher Education also created mobile applications which helped with screening. In addition to these, high-risk areas like libraries and laboratories had to be closely monitored and frequent cleaning and sanitizing had to be done. Finally, institutions were directed to implement their own “teaching and learning plan to ensure that physical distancing and other health protocols are observed at all times” (DHET, 2020b). This ultimately resulted in different universities creating and implementing their own COVID-19 guidelines and policies. This included institutions such as the University of the Free State, the University of South Africa, the University of the Witwatersrand and the University of Cape Town.

On the 28th of February 2021, the country moved down to alert level 1. Following this, the Department of Higher Education and Training also released *Directions on a national framework and criteria for the management of the 2021 academic year in public and private Higher Education institutions: Issued in terms of the Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act No,57 of 2002)*. Just like the previous directions issued, there was still an emphasis on the safety of students and maintaining social distancing. Institutions were still encouraged to create their plans for the opening of the 2021 academic year. In terms of access to campuses, staff and students were still encouraged to work from home if possible. In addition, institutions had to identify different students who might need access to residences and provide them with formal approvals before they could move into residences (DHET, 2021). Therefore, the gradual opening of institutions relied greatly on the “preparedness of infrastructure and teaching and learning spaces; screening of staff, students/learners and members of the public visiting these institutions; physical distancing; and the implementation of hygiene protocols in terms of the regulations” (Mudaly *et al.* 2021)

2.5 Rural university institutions.

Across South Africa we have what are called rural universities; a university is classified as rural mostly because of its geographical location, the rate of unemployment in the area (Uleanya, 2023), unpaved roads and poor internet or network connection (Uleanya and Rugbeer, 2020; Uleanya, Gamede, and Kutame, 2020). In addition, Hlalele, (2012) indicates that “Key features of a rural profile in South Africa include long distances to towns; the poor conditions of roads and bridges to schools; a lack of or limited access to Information Communications Technologies (ICTs); a lack of services such as running water, electricity, sanitation, health and educational facilities; low economic status, and little access to lifelong learning opportunities”. Uleanya and Rugbeer (2020), explain that in South Africa, we have 26 universities, which differ based on the degrees offered. These can range from technical universities, to comprehensive and rural universities. The existence of rural institutions in South Africa is largely because of the apartheid government’s segregation policies (Hlalele, 2012). This was because the apartheid government separated blacks and whites, with blacks being forced to study in rural universities, which were not as well-equipped as white universities different. For example, white people often had their universities in urban areas and people of colour had their universities in rural areas (Mbodila and Ndebele, 2022). Despite this, rural universities are still very important in our disadvantaged or rural communities. For instance, these kinds of institutions are purposely placed in these communities with the aim of encouraging the development and empowerment of the people in the community (Uleanya *et al.* 2020).

Despite these benefits, there are still some inequalities between universities in rural areas and those in urban areas (Uleanya *et al.* 2020; Olawale, Mncube, Ndondo and Mutongoza, 2022). For instance, rural universities are said to have limited teaching and learning resources, and the quality of education lacks as compared to urban institutions (Uleanya *et al.* 2020). In addition to this, it is important to note that students who study at rural institutions are said to come from disadvantaged families, therefore they do not have resources like laptops when they first arrive at university (Mncube, Mutongoza, and Ulawale, 2021). According to Frazee and Killen (in Sikhwari, Ravhuhali, Lavhelani, and Pataka, 2019), students in South African universities who come from different social, cultural, and economically diverse backgrounds do not perform equally in their

studies. Furthermore, Marongwe and Kobusingye (2022) indicate that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic rural universities in developing countries were “most vulnerable to possible collapse”. Thus, students who study in these institutions are therefore disadvantaged as compared to students in urban-based universities.

When the COVID-19 pandemic occurred, the inequalities between urban-based universities and rural institutions were further revealed (Marongwe and Kobusingye, 2022). For example, the University of Johannesburg, which is an urban based university, responded swiftly to the pandemic by issuing 5 900 devices to students and providing them with 30G data. However, when it came to rural or disadvantaged universities, by April 2020 after a meeting with university executives, there were no rural universities which had “indicated immediate interest to switch to online classes” (Aruleba, Jere and, Matarirano, 2022). As shown by Omodan (2021), the majority of students who attend rural universities also come from schools that are rural based and these schools normally lack resources like internet and other social inequalities. Therefore, when they transition into universities, they normally do not have the required knowledge of online learning which was required during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, Motaung and Dube (2020) argue that students in rural universities experience challenges with “inadequate access to technological devices, skills and competencies in using technological tools, network connectivity challenges, and low levels of engagement”. Thus, when the concept of online learning and teaching was introduced during the pandemic many student organisations rejected the notion across the African continent (Marongwe and Chisango, 2021). Therefore, it became important to try and understand what needed to happen to successfully support students in rural institutions during the pandemic.

As recognised by the Department of Higher learning in their policy titled: *Directions on national framework and criteria for the management of the 2021 academic year in public and private higher education institutions: Issues in terms of the disaster management Act, 2002 (Act No, 57 of 2002)*, the 2021 academic year would be affected by the pandemic and that there could not be a one-size fits all solution. This was especially true when considering the “unique circumstances at each institution (locational and

spatial arrangements, local lockdown restrictions, capacity issues, actual and variable numbers of students)". It was then left in individual institutions to enact their own policies and guidelines as to how they were going to manage the COVID-19 pandemic and as discussed earlier multiple universities did so. Now, Marongwe and Kobusingye, (2022) argue that to prepare for future pandemics universities need to formulate policies that "act as a guide to the university community". They further indicate that when these policies are drafted, they should be informed by the lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic and should also focus on "training needs, procurement of ICT gadgets, partnering with established universities, parents, funders and other relevant key stakeholders". In addition, Omodan (2020), argues that the inability of disadvantaged universities to respond effectively to the COVID-19 pandemic should be considered inadequate managerial skills, especially in emergencies within the university sector. And lastly, as indicated by Akinwumi and Itobore, (2020), some of the policies which were enacted and implemented in disadvantaged universities, showed a disconnect between institutional management and the student realities.

2.6 The Ethics of Mandatory Vaccination

From an ethical standpoint, the notion of mandatory vaccination carries with it many implications not just for individuals but both for society and different institutions. But first, I will discuss why people should be vaccinated. According to Giubilini (2019), the decision to vaccinate, either yourself or your children is regarded as an ethical choice; this is because individuals are expected to not only act out of self-interest but also to contribute to the public good and in this case to archive herd immunity. For example, Giubilini (2021) explains ethics as "values and principles that ought to regulate behaviours that are not only or not exclusively in one's own self-interest, but also and sometimes primarily in other peoples' interest or in line with certain societal expectations or requirements". Additionally, Williams (2022) also indicates that a vaccinated individual not only protects themselves but also protects others around them, eliminating the requirement for health services or health care. Therefore, a vaccinated individual is a benefit to the state as there will be less of a need to receive health services from the state which saves the governmental health resources.

Giubilini (2021), explains herd immunity as a situation where enough people in a community have been vaccinated, thus becoming immune to the disease or virus, resulting in the protection of those who did not or could not vaccinate. Therefore, this shows that the act of vaccination is not just to benefit oneself but to the community. It is for this reason that Guibilini (2019), believes vaccination to be an ethical choice. Furthermore, Guibilini (2019) and Dawson (2007) elaborate that the act of vaccinating is also a fulfilment of a basic moral obligation. Dawson (2007) explains that individuals have a moral obligation to vaccinate themselves to keep others safe especially where herd immunity does not exist. That is why if individuals fail to fulfil this moral obligation, institutions then take it upon themselves to ensure that this obligation is met. This can be through coercive policies that aim to achieve public health and social goals (Guibilini, 2019; Williams, 2022). In this section of my literature review I am focusing on herd immunity as a public good, institutional moral obligation, and the ethics around vaccination policies.

2.6.1 Herd Immunity as a public good and collective obligation

As discussed, earlier herd immunity is when enough people in a community have been vaccinated, rendering virus immunity and thus promoting the protection of those who are unvaccinated (Guibilini, 2019). Bullen, Heriot, and Jamrozik (2023) provide us with three different definitions of herd immunity. Firstly, herd immunity as a threshold that predicts the decrease of an epidemic. Secondly, the percentage of immunity in a population according to a set threshold. And thirdly, as an indirect advantage from collective immunity to those who are less immune. For this study, it is the third definition that is most relevant. This is because it addresses how herd immunity is an advantage to those who are vulnerable in our society, thus promoting the public good. Now it is important to understand how ethics are involved in herd immunity and how this is a public good. As argued by Guibilini (2019), people have a collective moral obligation to ensure that herd immunity occurs, this is because of the principle of fairness (Bernstein and Navin, 2023) and collective obligations. This principle entails that individuals have a moral obligation or responsibility to contribute to herd immunity by vaccination. People also have a moral obligation because of the harm principle, which entails that

vaccinations allow for the protection of the vaccinated and prevention of infection to the unvaccinated, thus protecting from harm (Dawson, 2007; Williams, 2022; Guibilini, 2019). This then means that individuals have the responsibility to support policies that encourage herd immunity.

Additionally, “From an ethical point of view, the relevant aspect of herd immunity is that it is a public good” (Guibilini, 2021). A public good as explained by Guibilini (2021) and Dawson (2007) is a goods that is “non-excludable” and “non-rivalrous”. This means that a public good is an occurrence which is impossible to prevent people from benefiting from and individuals benefit regardless, hence herd immunity can be considered as a public good (Williams, 2022). Dawson (2007) supports this notion and indicates that vaccination brings about crucial public good. Therefore, with these notions in mind, it becomes clear to see why individuals needed to vaccinate during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is to fulfil their moral obligation and to contribute to herd immunity. This moral obligation cannot take place without any collective obligation because no one individual can achieve herd immunity.

With collective obligation comes joint obligation. As elaborated by Pinkert (2014) “joint obligations are jointly owned by individual agents together”. Guibilini (2019), simplifies this by comparing it to the action of forming a circle, this is a joint action and no individual can by themselves form a circle. Achieving herd immunity is similar to forming a circle, in the sense that it requires joint agency. This is because “collective responsibility or collective obligation, joint obligations could be attributed only to individuals who can engage in joint actions” (Guibilini, 2019). This joint action now provides us with a relationship to realist social theory (Archer, 1995). As discussed earlier, this social theory is concerned with the relationship between “social relations and social action, or between social change and social stability (Cater and Sealey, 2015). When a collective obligation arises, it then becomes a joint obligation amongst society members thus leading to joint action or, in this regard, agency. Society members then have a moral obligation to get vaccinated to achieve herd immunity, which is a result of joint actions and their abilities to do otherwise. In this regard, no societal

structure enforces any rules or coercion to achieve change but change is a result of a collective obligation.

2.6.2 Institutional Moral Obligation and the ethics of vaccination policies

Despite there being individual and collective moral obligations to vaccinate, it is still not guaranteed that people will actually vaccinate. As indicated by Guibilini (2019) and van den Hoven (2012), individuals who refuse to vaccinate are referred to as free riders or free riding. This is because they still benefit from the protection of herd immunity without fulfilling their moral obligation. Some individuals who choose not to vaccinate base their decision on religion (van den Hoven, 2012; Thinane, 2022) but this choice then raises issues of fairness in society (Guibilini, 2021; Williams, 2022; van den Hoven; 2012). For example, Uvais, (2023) and Giannakou, Soulioti, and Kyprianidou, (2023) explain that because of vaccine hesitancy, people simply volunteering to vaccinate is not enough especially if the goal is to achieve the required level for “epidemic control” (Willimas, 2022).

This then takes us to the next point which is institutional moral obligation. According to Guibilini (2019), a state or an institution has the responsibility to “protect and promote individuals’ health”, especially for most vulnerable individuals and one of the key ways to do this is by employing coercive vaccination policies. One may argue for individual autonomy or bodily autonomy, but there are situations where public health goals outweigh these (Wheeler, 2021; Moodley, 2022; Guibilini, 2019). Similarly, going back to realist social theory, when looking at structures, according to Archer, (1995) they have a way of enforcing certain consequences, meaning that structures are known for taking autonomy from individuals. In this regard, the consequence is vaccine mandates as they do not allow individuals to choose for themselves. One of the driving forces for introducing vaccine mandates is because of the harm principle (Williams, 2022; Uvais, 2023; Guibilini, 2019). As explained by Williams (2022) vaccination not only benefits the vaccinated but also those who do not vaccinate, thus reducing the likelihood of any harm from occurring. This is because the ultimate goal of vaccination policies is to achieve herd immunity, thus the public good and institutions should implement the “least

coercive policy that is necessary to achieve herd immunity” even if this policy has “some level of coercion” (Guibilini, 2019).

Williams (2022) elaborates that, mandatory vaccination may be allowed when it meets the following four conditions. Firstly, when there is an outbreak that threatens the public’s health. Secondly, when there is a “safe and effective vaccine. Thirdly, when the mandate to vaccinate is more cost-effective or economically beneficial (Wheeler, 2021) than other solutions. And finally, when the “level of coercion” is balanced. In order to contextualise this to the South Africa context during the COVID-19 pandemic, Moodley (2022) provides some ethical justification for vaccine mandates. Firstly, during the pandemic, there was low vaccine intake from people and this was a concern because many of the vaccines that were present would have to be destroyed due to their expiration. In South Africa out of a population of sixty million, eight million are infected with HIV. This means that these are the most vulnerable people in our society who will benefit from vaccine mandates. Furthermore, vaccine mandates are a great benefit as they will lessen the pressure on our health system. In summary, these are just a few of the many reasons to ethically justify mandatory vaccinations but the ultimate goal is to achieve herd immunity thus promoting public good.

However, there are scholars who do not agree with the notion of mandatory vaccination. For example, Saunders, (2022) explains that other than opting for coercive methods or mandates, institutions should consider other mandates that do not necessarily require people to vaccinate. He indicates that policies can sometimes be referred to as mandatory “even though they are not strictly so” (Saunders, 2022). For instance, institutions can employ non-mandatory methods like educating people. This can help increase awareness, and dispel any fears and misconceptions about vaccines. Another alternative is to persuade people to vaccinate and portray the act of vaccination as a civic duty that one has to fulfil (Sounders, 2022; Conly, 2014). Furthermore, Rodger and Blackshaw, (2022) argue that vaccines should not be mandatory but within the context of health and social care workers. They indicate that vaccine mandates take away one’s bodily autonomy, and risk an increase in psychological resistance which will affect vaccine hesitancy. Also, because of ever-changing variants of the virus, as in the case

of COVID-19, one can never be fully vaccinated as boosters will always be needed (Rodger and Blackshaw, 2022). However, what is important is that vaccine mandates help in achieving herd immunity (Guibilini, 2019; Williams, 2022) and thus promote the public's good.

2.7 Conclusion

In summary, it is evident that the COVID-19 pandemic did wreak havoc in many countries. The responses by the governments both internationally and in South Africa were needed and crucial. The creation of COVID-19 guidelines by different governments is a perfect example of Archer (2003) shows how the structures we have in society influence individuals. Depending on how a country responded to the pandemic and the measures which were taken, the virus had a direct influence on the education sector. For example, literature showed that countries that responded quickly and made sure that their restrictions were adhered to had a positive influence in the education sector. As in the case of China, the government was quick to halt all face-to-face learning and enacted a policy that directed learning institutions to using the online method of teaching. Therefore, this validates the structural component of the realist social theory.

Archer (2003) has identified that society is constantly changing and improving on any errors as well as proving feedback. It is equally important to establish how our institutions of learning can improve when it comes to the way in which they responded to the pandemic. This will entail the agency perspective of the realist social theory (Archer 2003), which involves establishing how human beings can be social actors and promote change. As we have established from the realist social theory that society is constantly changing and has no preferred state (Tsoetsi and Mile, 2021), it is safe to assume that similar occurrences like the COVID-19 pandemic will transpire and it is best if such occurrences are properly prepared for. Therefore, investigating students, experiences will allow for a proper analysis of where institutions went right and where they need to improve. As shown by Mirvahedi (2021) in the realist social theory individuals can evaluate the structures that they occupy and introduce change where possible.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

For a researcher choosing the correct methodology for research is crucial to fully understand the phenomenon under study. Methodology allows the researcher to understand how knowledge can be created and understood. This chapter provides a more detailed outline of my choice in methodology, this includes my choice paradigm, research approach, design, data collection, analysis and interpretation. All of the choices I have made in methodology, are driven by the main research question which is “What are students’ experiences with the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* at a rural university campus?”.

3.2 The research process

Creswell and Guetterman (2021) explain research as a process of steps that the researcher uses to collect and analyse information to increase their understanding of the topic or issues. They further explain that research consists of three main steps, “1. Pose a question, 2. Collect data to answer the question, 3. Present an answer to the question”. For educators, research is important as it suggests improvements in practice. In addition, this research also provides policymakers with information when they want to investigate or debate educational topics (Creswell and Guetterman, 2021). As such, the key to any successful research project is having and using good methodological techniques or methods. Khaldi (2017) explains that “The type of research methodology the researcher chooses is determined by the research philosophy which the researcher adheres to and this choice will determine the research objective(s) and the research instruments developed and used as well as the quest for the solution to the problem he is investigating”. As indicated by Maree (2019), methods are tools that researchers use

to collect their data. These range from the selection of the research approach, paradigm, design, data collection, sampling, data analysis, and ethical considerations.

The correct selection and application of these methods can prove to play a pivotal role in any research project. They allow the researcher to gather or collect data from a range of social realities (Kamal, 2019). These may include, individual people or groups, the internet or media, documents, or relics. This data can then be collected using a wide range of methods. For instance, a researcher can choose to use interviews, observe their participants, or use documents or visual data (Maree, 2019). However, the determinant of how to collect data from your chosen sample is based solely on the research approach the researcher chooses and the phenomenon that they want to investigate (Kuada, 2012). Based on the research questions and the research problem, accompanied by a review of the literature, the researcher can then choose their approach (Creswell and Guetterman, 2021). In brief, they can choose the qualitative approach, quantitative, or mixed method approach.

3.3 Research Paradigm

This study has used the critical or transformative paradigm. The term 'critical theory' was first employed by Horkheimer in an article published in 1937 (Muller-Doorhm, 2017). It is equally important to first understand what a paradigm is. According to Maree (2019), a paradigm is "a set of assumptions or beliefs about the fundamental aspects of reality which gives rise to a particular world view, it addresses fundamental assumptions taken on faith, such as beliefs about the nature of reality (ontology) and the relationship between the knower and known (epistemology)". Therefore, one can say that a paradigm represents how the researcher looks at or understands the world and it provides a bridge between what they know and what they want to know. This means that a paradigm acts as a lens or organising philosophies on how reality can be understood (Maree, 2019). As further validated by Collins and Stockton (2018), epistemology and ontology represent how a researcher views the world and the way in which knowledge is created. Kamal (2019) also indicates that a paradigm represents the researchers' beliefs and values about the world, how they define it as well as how

they function in this world. In essence, researchers' views and beliefs about any topics explored ultimately guide their actions.

Maree (2019), states that there are three ontological positions, which are realism, materialism, and idealism. Firstly, realism claims that there is an external reality that is independent of what people understand and believe. Secondly, materialism claims that physical features like the economy, for example, hold real reality. And lastly, idealism sees reality as only constructed or known through the human mind and socially constructed meanings. These three ontological positions are not as easily identified in practice. But those who embark on the critical theory perspective, normally follow the idealist position. As such Poster (2019), indicates that critical theory attempts to promote emancipation by adding what is understood by the "theoretical efforts of critique of domination". In simple terms, this theory views society as an ongoing construction process and adds that narratives developed in different fields of social power shape social reality and how we understand it (Maree, 2019).

This theory is heavily influenced by Foucault (1965) and his ideas on structuralism. Structuralism looks at systems in society and power relations amongst those systems (Maree, 2019; Poster, 2019). This notion then creates a relationship with my choice in theory. If you look at the morphogenic approach and its analytical dualism, it also describes the relationship between structures in society and agents (Carter and Sealey, 2000; Mirvahedi, 2021). In addition, it is also important to note that the critical paradigm originates from the critical theory, which carries the belief that research is conducted for the liberation of individuals or groups in a democratic society (Maree, 2019). Muller-Doorhm, (2017) indicates that Horkheimer identified two essential conditions for critical thought, which are, the analysis of social oppression in structures of society and "empathetic participation in the experience of social suffering". As such critical theory has no other motives than the elimination of social injustice (Muller-Doorhm, 2017; Asghar, 2013). This paradigm is relevant and applicable to this study for several reasons. For example, when a policy is enacted, there are several stakeholders involved who hold different positions in society and in this case, I am referring to those

in power in an educational institution. Therefore, it was important to try and analyse the CRRVP and see how socially just it was through the perceptions of students.

3.4 Research Approach

In many cases, “words either concepts, terms or symbols” are the primary instruments used to communicate and to make meaning (Maree, 2019). This is why this study used the qualitative approach. Polkinghorne (in Maree, 2019) and Kamal (2019), indicate that the distinguishing characteristic of qualitative research is that it relies on linguistic data rather than numerical data. In addition, Kuada (2012), further states that qualitative research provides an examination of cases that are related to the chosen topic, and provides authentic descriptions that are delicate to some social and historical contexts. Furthermore, the qualitative approach also intends to answer questions by properly examining different social settings and the people that inhabit those settings (Maree, 2019). As such, when a researcher uses this approach, they must design it in such a way that it allows them to have a “first look at the setting in which those you study operate” (Kuada, 2012). Brooks and Normore (2015) explain that this approach when used in the educational leadership space has produced informative studies that broaden our understanding of how such things as power, abuse, equity, and management function within the education context. This is very important especially in this study because I aimed to understand how choices made by those in managerial positions affected students.

A further advantage of the qualitative approach is that it allows the participants to raise topics or issues that the researcher might not have anticipated. This is also an advantage as it is crucial that the research aims to gain new insight (Creswell and Guetterman, 2021) rather than confirming existing theories. Participants can share their feelings and provide their different perspectives, using their own words (Kuada, 2012). Hence, Kamal (2019) and Hammarberg, Kirkman, and de Lacey (2016), define qualitative research as an approach that explores and understands the meaning of individual people or a group to a social or human problem. As such, qualitative researchers are concerned with the experiences of their participants so that they can formulate meaning from those experiences (Kamal, 2019). In addition, with qualitative

research, the literature review “does not provide a major direction for the research questions”. This is because this approach relies heavily on the views of the participants in the study and less on the direction identified in the literature (Creswell and Guetterman, 2021).

The qualitative approach can also be divided into two, the interactive and the non-interactive. Within the interactive, the researcher has little to no personal involvement in the study they can engage in a phenomenological or ethnological study. A phenomenological study looks at how people experience a said phenomenon. This can be conducted by understanding participants’ attitudes or experiences. With the ethnological study, the researcher looks at “the discovery and description of the culture of a group of people”. In an educational setting, a researcher can investigate the culture of a certain classroom. Furthermore, in a non-interactive study, the researcher can do a historical or content analysis (Khaldi, 2017). To collect data, qualitative researchers employ strategies like interviewing participants, observing them, and an analysis of text or media (Creswell and Guetterman, 2021; Kamal, 2019; Maree, 2019; Hammarberg *et al.* 2016). Therefore, a researcher chooses any of these qualitative strategies based on whether their study is interactive or a non-interactive study.

As mentioned previously this study has used the qualitative approach. This is most appropriate because I investigated the experiences of students. Because the research aims to understand how students experienced the implementation of the *CRRVP*, this study is both interactive and non-interactive. The interactive aspect was the students’ experiences and the non-interactive aspect was the analysis of the policy in question. Both of these aspects have provided a wide range of data. For example, by looking at the students’ experiences this allowed for a more personalised response from the participants. In addition to this, it was also investigated whether or not the policy achieved its intention. Furthermore, the non-interactive aspect involved the analysis of the policy. This was done by looking at the policy contents and how it was implemented. To conclude, it is clear that the qualitative approach was best suited for this study.

3.5 Research design

According to Maree (2019), a research design is a plan that the researcher employs based on their philosophical standing which indicates the selection of their sample, data gathering methods, and data analysis methods. Yazan, (2015), also supports this notion by explaining research design as a sequence that connects the study's research questions up until its conclusion. As such, this study has used the case study research design. Harrison, Birks, Franklin, and Mills (2017) show that the origin of this design comes from the disciplines of anthropology and social sciences in the early twentieth century, but other accounts go back to the early nineteenth century. Gillham (2000) explains that a case can be "a unit of human activity embedded in the real worlds, which can only be studied or understood in context". In addition, Lichtman (2013) further explains that a case can be "limited to a characteristic, trait, or behaviour". A case can also be limited to one type of situation, these cases are often special or unique (Lichtman, 2013). Furthermore, the case study design according to Patnaik and Pandey (2019) and Baxter and Jack (2008) is mostly associated with researchers who employ the qualitative inquiry. Hence, this design was most suitable for this study.

This means that a case study can be an investigation of or research into individuals or groups of people in real life, within their everyday setting (Maree, 2019; Gillham, 2000; Yazan 2015; Yin, 2018; Lichtman, 2013). Gillham (2000) further explains that a case can be an office, a class, a family, or an institution such as a school or factory. On a larger scale, a case can even be a community. This is why Maree (2019) emphasises that a case is generally a bonded entity but the lines between the case and its contextual conditions may be blurred. Because of this, researchers need to be able to bind their case study research in the following ways, either by "time and activity" (Creswell and Creswell, 2018), "time and place" or "definition and context" (Maree, 2019). For the purpose of this study, these boundaries are definitely, time and place but the boundaries will be clear when discussing the sample choice (cf. 3.7).

As shown by Guba and Lincoln (in Maree, 2019) and Baxter and Jack (2008), there are different classifications of case study research design. Some are "factual, interpretative, or evaluative". This study has made use of the exploratory case study and this type of

case study according to Rule and John (2011), looks at a phenomenon that has not been investigated before and creates a foundation for future research. Maree (2019) also indicates that an exploratory case study explores instances where “interventions being evaluated have no clear single set of outcomes”. Additionally, Baxter and Jack (2008) also indicate that this type of case study looks at situations where the phenomenon being investigated has no “clear single set of outcomes”. As such, this type of case study was the most appropriate for this study because the COVID-19 pandemic was a new scenario in higher education, and the policies that were enacted were all new. As it stands, we have no information as to how these policies affected students when they were implemented, especially those in rural institutions.

3.6 Data collection

3.6.1 Focus groups

According to Lichtman (2013), a focus group is simply a group interview that the researcher uses to collect data. This is a way of collecting qualitative data that includes interacting with a small group of people in a formal or informal group discussion, with one topic in mind (Harding, 2019). Remler and Van Ryzin (2011) explain that this method is one of the most widely used ones within qualitative research, most “especially in applied research for policy and practice”. A researcher employs the focus group method of collecting data with the hopes that group interaction might increase the responses they might receive from their participants (Lichtman, 2013). This is because as participants interact in a focus group, they can “activate forgotten details” (Maree, 2019). As indicated by Creswell and Creswell (2018) in a focus group interview, a researcher has 6 to 8 interviewees and they are asked open-ended questions, which allow the participants to voice out their opinions. In addition, Lichtman, (2013), indicates that one of the advantages of this method is that it saves time. They explain that the researcher can “interview 6 to 12 people in one hour” (Remler and Van Ryzin, 2011). Creswell and Creswell (2018), further explain the advantages of using focus groups as a method of collecting data. To start, they indicate that this method is advantageous if the researcher cannot directly observe the participants. Another advantage is that, the

participants can provide historical accounts or experiences from the past. This method also gives the researcher total control when it comes to the line of questioning.

This study has used a semi-structured or guided focus group. In this type of focus group, the researcher develops a list of questions and has some preconceived plan of how the focus group might unfold (Lichtman, 2013). As such, the researcher starts the focus group interview with some broad or less structured questions. This is done to ease the participants into the session and to obtain the participants' general opinions to get them to a point where they can actively debate the issues being asked (Maree, 2019; Remler and Van Ryzin, 2011). As the interaction intensifies, the questions become more structured. In addition to this, to fully get every participant's opinion the moderator needs to encourage participation, but they need to be cautious not to become too active in the session (Maree, 2019). The participants sit around a table with a moderator and an audio or video recorder is used for the analysis of data later (Remler and Van Ryzin, 2011). There are typically two to three separate focus groups, depending on the number of subgroups.

3.6.2 Documents

The second data collection method that this study used is document analysis. Maree (2019) explains that when a researcher uses this method, they focus on all types of written communication which they deem suitable to give light to the phenomenon being studied. This can include both printed and digital texts like "company reports, memoranda, agendas administrative documents" and more. Within this method, the researcher can use texts that can be primary or secondary sources (Harding, 2019). Primary sources, are texts or documents that are not published that the researcher has gathered from either the participants or an organisation. This can include, "education legislation, policies, and regulations" (Maree, 2019: 101). Furthermore, the researcher should contextualise the document within the conditions of their creation. Therefore, the researcher must triangulate the results from document sources with other sources, and in this study, focus group interviews were used. Finally, documents can further help by re-creating events or important incidents that have already happened.

It is also important to distinguish between a literature review and a document analysis. The former relies on reviewing key academic sources based on a specific topic and the latter undertakes a detailed analysis of an original text (Harding, 2019). According to Macdonalds (in Harding, 2019), they explain that documents are socially produced, which means that the researcher can analyse them by questioning their “authenticity, credibility and representativeness”. Because of this, when analysing documents, a researcher should consider the position and intentions of the writer. They need to keep in mind what the writer was trying to achieve by creating the text and how this influences what is written. There are several advantages to using this data collection method for research. For example, documents are often easy to access and the internet has made access to them even easier (Harding, 2019). Therefore, this method of data collection was the easiest because the *CRRVP* was easily accessible from the University of the Free States’ website.

3.7 Participant Selection

When conducting research, a researcher is interested in a certain population. When doing sampling, the sample is chosen from the population of interest (Remler and Van Ryzin, 2011). There are many ways that a researcher can choose their sample, but within the qualitative approach, purposive sampling is mostly used (Maree, 2019). This study has used purposive sampling which means that participants are chosen purposely (Maree, 2019; Lapan, Quartaroli, and Rieemer, 2012). In addition, Lapan *et al.* (2012), further indicate that for researchers that use the case study as a design, it is quite usual for them to identify their participants using purposive sampling. Furthermore, to be more specific, this study has made use of what is called stratified purposive sampling. With this type of sampling, the researcher purposely chooses participants who are homogeneous in a way but who also carry some distinction, and this is done to compare the subgroups (Maree, 2019).

3.8 Sample size

Maree (2019) explains that there are no set rules for a sample size. It all depends on what the researcher wants to know, the purpose, and the available time and resources. Sample size in qualitative research should not be so large that the researcher cannot extract thick rich data, but it should also not be so small that it becomes difficult to achieve “data saturation” (Maree, 2019). Therefore, this research has made use of ten participants, who participated in a focus group interview. These participants were purposely chosen as students from the institution in which the study has focused on. In addition, because the study uses stratified purposive sampling, there was some distinction among the participants. For example, the first three participants were students who in 2022 did their first year of study. The second group of three were students who were registered during the years 2020 and 2021. The last group of four students were those who were registered at the institution in 2019 or before then. The last group consisted of both undergraduates and postgraduates.

3.9 Data analysis

Data analysis is generally based on the research questions, the study model, and, the type of data collected” (Lapan *et al.* 2012). Remler and Van Ryzin (2011), further indicate that qualitative data analysis involves the organisation and interpretation of data collection tools like field notes, interview transcriptions, or documents. For this reason, this study has used two data analysis tools: the thematic approach for the focus group interview and critical policy analysis for the policy document.

3.9.1 Thematic analysis

As indicated earlier this study made use of the deductive approach to thematic data analysis. According to Terry, Hayfield, Clarke, and Braun (2019), they mention that Gerald Holton 1975 is regarded as the founder of thematic analysis in his work “Themata”, though there are other reports that indicate that the term might pre-date Holton. This method of data analysis allows the researcher to identify, organise, and provide insight based on the patterns of the data they have collected. It focuses on the shared meaning and experiences of the participants, and the researcher can identify

these shared meanings and make sense of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Bailey, (2023) further elaborates that with the thematic approach, the researcher can generate theories or discover patterns of behaviour from the participants. Furthermore, within this approach to analysing data, the researcher has flexibility because this approach allows one to address several research questions that stem from different theoretical frameworks (Terry *et al.* 2019). This flexibility is also apparent from the type of data collected, meaning that a researcher can use this approach either from data collected using traditional methods, like interviews or focus group interviews (Terry *et al.*, 2019). Therefore, the approach was best suited for analysing the data I collected from the focus group interview.

Therefore, it is important to understand how one should conduct thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke, (2017) explain thematic analysis in six phases. In the first phase, the researcher fully immerses themselves in the data they have collected. This means that the researcher reads and re-reads, transcripts of interviews or listens to any audio recordings that they might have. In this phase, the researcher must take notes. In the second phase, which Braun and Clarke, (2017) call “Generating Initial codes”, the researcher here starts a systematic analysis of the data they have collected. From this. They must create codes which “are the building blocks of analysis” (Braun and Clarke, 2017). They allow the researcher to identify and provide labels for data that they see as relevant to each other. In the third phase, the codes which were identified now become themes. Braun and Clarke (2017) explain a theme as a tool that indicates patterns within the collected data which are related to the research questions. This means that, a researcher patterns the responses of their participants in relation to their research question in order to create themes.

Bailey, (2023) explains a theme as “the overarching unifying threads or underlying insights that capture the essence of what is being studied”. In the fourth phase, the researcher focuses on refining their themes based on the codes that were identified. This is done for quality assurance, especially for new researchers. In the fifth phase, “Defining and Naming Themes” occurs in which, Braun and Clarke (2017) indicate that the researcher needs to show what is unique and specific about each of their themes.

Thorough analysis is required in this phase. In the final phase, which is “Producing the Report”, The researcher does not only write their report, they need to write it in such a manner that it tells a story based on the data they have analysed. In brief, when conducting data analysis these were the steps I followed.

3.9.2 Critical Policy Analysis.

Before unpacking what critical policy analysis is, we need to first understand its conception. Fischer, Torgerson, Durnova, and Orsini (2015) state that critical policy studies came about in an effort to try and comprehend policy processes. This is not only from an “input and output” perspective but rather to understand policy processes in terms of values and normative assumptions, either political or social which shape the policy process. Fischer *et al.* (2015) assert that one of the key issues for critical policy studies involves the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is used to shape policy, and the kind of knowledge and assumptions involved in guiding the implementation of policy decisions. Furthermore, Diem and Brooks (2022) explain that CPA has in the past 30 years gained some popularity in academics and within the education space. They further maintain that CPA is mostly used by scholars who are interested in issues of “institutional racism, sexism, ableism, and many other inequalities” (Diem and Brooks, 2022). Hence, this method of policy analysis is suitable for this study because I was able to identify inequalities that came about after the enactment of the *CRRVP*.

In addition to this, they indicate that critical policy studies reflect studies of cultural and historical contexts of knowledge and it largely takes the “interpretive, culturally and historically constructivist understanding of knowledge and its creation” (Fischer *et al.* 2015). Therefore, this is important and relevant to this study as I did express earlier that this study has used the critical theory paradigm. Lastly, critical policy studies as well as critical policy analysis came about as “an academic response to the social and political turmoil” from the period from 1960 to the 1970s. During that period, western societies experienced several political unrests such as the tensions created by the “civil rights struggle, the War on Poverty, the Vietnam War, the threat of nuclear holocaust, student unrest, the emergence of the women’s movement, health and safety problems, recognition of the environmental crisis” (Fischer *et al.* 2015).

According to Young and Diem (2018), critical policy analysis includes several different viewpoints as well as developments that are aimed at providing alternative methods of analysing educational policy problems. Therefore, as a critical policy researcher, one engages in the evaluation or questioning of the policy process. In addition to this, one further evaluates the “epistemological” origin of the policy, the key partners involved in the policy process, and the construction of the policy (Young and Diem, 2018). Now Apple (2018) further explains that critical policy analysis is based on the belief of crucial importance is needed to understand the “complex connections between education and the relations of dominance and subordination in the larger society—and the movements that are trying to interrupt these relations”. Similarly, this provides a perfect link to the realist social theory, which questions the role that societal structures have in individuals’ agency and autonomy. Therefore, it is important to understand how one can incorporate CPA in their research.

Young and Diem (2018) outline the following process that scholars can employ in their studies when conducting CPA and these are also the steps I followed when conducting the policy analysis. To start, CPA thoroughly looks at the “root and development of education policy”. Second, CPA establishes the difference between the intended policy and how it is practiced. Third, “CPA examines the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge and the creation of “winners” and “losers.” Fourth, CPA thoroughly examines complicated systems and the environment in which the policy is enacted and implemented. And fifth, “CPA explores social stratification and the impact of policy on relationships of privilege and inequality”. Lastly, “CPA is interested in the nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of historically underrepresented groups”. All these processes were crucial when conducting policy analysis for this study. This is most important, especially when considering the fact that when the policy in question was implemented there was some resistance from the students. And, our students do form part of a “historically underrepresented group” (Young and Diem, 2018).

3.10 Data interpretation

When a researcher interprets their analysed data, they look for “emerging patterns, associations, concepts and explanations in their data” (Maree, 2019). “Triangulation refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena” (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blythe, and Neville, 2014). This is why this study used the crystallisation or triangulation of qualitative data. This tool entails looking at the world not only in two dimensions but, just like a crystal a phenomenon can be interpreted in various ways. When interpreting data, the researcher looks for similar patterns that emerge from their findings. These patterns would explain why these similarities occur and what they entail (Maree, 2019). In addition, Carter *et al.* (2014), indicates that there are different types of triangulation; this study has used “Method triangulation”. This entails the use of multiple data collection methods in an attempt to understand one phenomenon. Therefore, this type of data interpretation is most suitable, as this study has used more than one data collection method to understand the phenomenon in question.

3.11 Quality Assurance

Trustworthiness is concerned with ensuring the quality, authenticity, and truthfulness of the research findings (Kyngas, Kaariainen, and Elo, 2020). The concept of trustworthiness was founded by “Lincoln and Guba 1985” as a way to evaluate qualitative data (Lemon and Hayes, 2020). When conducting research, a researcher needs to ensure that their findings are of quality, and as such they must satisfy the following four criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Maree, 2019; Kyngas *et al.* 2020). Firstly, credibility entails the use of good research methods, design, and theories (Maree, 2019). For this reason, this study has adhered to the same methods, designs, and theories throughout the study. Secondly, dependability refers to the stability of data under different conditions, it also looks at the consistency of data from the beginning of the study, to collecting data and its analysis (Kyngas *et al.* 2020). For example, to ensure dependability, a researcher can be peer examined; this entails

allowing another researcher to analyse the collected data and assess how the results compare to the original findings, (Kyngas *et al.* 2020).

Next, confirmability looks at how the study findings resemble the collected data. Meaning, the researcher should not solely focus on the response from one participant, (Kyngas *et al.* 2020). Therefore, a researcher needs to ensure that their findings directly resemble the data collected and they can achieve this by remaining neutral throughout their research project. Lastly, transferability entails the extent to which the findings are applicable in other fields or contexts (Kyngas *et al.* 2020). To ensure transferability, the researcher needs to provide the readers with an account of the design used, and sampling. Therefore, the researcher must be transparent about the methodology used in the study, which is what this chapter provides.

3.12 Conclusion

In conclusion, it is very clear that for any successful study, there have to be good methodological practices used. Having a research problem and research questions is not enough. A researcher needs to employ good methodological practices. This starts with the selection of a good research paradigm, which influences their choice of the theory to be used. Then after establishing the paradigm, it is important to use the most appropriate research approach. As shown earlier, this approach has influenced the choice in research design, data collection tools, data analysis, selection of participants, and data interpretation (Khaldi, 2017). That is why Creswell and Guetterman (2021) indicated that when conducting research there are several steps that the researcher needs to follow. And lastly, a good research study needs to be of quality. A researcher needs to ensure that their work is authentic and truthful (Kyngas *et al.* 2020).

CHAPTER 4

POLICY ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

Within the qualitative approach, data analysis can take several different forms. For example, data can come from documents, interview transcripts, or field notes (Maree, 2019; Remler and Van Ryzin, 2011). Therefore, this chapter has attempted to analyse the *Covid-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* using the critical policy analysis approach as described by Young and Diem (2018) (cf. 3.9.2).

4.2 What is policy analysis?

It is important first to understand what policy analysis is. According to Dunn (2018), policy analysis is a multidisciplinary process which looks at the “creation, critical assessment and communication of policy-relevant knowledge”. In contrast, Weimer and Vinning (2017) provide a more focused definition by deducing that whether or not a policy is in a private or public setting, there are always clients involved who can participate in the decision-making process. They explain policy analysis as “a client-orientated advice relevant to public decisions and informed by social values”. This definition is of course relevant to this study because the policy being analysed, is not necessarily a public policy but a private policy specific to one educational institution. Within the higher education sector, students do pay for their education. Hence, they can also be referred to as clients, and this definition indicates the importance of their involvement in decision-making.

Within the education sector policy analysis needs to identify different levels at which policy development takes place, the different educational institutions involved, and the role and importance of cultural contexts (Jie, 2016). Codd (2008) provides two frameworks of policy analysis: analysis *of* policy and analysis *for* policy. This study will delve into the analysis *of* policy, which entails looking at the policy contents and determining the kind of effects that the policy had on the different groups in which it was

implemented. Furthermore, Jie (2016) pointed out that when conducting education policy analysis, it is important to consider the following “content, context, actors, and process”. He indicates that they cannot be seen as separate entities but as one. For example, the “actors” whom we can view as ‘structures’ according to the realist social theory (Archer, 1995) are people, governments, or organizations who play a major role in the shaping and creation of policies. Additionally, with the content we look at how the policy is articulated, what its aims are, the value of the policy, and if any actions need to be taken (Jie, 2016). According to Jie, (2016), “Context refers to systemic factors – political, economic and social, both national and international – which may have an effect on education policy”. These can include “Focusing events” like the COVID-19 pandemic and “Other structural factors” like technological developments or demographic features of the people in that country and in our case, students in a rural university institution. Lastly, the policy process “comprises the initiation, development, negotiation, communication, implementation, and evaluation of policies” (Jie, 2016). This entails looking at whether or not these processes were followed from the policy inception to its implementation and evaluation.

4.3 What is a policy

Before attempting to understand what, a policy is let us first try to understand how they first came about. According to Taylor, Rizvi, Ligard, and Henry (1997), before the current “mass schooling” we have, education was a private privilege only for a small group of people. When government schools took form in the early nineteenth century in Europe, education policies were enacted to indicate the conditions in which schools had to operate. Taylor *et al.* (1997) further explains that the earliest educational policies were enacted for administrative purposes in government schools. They outlined such things as “prescriptions for curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment” and other conditions such as teacher employment, maintenance of school facilities, and learner attendance.

In recent years educational policies have developed to represent much more than this. Since the early 1960, public policies, including educational policies have now performed more functions. “Educational policy has thus become a bureaucratic instrument with which to administer the expectations that the public has of education” (Taylor *et al.*

1997: 3). This was the result of the change in society and the introduction of different interest groups. These include the civil rights movement and the women's movement; both these movements were not satisfied with the role education played in society. In recent years, other factors such as global economic restructuring and technological changes have also resulted in the revision of educational policies. In addition to this, society now demands to be involved in the policy creation processes. It is also important to note that policies are rarely enacted from a clean slate, they normally take form from existing policies, and laws. Tylor *et al.* (1997:5) provides us with this understanding of a policy: "Policy is thus an instrument through which change is mapped onto existing policies, programmes or organisations, and onto the demands made by particular interest groups".

However, as I have indicated, explaining policy is more complex than this. For example, Ball (1993) agrees that it is possible to find the term policy being used to describe different things in one study. For him, the meaning of policy mostly depends on how it is applied to a research study and how results are interpreted. He further indicates that we should not view policies as "things" because they can also be "processes and outcomes". Additionally, Cloete and de Coning (2011), explain policy as "a public sector statement of intent, including sometimes a more detailed program of action, to give effect to selected normative and empirical goals in order to improve or resolve perceived problems and needs in society in a specific way, thereby achieving desired changes in that society". This definition resonates with this study. A policy is a program of action that responds to a certain problem, which in our case was the pandemic based on a society's needs. This indicates that a policy needs to solve a problem that affects people of a certain group, and it needs to take into cognisance the kind of people that are in that society and their needs. In brief, the question is, did the *CRRVP* respond to the pandemic by looking at the needs of students? And in our context, were the needs of rural-based students considered?

4.4. Understanding the policy cycle.

Public or educational policies follow certain steps or processes before they can be implemented. Regardless of whether they are enacted in public or private institutions, the assumption is that they follow similar patterns, especially within the education sector. As discussed by Jann and Wegrich (2007), and Jie (2016) the policy process follows the following steps: the identification of the problem, followed by policy formulation, and then implementation, and eventually, policy evaluation and termination.

4.4.1. Problem Identification

Muthanna and Sung (2023) explain that educational policies are enacted “in the manner of documents compiled at a top level or by institutions, such as official reports, meeting minutes, plans, events, and talks”. However, before a policy can be enacted and eventually implemented. A need for a policy is required, or a problem needs to be identified to which a policy will serve as a solution. After a problem has been identified, it will then be included in the agenda of the specific institution or government (Jie, 2016). Kingdon (1995), affirms that an agenda is a list of problems that specific government officials or members outside of the government pay close attention to at any given time. In addition, Jann and Wegrich (2007) point out that “Agenda-setting results in a selection between diverse problems and issues”. In the agenda many issues are put forth, and not all of these issues will receive the same level of attention. Therefore, it is important to try and understand what happened in an emergency situation like the COVID-19 pandemic, and whether agenda-setting took place.

4.4.2 Policy Formulation

Jann and Wegrich (2007) explain that at this stage of the policy process, the proposed problems and demands are included in institutional programs. This is where policy objectives are defined, entailing what the policy needs to achieve and any actionable options. One of the key considerations at this point in the process is the economic implications of the policy in question. Jie (2016) indicates that this step of the policy process looks at the people involved in the policy formulation and how policies are agreed upon and how they are conveyed. Therefore, this step entails the actual creation

of the policy, where different stakeholders decide on the policy principles and objectives and other social factors are considered that directly or indirectly will be affected by the policy.

4.4.3 Understanding Policy Implementation

Muthanna and Sung (2023), explain that policy implementers try to implement policies by putting the policy objectives into practice. Similarly, Pulzl and Treib (2006) indicate that implementation studies can also be characterised as “studies of policy change”. Jie (2016) points out that this is the most neglected step in the policy cycle and, it is also the most important. If policies are not implemented or they are changed here then the policy outcomes will not be the ones that were wanted. In simple terms, Barrett (in Pulzl and Treib, 2006) explains that policy implementation is the process of “translating policy into action”.

Muthanna and Sung (2023), Pulzl and Treib (2006) and Jie (2016) provide two policy implementation strategies, the “Top-Down and the Bottom-Up” approaches. The Top-Down approach focuses more on hierarchy. The main focus of this approach is to produce the objectives created by the decision-makers in the implementation state (Pulzl and Treib, 2006). This means that policy objectives are first created by the decision-makers and they are responsible for agenda-setting, policy formulation, and decision-making (Jann and Wegrich, 2007); this is also referred to as the linear approach to policy implementation (Jie, 2016). This is why Muthanna and Sung (2023) argue that educational policies which employ the top-down approach do not consider students’ perspectives because of their hierarchical nature. In contrast, the bottom-up approach views ordinary public servants as the “main actors” when it comes to the delivery of the policy and its implementation (Muthanna and Sung, 2023). With this approach, the implementers play an active role in policy formulation (Jie, 2016). This means that policies that are enacted in this manner do not follow the linear cycle of policy creation but take into cognisance the actors within individual societies and institutions. In this way, Muthanna and Sung (2023) indicate that the bottom-up approach is much more suitable for educational policies as it involves students. This is also very relevant to what I discussed in my theoretical framework (cf. 2.1.1) because

with realist social theory, agency refers to how individuals can instigate change within the institutions that they occupy (Mirvahedi, 2021).

4.4.4 Policy evaluation

This stage of the policy cycle entails looking back at whether the policy truly achieved its intended goals. We also establish if the policy caused any unintended consequences, which can lead to the policy being changed or terminated (Jie, 2016). Similarly, this stage is also crucial to the *CRRVP* because as I have indicated it is important to understand how the policy affected students and if it did achieve its intended outcomes. Finally, by conducting this evaluation, we will be able to know what to improve if another situation like that of the COVID-19 pandemic occur.

4.5 Policy analysis of the Covid-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy

As I have discussed in Chapter 3 this study has used critical policy analysis to analyse the policy in question. The study has used the six-stage process outlined by (Young and Diem, 2018) which I thoroughly discussed in chapter 3 (cf. 3.9.2). First, I looked at the root and development of the policy in question. Second, I attempted to understand the difference between the intended policy and how it was practiced. Third, I analysed the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge. Fourth, I provided an analysis of the environment in which the policy was enacted and implemented. Fifth, the role that the policy played in social stratification was explained. And lastly, I discussed any resistance towards the policy from historically disadvantaged members. This analysis by Young and Diem (2018) was appropriate because this policy is not a public policy, but rather a private institutional policy; thus the normal route of policy analysis would not suffice.

4.5.1 Policy purpose and development.

The *Covid-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* (2021) was implemented at the beginning of the academic year in 2022, as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic. As indicated in the *CRRVP* (2021:3), this policy was introduced as a part of the “UFS

Cares Programme” after an agreement between different stakeholders in 2020. The policy was only intended to be applicable during the COVID-19 pandemic or until the university saw it fit that had served its purpose. The policy outlined that for any personnel to have access to any of the university campuses, they needed to be vaccinated against the COVID-19 virus. For instance, it is stated in the policy preamble/background that “UFS’s approach is accordingly that COVID-19 vaccination is required for all staff members and students who enter its premises” (CRRVP, 2021:3).

It is also indicated that this policy is in line with the *Government Gazette, No 44700, 11 June 2021* (CRRVP, 2021). This government Gazette is that of the Department of Employment and Labour, *Consolidated Directions on Occupational Health and Safety Measures in Certain Workplaces (2021)*. This was issued “*In terms of Regulation 4(10) of the regulations made under section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002: Measures to address, prevent and combat the spread of COVID-19 in certain workplaces in the Republic of South Africa*” (Department of Employment and Labour, 2021:1). The CRRVP (2021, is in line with the *Consolidated Directions on Occupational Health and Safety Measures in Certain Workplaces (2021)*. This means that it is obligated to comply with the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, Basic Conditions for Employment Act, No. 75 of 1997, Occupational Health and Safety Act, No. 85 of 1993, and any other government regulations. Compliance with all of these governmental acts is to ensure a safe working environment for employees of the UFS and this was also important because the institution had an institutional moral obligation to keep its community safe (cf. 2.6).

For example, as indicated in the *Consolidated Directions on Occupational Health and Safety Measures in Certain Workplaces (2021)*, these directions were applied to employers and their employees at the workplace who were allowed to continue to work during the regulations. In addition to this, this gazette also gives administrative directions for employers. For instance, it outlines that if an employer has more than 50 employees, they would have to submit a risk assessment accompanied by a plan and policy, “concerning the protection of the health and safety of its employees from SARS-CoV-2 infections and severe COVID-19 disease”. Employers also had to keep a written

copy of the risk assessment or policy, hence the creation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*. Therefore, it is clear that this policy was enacted as a way to keep the employees of the university safe and also to comply with government regulations during the COVID-19 pandemic.

It was also important to understand the relevance of the policy when it came to students. As indicated in the CRRVP, “concerning the students, the UFS owes them a duty of care to ensure a safe learning environment”. As such, the policy was also enacted to ensure a safe learning environment for students. The policy refers to sections 12 and 15 of the Bill of Rights in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996*. For example, as indicated in the Bill of Rights, “Everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity which includes the right(b) to security in and to control over their body and (c) not to be subjected to medical or scientific experiments without their informed consent” (RSA, Chapter 2, sec 12 (b-c): 1996). In addition to this, section 15 of the constitution states that every citizen in the republic has the right to “freedom of conscience, religion, thought, belief and opinion” (RSA, Chapter 2, sec 15, (1): 1996).

The inclusion of these two sections of the constitution symbolises two aspects. To start, this indicated that as much as the policy outlines that students need to be vaccinated to gain access to campus, it also recognises that individuals have a right to choose not to get vaccinated, as they have control over their bodies. Also because people have the right to freedom of conscience, and opinion, they can also choose not to vaccinate due to their beliefs and opinions without any medically inclined reasons. Despite the individual rights that people have, the policy was implemented as it served a purpose for the “greater good” (cf. 2.6.1). The policy indicates that the collective greater good and well-being of the UFS community should be balanced against “individual constitutional rights”. Therefore, when it concerns students, the policy does not indicate any other legislature that supports its enactment and what is stipulated in the policy about students’ mandatory vaccination.

However, the policy only refers to the “greater good” because of the moral obligation that the institution had and because vaccinated individuals contribute to herd immunity

thus promoting “public good”. In other words, everyone has the collective moral obligation to protect those who are vulnerable in our society (cf. 2.621). Therefore, the purpose and development of this policy was to facilitate the vaccination of UFS employees, ad-hoc contact workers, and students. The intention here was that all parties could gain continued access to all of the UFS facilities. Finally, this policy served as standards and procedures for the management of COVID-19 and COVID-19 vaccination.

4.5.1.1 Policy guiding principles:

The policy outlines several guidelines for its implementation. It indicates that the UFS has been a primarily face-to-face working and learning environment, especially for undergraduates. This means that the environment must be safe for both students and staff members. As UFS is a predominately contact institution, remote teaching and learning does not “align with the culture” of the institution. It is also indicated that students require access to the university because they do not have the required resources for remote learning. Most importantly, the policy recognises as stated earlier that it was intended for the “greater good”, and that the right of a few individuals outweighs the rights of many. This is why the policy refers to section 24 of the constitution, which explains that “Everyone has a right to “(a)to an environment that is not harmful to their health or wellbeing; and (b) to have the environment protected, for the benefit of present and future generations” (RSA, Chapter 2, sec 24 (a-b):1996). Finally, the policy also firmly indicates that the university has the right to deny any person access to its campuses based on safety protocols not being met.

4.5.2 The difference between the intended policy and how it was practiced.

This section will outline how the policy was intended to be practiced according to the policy document. A thorough understanding of how the policy was practiced will be provided later on when conducting a thematic analysis of the focus group discussion. Therefore, with regards to how the policy was intended to be practiced according to the policy document, I will be focusing on four parts: COVID-19 Workplace Regulations, COVID-19 testing, COVID-19 vaccinations and exceptions, and non-compliance for both students and university employees.

4.5.2.1 COVID-19 Workplace Regulations

The policy required all staff members, service workers, and students to maintain precautionary health measures when in any common areas within the university premises. In addition to this, the university was to ensure that there is a sufficient supply of sanitisers at “all entrances to buildings, elevators, and all communal areas” (CRRVP, 2021:9). The CRRVP indicates that all employees would be provided with the necessary personal protection equipment except for facial masks based on employees’ work description. However, the policy fails to indicate if any personal protective equipment would be provided for students. Furthermore, the policy indicates that all employees, service workers, and students should at all times wear an N95 mask which covers their mouth and nose whenever they are within the university premises. Kyung, Kim, Hwang, Park, and Jeong (2020) and Azap and Erdinc (2020) explain that an N95 filtering facepiece is a respiratory protective device designed to fit perfectly on the face as a way to protect from airborne particles. A mask such as this is effective as it protects against 95% of small particles, hence it is commonly used by health and industrial workers. It was valid for the policy to suggest the wearing of this protective device, however the policy did not indicate if the institution would provide these masks to students.

The policy’s further intention was to ensure that any person who is not vaccinated, should provide an approved exemption. Once a person had this exemption, they would be subjected to a COVID-19 screening questionnaire before they could gain access to the university campuses. Any persons who did not meet the requirements during the screening will be sent to the university health facilities and they would be advised on whether they should isolate themselves or go to quarantine. Finally, the CRRVP indicates that any person who breaks these regulations would be subjected to paying a fine, though the policy is not specific about the amount of the fine and what constitutes being fined.

4.5.2.2 COVID-19 Testing

When it came to COVID-19 testing, all employees, and students who suspected a possible exposure to the virus were expected to undergo a COVID-19 PCR test. Following this test, employees had to inform their line managers and undergo ten days

of quarantine. Similarly, students who had been exposed to the virus were expected to undergo ten days of quarantine after getting tested. During those ten days the policy outlines that employees should work from home remotely and should remote work not be possible, the employee should apply for a sick leave. In contrast, the policy does not say anything about remote learning for students during those ten days or any other provision for students since they would not have access to university resources. Further, if an employee or student were to test positive for the virus, the policy firmly indicates that they would not be allowed to access the university premises until they had provided a negative COVID-19 test result.

4.5.2.3 COVID-19 vaccinations and exceptions

As indicated earlier the university took a firm stance on vaccination and all persons who wanted to have access to the university premises had to be vaccinated. According to the policy, employees were encouraged to vaccinate to such a level that they were even allowed to do so even during working hours, without the need to complete leave applications or time off. The only condition which employees needed to provide was proof of vaccination to their line manager. The policy also outlines that for permanent employees, the cost of vaccination would be paid off by their medical aid scheme, as the “UFS subsidises the medical aid costs of employees. Contract employees were also expected to vaccinate at their own cost, and if they failed to vaccinate the university had “the right to cancel the relevant service contract of the ad hoc contract worker concerned” (CRRVP, 2021:11). With regards to students, the policy only indicates that students, as well as contract workers who were not medical aid members, could get vaccinated for free at any designated government facility.

The policy further indicates that if these mentioned parties experience any side effects from the vaccine, they should seek assistance from the university’s health facilities. In addition, the policy refers to the notice made by the Compensation Commissioner issued on the 22nd of October 2021, *“Notice on Compensation for COVID-19 Vaccination side-effects published in terms of section 6A(B) of Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act 130 of 1993 as Amended”*. This notice outlined that the compensation fund would cover the expenses of any employees who are

injured, become ill, or die as a result of receiving a COVID-19 vaccine. This only applied to employees who were required to be vaccinated as directed by the employer (Compensation Commissioner, 2021). Therefore, the CRRVP indicates that employees who unfortunately vaccinated and developed some sort of severe reaction to the vaccine could receive compensation according to the *Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act 130 of 1993*. However, the policy fails to indicate any form of compensation for students, if they unfortunately experience any life-threatening reactions to the COVID-19 vaccine.

The CRRVP also indicated that, to ensure a safe learning and teaching environment, registrations were to take place online. Any student who wanted to gain access to the university campuses, had to “provide proof of a COVID-19 vaccination or document supporting an acceptable ground for exemption” (CRRVP, 2021:12). Once the policy was implemented employees had to upload their proof of vaccination to a specific website provided by the university. Employees and students, who could not vaccinate and needed an exemption, were required to provide weekly negative COVID-19 test results. The cost of these tests would come directly from their own pockets as they waited for their exemption to be approved.

When it comes to exemptions, the policy is very specific about what staff members and students have to do, and under which conditions individuals can apply for an exemption. To illustrate, the policy indicates that individuals can apply for an exemption, based on a medical objection, which should be accompanied by a letter from a registered medical practitioner. Individuals could apply for an exemption based on a religious objection and this had to be accompanied by a letter from their religious leader. This letter had to state the nature of the religion and the reasons had to be supported by relevant religious doctrine. Other exemptions are those of natural immunity, participation in a clinical trial, or any other legally acceptable exemptions. Any application submitted was to be submitted to the “Vaccination Exemption Committee” for employees and the “Student Vaccination Exemption Committee” for students. These committees according to the policy were independent and they consisted of a “Medical Practitioner, the relevant

COVID-19 “Compliance Officer, a religious expert, a psychologist, a legal expert, and relevant Human Resources Business Partner” (CRRVP, 2021: 17). It is also worth noting that the policy does not indicate any representative for students in this committee. If an individual’s application for an exemption was declined and they felt that their reasons were valid, they had the option of sending their application to an Exemption Appeals Committee and this committee’s decision was final.

4.5.3 The Distribution of power, resources, and knowledge

This paper is specifically focusing on students’ experiences in a rural institution. Thus, this section of the analysis will only focus on the distribution of power, resources, and knowledge, within the context of students, which is indicated in the policy document.

4.5.3.1 Distribution of power

When a policy is enacted, multiple, stakeholders are involved from the agenda setting until the time of implementation and eventually termination (Jann and Wegrich, 2007). The CRRVP (2021) indicates that this policy came about “as part of the UFS Cares Programme and in line with the compact signed between all stakeholders during 2020”. The policy is not specific about who these stakeholders are. As indicated in the *Higher Education Act 101 of 1997*, the senate of a higher education institution should consist of the following individuals “(a) the principal; (b) the vice-principal or vice-principals; (c) academic employees of the public higher education institution; (d) employees of the public higher education institution other than academic employees; (e) members of the council; (f) members of the student’s representative council; and (g) such additional persons as may be determined by the institutional statute” (Higher Education Act 101, Chapter 4, sec 28(2) a-g, 1997:21).

In addition, an institution of higher learning also needs to have an institutional forum that comprises of “(a) the management, as determined by the institutional statute; (b) the council; (c) the senate; (d) the academic employees; (e) the employees other than academic employees; (f) the students; and (g) any other category determined by the institutional statute” (Higher Education Act 101, Chapter 4 section 31 (2) a-g, 1997:31). This forum is responsible for advising the council in matters of “race and gender equality

policies”. Furthermore, the forum is responsible for developing an institutional culture that encourages and endorses “tolerance and respect” for human rights and ensures that there is a suitable environment for teaching, learning, and research (Higher Education Act, Chapter 4, Section 31 (1) ii and v, 1997: 30). Therefore, it is evident that for any major decisions like the enactment and implementation of institutional policies, that multiple stake holders are required, and students are also represented in the form of the student representative council. However, when analysing the CRRVP there is no mention in the policy document of the student representative council. As such, this brings up the question of whether or not there was a fair balance of power from the policy conception to its eventual termination.

4.5.3.2 Distribution of Resources

In the context of students, the CRRVP indicates some resources which are specific to helping with the COVID-19 virus. For instance, students who exhibit any symptoms of the virus were to be provided with a free COVID-19 test, after being screened at the gate if they wished to have access to any of the campus facilities. Moreover, the policy also states that students, who had any concerns about receiving the COVID-19 vaccine, could “receive voluntary online individual counselling at any extra UFS appointed counselling support service” (CRRVP,2021:13). Similarly, the policy further explains that the university supports a blended learning approach, though the university is a predominantly face to face institution (CRRVP, 2021). In contrast, even though the policy indicates that it supported a blended learning approach, it does not indicate if any resources would be provided to students to successfully learn online. According to the *National Student Financial Aid Scheme Annual Report 2020/2021*, all students who were funded by NSFAs who had to learn remotely because of the pandemic during the 2020/21 period were eligible to receive electronic learning devices. In brief, this was a provision made by the Department of Higher Education and NSFAS, and the policy in question does not make mention of this provision to students.

4.5.3.3 Distribution of Knowledge

This section again, will focus on the distribution of knowledge, based on what is stated in the policy document. To start, the CRRVP does provide an explanation about the importance of vaccination for both staff members and students. In addition to this, the CRRVP (2021:25) provides a section on Frequently Asked Questions about the policy. This section provides knowledge on questions such as the following: “How does the vaccine work? Why should you get the vaccine? What are the most common side effects? Can the vaccine alter my DNA?” and many more. All of this knowledge is provided by an infectious disease specialist. Therefore, the policy does provide some knowledge about the virus and the importance of vaccinating. However, it fails to justify or indicate why vaccinating was for the “greater good”. This is an ethical issue and the policy did not go into detail about what this “greater good” is and why it is important for students to contribute to this “greater good”

4.5.4 The environment in which the policy is created and implemented

The policy was implemented at all three of the University of the Free States’ campuses. Two of the campuses are located in the Bloemfontein area, which is a city or urban area. The remaining campus, which is the focus of this study is in a rural area located in the Eastern Free State in Qwaqwa, at the Maluti A Phofung district. In the Census conducted in 2011, this district had 100 228 households, and on average, each household had about 3 to 4 people living in it. In addition, this district is rated as the most poverty-stricken area in the Free State, with 60 percent of households in the area earning less than R1 650 per month. A further eleven percent of households did not have access to electricity (Statistics South Africa, 2023). This is also validated by Denoon-Stevens and Mcwagae (2019) who also indicate that the Maluti-A-Phofung municipality is the most poverty-stricken municipality in the Free State and, confirm that only 15 percent of people are employed compared to the national average of 25 percent.

The Qwaqwa campus of the University of the Free State was opened in 1982 and formally known as UniQWA. It became part of the UFS at the beginning of 2003. The location of the campus provides easy access to other provinces like Gauteng and KwaZulu Natal (Denoon-Stevens and Mcwagae, 2019), hence there is also a large number of students who come from the nearby KZN regions. According to the UFS Annual Teaching and Learning Report (2020), out of the 20 feeder schools that provide UFS with the most students, eight schools are from Qwaqwa and another two came from the KZN areas. In addition to this, 82 percent of first-entering students at the Qwaqwa campus come from quintile one to three schools (UFS, 2020:7).

As explained by Ogbonnyana and Awuah (2019) and CAPS123 (2023), South African schools are classified into five quintiles based on the socioeconomic status of the area in which a school is located. This was done by the government to allocate financial resources to schools. For example, the first three quintiles are referred to as “non-fee-paying schools”, meaning that they receive much of their funding from the government and learners do not pay any school fees. Those in quintiles four and five are fee-paying schools, with the assumption that parents can afford to pay the schooling fees (Ogbonnyana and Awuah, 2019). Therefore, if 82 percent of students at the Qwaqwa campus come from quintiles 1 to 3, it is evident that these students come from very disadvantaged backgrounds. Hence, Denoon-Stevens and Mcwagae (2019), confirm that because of the location of the campus, some students who rent at the local township can walk from campus to where they stay.

4.5.5 Social stratification and the impact of policy on relationships of privilege and inequality

The policy does not address issues of inequalities and privilege. One might argue that this policy seems to favour those who are privileged and does not seem to accommodate less privileged students. For example, the policy states that if a student has applied for an exemption and they are waiting for the outcome, they have to provide a weekly SARS-COVID-19 PCR test at their own cost (CRRVP, 2021:14). This notion is unrealistic, especially for students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, like those in Qwaqwa. Furthermore, the policy also does not seem to indicate any provision

for online learning, especially for students in rural institutions. Unfortunately, the policy further explains that if a student fails to comply with what is stipulated in the policy, they “may be deregistered” (CRRVP, 2021:27). This in turn is an infringement against, the student’s right to education.

According to the *Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion the Post-School Education and Training System* (2016), institutions of higher learning are obligated to enact socially inclusive policies. For instance, some of the principles of social inclusion are “Human rights and equality; Inclusivity and social justice; Redress and transformation” (DHET, 2016: 23). Therefore, policies should foster inclusivity and social justice and they need to reflect the environment in which they are enacted and implemented. Additionally, as a result of our country’s past, rural institutions that are in former Bantu stands should also have policies that strive to redress our country’s past and not exacerbate the already existing inequalities. This policy framework is in line with the *White Paper on Education and Training* (1995) which also touches on social inclusion in institutions of higher learning.

4.5.6 Nature of resistance to or engagement in policy by members of historically underrepresented groups

The policy did receive some resistance before it could be implemented and once it was implemented. As discussed in Chapter Two, (cf. 2.4.4), the implementation of such policies received resistance from students. This also entailed resistance from student organisations like, the South African Students Congress (SASCO). They recognised that multiple institutions responded with online teaching and learning as a solution to the pandemic. However, SASCO resisted the notion of online learning and proposed that institutions should rather implement a blended learning approach. Similarly, institutions like TVETs would not be able to adopt this approach as they did not have the required infrastructure (SASCO, 2020). A thorough understanding of this resistance will be discussed later when conducting a thematic analysis. These will be based on responses

from students in a rural institution, and they represent historically underrepresented groups.

4.6 Silences and Omissions in the COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy

Policy analysis not only focuses on the policy contents and whether the policy objectives were met but also looks at what is not said and what was not included in the policy. As explained by Jie (2016), when doing policy analysis, one also has to consider the silences in the document, meaning, what has not been said and the omissions, which is what was not included. It is also equally important to discuss what has been “clearly and openly articulated” which is what I discussed above. The *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* had many omissions and silences.

4.6.1 Policy omissions

To start, the policy specifically provides many supporting legislatures as to why it had to be enacted and implemented, but the policies and guidelines solely focus on university employees and not students. For instance, the policy is in line with the *Consolidated Directions on Occupational Health and Safety Measures in Certain Workplaces (2021)*, Regulation 4(10) of the regulations made under section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002: *Measures to address, prevent and combat the spread of COVID-19 in certain workplaces in the Republic of South Africa*, the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, *Basic Conditions for Employment Act*, No. 75 of 1997, *Occupational Health and Safety Act*, No. 85 of 1993. However, the policy failed to indicate any other policies that supported the creation and implementation of this policy in the context of students. The only other legislature that was mentioned was the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa*, which was not enough to support this policy. To demonstrate, the constitution states that individuals have a right to control over their bodies and they cannot be subjected to any medical experiments without their agreement (RSA: 1996 Section 12 and 15). This legislature is also against this policy in a way. Therefore, the policy failed to indicate supporting legislation for students.

In addition, the policy failed to indicate certain resources needed by students. For example, the policy did not indicate if students would be provided with face masks, online teaching resources, and the cost of vaccinating. Staff members were however provided with masks, despite the possible greater demand for these by students. Additionally, the policy indicated that it supported the blended learning approach but it failed to indicate if resources would be provided for students to successfully undertake online learning. Furthermore, unlike students who had to vaccinate at their own cost or at government vaccination sites, employees were encouraged to vaccinate and the cost of this was to be paid by the university through medical aid schemes. Similarly, the policy omitted to indicate any compensation if students were to develop any life-threatening side effects to the vaccine, whereas employees who experienced any life-threatening side effects to the vaccine were to be compensated according to the, *“Notice on Compensation for COVID-19 Vaccination side-effects published in terms of section 6A(B) of Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act 130 of 1993 as Amended”*.

4.6.2 Policy silences

Another problem is that the policy is not transparent or it is silent about the stakeholders involved in the creation of this policy. To be exact, the policy has made no mention of the ‘Student Representative Council’. This is despite it being a prerequisite of the *Higher Education Act 101 of 1997*, the Senate and the institutional forum of any higher education institution which call for a student representative as a part of stakeholders who important in such decision-making. Furthermore, the policy is also silent about how disadvantaged students will be assisted. For instance, according to *The Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training Institutions (2016)*, the purpose of this document is to assist higher education institutions in the implementation of social inclusion mechanisms (cf. 2.1.3) (DHET, 2016). Therefore, this policy document obligates institutions of higher learning to ensure that their practices and policies are socially inclusive, and reflects the context of their students. And yet, if it is analysed, the CRRVP (2021) does not indicate any socially inclusive mechanics or strategies for disadvantaged students. Therefore, based on this,

some silences in the policy may be considered socially unjust for students who come from an environment like that of Qwaqwa (cf. 4.4.4).

5.7 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter provided an analysis of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy (2021)*. The approach used to analyse this policy was the critical policy analysis and I used the six stages provided by Young and Diem (2018). Policy analysis is imperative as it provides us with the opportunity to investigate if a policy has achieved its expected outcomes and what improvements can be made going into the future.

CHAPTER 5

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

5.1 Introduction

The involvement of participants in any research study is crucial, especially when attempting to understand their experiences. As indicated in the third chapter (cf. 3.4), this study is of a qualitative nature and to fully understand the experiences of students with the implementation of CRRVP, it is important to make sure that the very students who experienced it are involved in the data collection. Therefore, this chapter aims to provide data collected from the research participants using thematic analysis. An overview of how participants were selected is provided, as well as ethical procedures that were followed when collecting data.

5.2 Research approach and data collection

This study used the qualitative approach to collecting data (cf. 3.4). This approach was advantageous as it allowed participants to bring up new information that I, as the researcher did not anticipate. In line with this approach, focus group discussion was used to collect data (cf. 3.6.1). This was the best method to collect data as it allowed the participants to discuss freely and voice their opinions and feelings (Kuada 2012; Creswell and Guetterman, 2021). The focus group discussion lasted 58 minutes and 36 seconds and an audio recorder was used to record the discussion.

5.3 Participant selection

The study used stratified purposive sampling (cf. 3.8), which means that the participants were chosen because of their homogeneous traits but they also had some differences (Maree, 2019). For example, the study used ten participants who were all students from the same rural-based university campus. Additionally, they were also similar in that they all experienced the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*. The only difference is their year of study during the 2022 academic year when the CRRVP was implemented.

To illustrate, the first three participants were in their first year of study in 2022, when the policy was implemented. The second group of three participants was in their second

year in 2022 when the policy was implemented. The second group also experienced university before the policy was implemented. The last group of four participants were registered students before the COVID-19 pandemic and they also experienced the implementation of the policy in 2022. These were also postgraduate students who experienced university before the pandemic. Because students had to learn online during the pandemic, it was also important to identify their hometowns. Out of the ten participants, six come from Qwaqwa in the Free State, which is also where the rural university campus is based. Two came from the New Castle in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province and another from Mnambithi in the same province. The last participant came from Khayelitsha in the Western Cape.

Table 5.1: Participant geographic details.

Participant	Age	Gender	Years of study in 2022	Hometown
A1	20-25	Male	First-year	Qwaqwa FS
A2	20-25	Female	First-year	Khayelitsha WC
A3	20-25	Female	First-year	Qwaqwa FS
B1	20-25	Female	Second year	Qwaqwa FS
B2	20-25	Male	Second year	Qwaqwa FS
B3	20-25	Female	Second year	Newcastle KZN
C1	20-25	Male	Fourth-year	Qwaqwa FS
C2	20-25	Male	Honours	New Castle KZN
C3	20-25	Female	Honours	Qwaqwa FS
C4	20-25	Female	Honours	Mnambithi KZN

5.4 Ethical considerations

As indicated in the first chapter (cf. 1.11), because of the personal nature of qualitative research (Maree, 2019) following the correct ethical procedures is essential. For instance, this study obtained ethical clearance from the University of the Free State on the 22nd of March 2023, with the ethical clearance number: **UFS-HSD2022/1856/23**. Participants were also provided with consent forms a week before the focus group discussion in order for them to peruse thoroughly.

On the day of the focus group discussion, participants were reminded that they were there on a participatory nature and if they wished, they were free to leave. All of the ten participants were given code names. For example, because the participants were grouped according to their study leave, I used ABC and further classified them into those groups. Those who were doing their first year of study belonged to group A meaning there was A1, A2, and A3, as indicated in table 5.1. Furthermore, all of the participants were above the age of 18 meaning that no parental involvement was needed. Finally, participants were assured that their identities would be kept confidential and no unauthorized personnel would have access to the audio recorded or the transcript.

5.5 Data presentation

As discussed previously, this study employed the deductive approach to thematic data analysis approach (cf. 3.9.1) to analyse data collected from the focus group discussion. This approach was most suited as it allowed me, as the researcher, to take the participants' shared meanings and experiences and be able to make sense of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2012). In addition, this approach allowed me to take these shared meanings and create themes based on the participants' responses. A further advantage is that I, as a researcher, can address several research questions using this approach. Therefore, the following themes were identified from the focus group:

Table 5.2 Themes and sub-themes

Themes	Sub-themes
Theme 1: Student policy knowledge	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Prior knowledge of the policy before implementation 2. Participation and involvement in the policy process 3. Importance of the Policy

Theme 2: Challenges with online teaching and learning during the pandemic	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Lack of adequate resources for online learning 2. Unconducive environment at home 3. Lack of knowledge with using technological devices 4. Support from the University 5. Online course content and delivery
Theme 3: Effects of policy implementation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Restricted access to the university campus
Theme 4: COVID-19 Vaccination	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students' choice to vaccinate 2. Students' attitudes towards mandatory vaccination

5.5.1. Theme 1: Student policy knowledge

This theme provides an overview of students' knowledge about the policy, their involvement, and their attitudes toward the enactment of this policy. It further provides us with whether or not students deemed this policy a necessity or not. Theme 1 resulted in the following three sub-themes:

5.5.1.1 Prior knowledge of the policy before implementation

Before any policy can be created and eventually implemented, the public or the people whom the policy will affect have to know about the policy. As I indicated earlier (cf. 4.4) the policy process follows several steps (Jann and Wegrich, 2007; Jie, 2016). Furthermore, before a policy can be created a need for the policy has to be identified (Jie,2016) which normally entails informing the people or society whom the policy will affect, in this case students. Therefore, the question here is? was there proper consultation with students before the policy was implemented?

C3: ...yes I was aware of the required vaccination policy, in 2022 I was doing my honours so in 2021 I was doing my final year. So when applying for post-grad we were made aware that for you to access campus from next year, if this still goes on you going to need to be required...

C1: I was aware of it, that you need to be vaccinated for you to access the premises, as well as if you are on the campus you are supposed to be wearing your face mask. So yeah I was aware.

The two participants above, C3 and C1 demonstrated that they knew about the policy before it was implemented in the institution. Just like C2 indicated they knew about the policy because they had plans to continue their studies in 2022, as the participants above point out "... So when applying for post-grad we were made aware..."

In contrast to the above participants' response, first-year students in 2022, seemed to be unaware of the CRRVP. As indicated by A4 below, they only knew about the wearing of face masks, which was a requirement for the majority of citizens in South Africa at that time. They indicated that they were not aware of the policy as first-year students. As the following statements below show:

A4: I was aware that we had to wear masks but based on campus regulations I was not that knowledgeable.

A1: So I only became aware at the beginning of the semester when we had to attend classes. Uhhh we were stopped at the gate and told that we were not supposed to get in since we haven't been vaccinated yet.

Similarly, A1 was also a first-year student when the policy was implemented and they indicated that they only learned about the policy once they arrived at the university campus. This is shown by the comment: "... we were stopped at the gate ..." Therefore, this seems to have been an inconvenience to students, and it supports the notion that within realist social theory the structures which we occupy enforce certain consequences to actors that occupy them.

5.5.1.2 Participation and involvement in the policy process

It is not enough to inform people about a policy that is being created. The people who will be affected by the policy also need to voice their opinions about the policy. This is a crucial step in the policy process cycle. When establishing the efficacy of implementation, the CRRVP was important to establish if students were given the

opportunity to contribute towards the policy creation and provide their opinions before it was put in place.

C2: *But I was aware of it as an SRC, and yes, we did participate, there was quite a lot of engagement...they didn't do it necessarily so that they can involve anyone's voice, but simply to comply with the regulations to implement the policy or policy development, it was just that. Otherwise, everything that they said was going to happen, happened*

Student perceptions seem to imply that they did participate and provide their opinions about the policy before it was implemented. As indicated by C2 he was able to participate because he was a member of the SRC, in his comment "... I was aware of it as an SRC, and yes, we did participate..." This then answers the question of whether or not students were included in the creation of the policy. As discussed in the previous chapter (cf. 4.5.3.1) according to the *Higher Education Act 101 of 1997*, the institutional forum which has to comprise a student representative who needs to be included in the creation of any institutional policies, especially those that will affect students. As the following statements below show:

C3: *...Formality...that survey was just something to tick boxes to say that they can say we did follow procedure. But I think the decision was already made that in 2022 this is what's going to happen...*

This suggests that as much as students did participate in the surveys that were sent before the policy was implemented, they believe that this was a futile attempt to "tick boxes", as indicated by C. Students pointed out that the surveys were just a way for the institution to follow the required procedures and to do what is necessary for policy formulation. The comment below shows how students' responses were not considered:

C2: *...It was a simple question of yes or no. True or false, do you agree or not, on a scale of one to ten. There was no part in it that says what do you think about it...*

Additionally, participants also indicate that the surveys were not personal, meaning they did not allow them to voice out their opinions about the policy. It was just questions like, true or false and scaled questions. As indicated by C2: "...There was no part in it that says what do you think about it..." Another student stated:

B1: ...they knew that, once they say you should vaccinate and you do not vaccinate, you are not allowed. They knew that we were going to vaccinate because we didn't want to be kicked out of the campus...

This comment shows that, participants felt despite those interactions with them such as survey, before the policy was implemented, they were futile because the decision was already made. For example, B1 above indicated that, the institution knew that students would eventually vaccinate because they did not want to be excluded from entering university campus. Unfortunately, as I have also discussed earlier in the previous chapter (cf. 4.5.2.3) the policy did specifically indicate that if students did not want to vaccinate and their request for an exemption was declined by the “Exemption Appeals Committee” they may need to discontinue their studies from the institution (CRRVP, 2021:27). Therefore, as participant B1, above indicates the surveys which were conducted before the policy was implemented were unnecessary. What the institution intended to happen eventually happened when the policy was implemented, despite there being resistance from students.

5.5.1.3 Importance of the Policy

Another important sub-theme which emerged from the discussion, is whether or not students deemed the policy important or necessary. This is a very crucial factor to explore, especially considering that when these policies were enacted many students were against them. As discussed in the second chapter (cf. 2.4.4) the South African Students Congress (SASCO) did not accept the notion of online teaching and learning as it was not a privilege that many South African students had. Here are students' perceptions of this:

C1: ...maybe the necessity of the policy was to prevent the spread of the virus on campus. That's the only necessity that I see...

C2: ...From a policy point of view sure, but here's the problem. Contents of the policy that's where the problem is. It conditions you to have to vaccinate...

C3: ...I think they used a matter of urgency, to force students to vaccinate. I think it was necessary, yes politically so what was happening and what we were seeing in the media...

Thus, participants do to some degree deem this policy important and necessary for that time. This is shown as indicated by C1 above, “... *the policy was to prevent the spread of the virus on campus...*” which means that they did see the need for the policy. However, what participants did not necessarily appreciate about the policy was the forceful nature that it had on them. For example, C2 states “...*It conditions you to have to vaccinate...*” The same sentiments were shared by C3 in that the policy was necessary, but the institution used urgency to force students to accept the conditions which were indicated in the policy. Therefore, some participants understood the importance of the policy, but they were not happy with the contents of the policy, especially the mandatory vaccination and its forceful nature.

5.5.2 Theme 2: Challenges with online teaching and learning during the pandemic

Based on the focus group discussion participants presented the many challenges that they faced during the pandemic. These challenges ranged from them not having the required knowledge to operate technological devices successfully for online learning, to problems that they encountered at their respective homes when trying to attend online sessions. Theme 2 resulted in the following sub-themes:

5.5.2.1 Lack of adequate resources for online learning

One of the many challenges that participants highlighted was that they did not have the needed resources for them to successfully learn online. Their challenges ranged from, not having devices like laptops and computers to issues with electricity. Some students had to resort to using their cell phones to, type assessments and to attend online classes. This is very unfortunate because as indicated earlier, in 2020 82 percent of first entering students who attended this rural-based campus came from schools that fall between quintiles 1 to 3 (UFS, 2020). These are schools that rely on government funding and learners in these schools normally do not pay any schooling fees (Ogbonnyana and Awuah, 2019). Out of the 20 top feeder schools of the UFS, eight of them come from the Qwaqwa area (UFS, 2020). Unfortunately, the Maluti A Phofung

district is considered one the most poverty-stricken districts, (Denoon-Stevens and Mcwagae, 2019: Census, 2011), in which 60 percent of households earn less than R1650 per month (Statistics South Africa, 2023). This comment below shows this situation:

A2: ...*Because it was very difficult having to wake up at seven going to the lab, for you to attend an 8 am class. I was forced to buy a laptop even though I had no money, so that I can attend my online classes...*

In this case, participant A2 indicated that they did not have the needed laptop or computer to successfully learn online, hence they resorted to using the university computer labs. But, using computer labs was not convenient for them, which is why they had to buy a laptop so that they could attend online sessions. As indicated by the comments below:

C2:*This is the phone I had at the time and I think I used it to type three assignments at the time...*

A3: ...*NO, I was using my cellphone...*

Participants C2 And A3, unfortunately, indicated that they had to resort to using their smartphones for typing assignments as well as to attend their online classes.

Those who did have the required devices also experienced problems with electricity. It is no secret that South Africa has a power problem. As confirmed by Steenkamp, February, September, Taylor, Hollis-Turner, and Bruwer (2016), load-shedding has unfortunately become a frequent occurrence in South Africa which holds back the country from achieving its socio-economic objectives. Nowakowska and Tubis (2015) state that load-shedding is, when the available electricity does not meet the demand from customers, and thus it becomes necessary to cut or interrupt the electricity supply to certain locations. Nowakowska and Tubis (2015) indicate that these power shortages first started in 2007. However, Akpeju, Olasoji, Gaunt, Oyedokun, Awodele, and Folly (2020) date load shedding occurring as far back as 2005, which then occurred in the years 2007/8, 2014/15, and 2018/19. Now, in certain areas like Qwaqwa, power cuts are problematic on top of the fact that as discussed earlier, in the Maluti A Phofung

municipality six percent of households do not have access to electricity (Statistics South Africa, 2023). The following comments cement this notion:

B2: ...*Because I was living at home during online classes. It was about electricity, so the whole day we would not have electricity. So I would have to wait and sometimes I wouldn't attend classes because of electricity. So due to that, I had no marks for attendance, and again, there were online tests and exams. So sometimes I failed because of that problem.*

Participant B2 explain that because they had to attend classes from home, lack of electricity presented them with challenges. Power cuts left him unable to attend online classes, which meant that he did not have attendance marks for certain modules. Additionally, electricity also made him miss some online tests and exams, which negatively affected his marks. Therefore, learning online presented many challenges for students.

5.5.2.2 Unconducive environment at home

Participants also indicated that their respective homes also presented a challenge when it came to learning successfully online. Therefore, as much as institutions removed students from their university campuses based on safety concerns, they also subjected them to environments that were not conducive for online teaching and learning at their respective homes. According to the Statistics South Africa (2023) during the 2011 Census in the Maluti A Phofung district, an average household had 3 to 4 people living in it. Therefore, environments at home also proved to be a challenge for online learning for students, as shown in the comments below:

B1: ...*Obviously at home, you know when there are kids and parents. They are calling you they don't even care that you are studying or not, they will just tell you to do this and that. And you do not have to say no hence it was hard, you do not get a chance to focus and everything...*

C3: ...*But like she said, when you are at home, they don't care they don't understand. Like myself I grew up in a rural area, I live with my grandmother. So she does not get it when I say I am at school and I am attending classes or writing, yet I am on my phone. She would say you are busy playing with your phone I need you to go somewhere or I need you to do something...*

Participants B1 and C3, provide good examples of how difficult it was to successfully learn online while they were at homes. Parents and even children at home do not

understand the concept of online learning. Therefore, because students were at home, they were expected to do normal day-to-day chores.

5.5.2.3 Lack of knowledge about the use of technological devices

Some participants also highlighted that they did not have the required technological knowledge to successfully study online. For instance, certain students, especially first-years, did not have any exposure to the use of computers and laptops, let alone online learning management systems like Blackboard. Knowing how to properly use technological devices requires prior exposure to them and this is a privilege that many students do not have. They only come across things once they arrive at university and even then, they still require proper practice so that they can use them successfully. Many first years during the year 2022, had to study online for the first six months of the academic year. They were only able to access the campus and its facilities in the second semester once the CRRVP was discontinued. Therefore, this means that many first-entering students had to complete an entire semester without having the required knowledge as to how to operate devices and navigate online learning management systems. This is shown by the following comments:

A4: *For me it was hard coping with online learning because I had no prior experience of technological devices from high school. One moment I cannot see the slides and one moment I cannot hear the lecturer. And I don't have anyone to ask so it was very hard, especially as a first-year student.*

A1: *So, from my youngest age till I did my matric I was computer illiterate, like, very very illiterate. So, I actually had to attend computer classes for me to be able to comprehend everything that is going on, on campus. So, since I was doing online, there is a computer school there near the post office in town, so I had to attend that school last year around February. So, I could be able to type my assignments on my own save things and do all of that...So, I was in trouble I had to write synthesised paragraphs and stuff. So, I couldn't do anything because I was very illiterate. I didn't know word, I didn't know Excel, I did not know any of those things.*

A1 and A4 are both students who in 2022, were doing their first year. They did not have any experience from high school with online teaching and learning. Online platforms, such as Blackboard were new to them and they struggled. A1 even indicates that he had to resort to attending a computer short course elsewhere, which he had to pay for

himself. Therefore, the institution should have made means to familiarise new students with how to navigate online platforms.

5.5.2.4 Support from the University

One of the other major sub-themes to emerge was the lack of support that students experienced from the university. For example, many of the participants indicated problems that they experienced and which according to my understanding were supposed to be taken care of by the institution. This takes us back to the realist social theory and how structures have a way of imposing consequences on individuals. The following comment demonstrates one of these consequences:

***C2:** ...So there is a lecturer here who want people to participate, now it is as if you are not there. They say unmute your mike and say something and you are quiet. Then you have a problem, because if you going to unmute, you either choose to have a problem with your lecturer or us lab assistants. Because if you going to unmute and speak, I'm going to say you are making noise for other students...*

This quote indicates the following: As much as some students were able to vaccinate and get access to some of the university facilities like computer labs, they still experienced challenges. For example, the above participant stated “...if you going to unmute and speak, I'm going to say you are making noise for other students, who are also doing whatever they are doing...” Therefore, this shows a lack of support from the institution because students were expected to learn online, and those who did not have any computers or laptops had to resort to using the university ICT (Information and communication technologies) laboratories. However, the university did not make any provisions for students who had to attend online classes in the campus labs. This is shown by the comment below:

***C2:** I had a student In ICT, who was submitting an assignment... And she called one of us and asked how do I submit. when we got there, the person was not typing the assignment in a Word document, but she was typing in the comment box, the entire assignment. So I think also as ICT, and CTL (Centre for Teaching and Learning) together with faculties, failed when it comes to teaching ourselves and students how to adapt to this thing. Because we were just force-fed information.*

Furthermore, participants also indicated that because there was restricted access to campus, some students did not get properly orientated on how they could use the university learning management systems. Students were either expected to watch a video or read a document that explained how to conduct certain tasks. For example, the above participant C2, indicates that they encountered a student, who was writing an assignment in the comments section, rather than typing the assignment on a Word document and then attaching it to submit. According to the participant, the Centre for Teaching and Learning as well as faculties should have done more to orientate students to the use of online platforms like blackboard. This is shown by the comment below:

C1: *...they just sent me an email saying that if I am interested in a laptop I should apply for it and I use cash to pay for my studies. And I applied and I got it...*

Though some participants, indicated that the university did not support them, others like C1, stated that the university did assist them in acquiring a laptop. Despite the method of funding that a student used, either a bursary, study loan or self-funding, the institution did provide them with a device for online learning. Therefore, some support was provided to students from the institution.

5.5.2.5 Online course content and delivery

First-entering students also seemed to encounter some problems with the online class content and the method of delivery. To start, these students were new from high school and they were used to a class being conducted in a certain way. They had to adapt to the change in the content but also to the method of delivery which they were not familiar with. As confirmed by Lin (2022), first-entering students experience many challenges with online learning. This is shown by the comment below:

A1: *... I would be asking a question five times not even being heard about what I am asking. So it was a bit challenging, and I actually did not learn anything from online classes. And I actually feel lucky that I only attended online classes for just six months. So I feel lucky because I feel that I would have failed.*

Participant A1 indicated that they found it hard to gain the much needed interaction with their lectures during online classes. For instance, students A1 emphasises this with the comment: “...sometimes I would be asking a question five times not even be heard about what I am asking...” This shows that there was a disconnect between students and their instructors. Students could not successfully ask questions, or receive any clarifications, meaning that teaching and learning did not successfully take place. In addition, the participant indicated that “...I actually did not learn anything from online classes...” Students also experienced other challenges with online learning, this is shown by the comment below:

C2: *...So here is a problem we had, students who do not have computers, laptops, and the likes, so they have to go to the ICT labs to access computers. What we were told is, you are not allowed to make noise in the labs. So there is a lecturer here who wants people to participate, now it is as if you are not there. They say unmute your mike and say something and you are quiet...*

Student participation in any classroom environment is crucial. If students are quiet and not engaging with the lesson, the instructor assumes that successful teaching and learning is not taking place. That is why, even in online sessions the instructor still expects students to engage and participate. As the above participant indicated “...They say unmute your mike and say something and you are quiet...” This was problematic especially when lectures expected students to participate verbally in the online session, especially for students who relied on the computer labs to attend their online classes. This is shown by the comment below:

C3: *...Us as students having to come together and do group works. There was still group works and stuff. But it was hard alone face to face doing group works alone. But it was even worse with online, everyone is saying connecting or you are there you just switch off your data then on, off, on...*

The course content also presented some challenges to students. For example, some modules require students to work in groups to complete an assignment. In a traditional classroom setting, this is ideal, but with online classes, this is not always feasible. As the above participant indicated, “...Us as students having to come together and do

group works. There was still group works and stuff. But it was hard alone face to face doing group work alone...” Therefore, this suggests that some modules did not change or restructure themselves to adapt to the changes that were occurring at that time.

5.5.3 Theme 3: Effects of policy implementation

When a policy is implemented, it is not always guaranteed that it will achieve the expected objectives. Therefore, it is crucial to understand how students experienced the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*. At a rural institution, this becomes even more important. Theme 3 resulted in one sub-theme:

5.5.3.1 Restricted access to the university campus.

One of the major implication of the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* (2021) was the restricted access to the university campus and the university facilities. Understandably, this was a need at the time and social distancing guidelines had to be followed, but first-entering students seemed to encounter several challenges as a result of this restriction.

A1: So I am one person who is not good with directions so, I used to get lost all of the time going to classes. So it was actually a bit challenging, I didn't know that there was a well-functioning library here at campus because I didn't attend any orientation that told me that there was a library here on campus, where I can get textbooks. Like didn't know that you could borrow a textbook from the library to study..... I do not know how to put it but I kind of felt stupid when I actually came to the campus for the second semester.

The policy was only implemented for the first six months of the academic year in 2022. This meant that first-entering students in 2022 did not have access to the institution for an entire semester. Returning to the institution proved to be a problem for some students as indicated by A1 above: “...*I didn't know that there was a well-functioning library here at campus because I didn't attend any orientation...*” This shows that students did not have access to the institution for the first semester, they did not acquire the normal first-year experience which entails being acclimated with the environment and the facilities of the institution.

In addition, A1 further indicated that... *I kind of felt stupid when I actually came to the campus for the second semester...* This is quite worrisome because successful learning cannot take place if a person is not comfortable with their learning environment or if they do not feel that they belong there. As I have discussed previously (cf. 2.2.1) a safe learning space or environment “influences a student’s security, sense of belonging, mental health, and academic performance” (Maffini, and Dillard, 2022). Therefore, the institution should have made means to acclimate students to the new environment, so that they can feel that they belong there. This is shown by the comment below:

A4: *Well, I was living at SHU7-DUBAI residence. So I was on campus but not really on campus... having to ask a stranger where is this class? And people will just stare at you like, where are you from if you don't know those venues. It kind of like killed me.*

Even students who did have access to the institution also struggled with the transition of being fully on campus and attending classes. For instance, as indicated by A4 above “...*It kind of like killed me...*” Having to ask strangers where certain venues and facilities were presented a problem for students, which in a way could affect a student’s sense of belonging. This is shown by the comment below:

A1: *...Most students that started their classes being face to face, they seemed to be more motivated than I was coming back to campus... Like I was not motivated, so that disadvantaged me a lot because, me coming back here I was like what's going on here, I was puzzled...*

In addition, due to the restricted access to the university, participant A1 indicated that they did not feel as motivated as other students who had been exposed to the university facilities before the pandemic: “...*Like I was not motivated, so that disadvantaged me a lot...*” As I have stated previously (cf. 2.3), Maslow (1943), identified safety needs and psychological needs as being one of the fundamental needs in his Hierarchy of Needs of Human Motivation (Chan and Dishman, 2011). Motivation plays an important role in how a person views their world. If a student is not motivated, it is not likely that successful learning will take place.

C2: ...There were those who are on campus students but they could not come back to res because they were not allowed. Some resorted to renting off campus so that they can come to campus and write some of those tests like CSIQ...

Finally, one of the disadvantages that restricted access had for students was residence students having to rent off-campus accommodation just so that they could stay close to the institution. This is a prime example of how structures impose certain disadvantages for actors. Even though students could not have access to the institution, they were still expected to write on-campus tests. This meant that students had to use their own money to rent accommodation off campus because if they went home, they would not be able to write on-campus tests.

5.5.4 Theme 4: COVID-19 Vaccination

During the pandemic, people were encouraged to receive COVID-19 vaccines. Similarly, the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy (2021)* also mandated student and staff members to vaccinate. As I have discussed in my policy analysis Chapter 4, the policy required students and staff members of the university to be vaccinated so that they could gain access to the university campus. Therefore, it is crucial to attempt to understand how students in a rural-based institution perceived this notion of mandatory vaccination. Two sub-themes emerged from this theme:

5.5.4.1 Students' choice to vaccinate

For any person to take a vaccine it is their personal choice and they have to do so in an attempt to protect their health from some kind of disease or virus. As I have discussed previously (cf. 4.5.1) according to the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996* in the Bill of Rights sections 12 and 15, "Everyone has the right to bodily and psychological integrity which includes the right(b) to security in and to control over their body and (c) not to be subjected to medical or scientific experiments without their informed consent". In simple terms, this means that anyone in the republic cannot be subjected to any medical experiments without their consent and this includes vaccinations as well. Similarly, every citizen of the Republic of South Africa has the right to an Education (RSA, Chapter 2, section 29 (1) a-b: 1996). The constitution does not indicate that for people to receive an education they have to be vaccinated, and there

are actually no such conditions mentioned. Therefore, it becomes quite important to understand why students vaccinated, and if their choice to vaccinate was influenced by the CRRVP (2021).

B1: *I had no choice I had to come to campus.*

B2: *Same as her didnt have any choice. I remember in 2021 I was doing MATD so the semester tests were face-to-face, so I had no choice. So I had no choice I had to vaccinate in order to access the campus and write the test.*

When participants were asked why they vaccinated, a vast majority of them indicated that they were vaccinated because they wanted access to the institution. For example, B1 indicated that *I had no choice I had to come to campus*. This is something that the majority of the participants resonated with. For example, B2, also indicated that they were particularly vaccinated because in 2021 they were writing tests on campus, and this was during the pandemic. Though the policy was not implemented then, it was still expected for students to be vaccinated in order to access the institution. This is particularly unfair and shows some sort of policy paralysis and lack of context for the policy. The policy did not take the students' context, and backgrounds into consideration.

For example, as discussed earlier (cf. 4.5.4), the area in which the campus is located, has high rates of poverty and 60 percent of households in the area earned less than R1 650 per month (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Therefore, this means that the vast majority of students, had no choice but to vaccinate and have access to some of the university facilities because learning from home was not an option. Students who come from disadvantaged backgrounds cannot afford necessities like data and they do not have the required devices to successfully learn online. Therefore, the poor and disadvantaged students had to be vaccinated in order to get an education, which is unfair and unconstitutional to some extent. This is shown by the comment below:

C3: *...this campus is in a rural area, I'm from Harankopane (one of the villages in Qwaqwa) and I've been living in the residences from my first year. So, to ensure that I had access to everything I needed like internet connection and WiFi to make my studies easier. I had to stay on campus, I had to stay at*

res, and I knew that I had to get vaccinated to come back to res, otherwise I'm not going to be able to access campus...

The same sentiment was shared by C3 who indicated that because they had come from a rural area they needed to vaccinate. This was mainly to have access to some of the things like WiFi and computers that they could never have access to if they stayed home and decided to learn from there.

A1: It did contribute to my choice, being honest during the pandemic I attended a lot of funerals where people died of COVID... So I wanted to vaccinate form that experience I got because I was actually afraid of getting sick and dying.... It was a 50-50 situation, like now I'm going to varsity and I need to get vaccinated for that and that other factor.

C4: Definitely yes 100%

Additionally, it was also important to understand if the CRRVP contributed to students' choices to vaccinate. This is because a person should only vaccinate as a means to protect themselves from any virus or disease, meaning any health-related reasons. C4 indicated the CRRVP did "...definitely..." contribute to their decision to vaccinate. The same sentiments were shared by Participant A1, but he further indicated that he witnessed countless people dying because of the COVID-19 virus. Therefore, his choice to vaccinate was because he did not want to fall victim to the virus and so that he could have access to the university as mandated by the CRRVP.

5.5.4.2 Students' attitudes towards mandatory vaccination

It was also important to understand students' attitudes toward the notion of mandatory vaccination. This was a new occurrence in institutions of higher learning and understanding students' attitudes is important.

C3: ...this policy in my view, keeping in mind that we have different campuses. This policy was created, for UFS not considering context, that there are different campuses of the same university, so this was generalised without thinking of the different locations that the campuses are. Like even if you interview a student who is Bloemfontein their experiences will not be the same, even if they are from Qwaqwa but studying that side.

Participants pointed out that one of the issues that they had with this policy was that it was not contextualised. They indicated that the policy was created for the entire institution, without considering the fact that this university has different campuses which are in different locations. As shown by C3's comment above "*...Like even if you interview a student who is Bloemfontein their experiences will not be the same, even if they are from Qwaqwa but studying that side...*" Therefore, the experiences that students had with regards to the policy differ based on the campus they are studying in even though they are at the same institution. They further indicate that even if a student's hometown is Qwaqwa, if they study at the Bloemfontein campus which is approximately 300km from Qwaqwa, their experiences vary from a student who is at the Qwaqwa campus.

C2: *...its not fair, again look around, even if you are staying off campus you need certain things here. How many of us stay off campus but you prefer to be on campus?*

Similarly, participants indicated that this policy was not fair. This is because the vast majority of students rely on resources that are found at the campus for their studies. As indicated by C2 above "*...How many of us stay off campus but you prefer to be on campus?*" Therefore, they indicate that this policy was not fair because it restricted students' access to the institution and failed to recognize that the vast majority of students rely on the resources that are found on the campus to successfully learn. Additionally, this policy was not fair because students had no choice but to vaccinate. Thus the decision to vaccinate became more about access to education than protecting their health.

5.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter presented the data collected from participants using a thematic analysis approach. The data presented had in total four themes identified, and each theme resulted in its sub-themes. Therefore, participants were able to express their experiences with the implementation of the CRRVP. The next chapter which is the final chapter will provide a discussion of results, recommendations, and a conclusion.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATIONS, REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

6.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide the findings and conclusions of this study, they will also be accompanied by recommendations based on the findings. I will start by outlining my findings based on each of my research objectives which were identified in Chapter 1, (cf. 1.5). Of course, these findings will also be responding to the broader research aim which is: **To explore students' experiences with the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* at a rural University campus.** This chapter also responds to the last research objective, which is "To make comments on and suggestions regarding students' experiences with the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* in a rural university". This is because after discussing my findings I will also provide recommendations and suggestions for future research, which directly responds to the fourth objective.

6.2 Summary of Findings

6.2.1 Objective 1: **To gain an understanding of how a safe learning environment for university students is conceptualised on an international level and contextualised in South Africa**

The findings for this objective come directly from the second chapter. What was crucial here was to demonstrate how a safe learning environment is perceived on an international scale as well as here in South Africa. Student safety or a safe learning environment can be perceived from different standpoints, see (cf. 2.2.1). We have physical safety and strategic safety, and this study focused on the latter. Strategic safety entails as discussed, the rules and policies that institutions have that ensure the safety of individuals in their respective learning institutions. Therefore, I explored the findings from an international

context and South Africa separately, then provided a generalised conclusion of the finding based on this objective.

6.2.1.1 International conceptualisation of a safe learning environment

To understand how a safe learning environment is perceived, I looked at three countries, the United States of America (cf. 2.3.1), China (cf. 2.3.2), and Nigeria (cf. 2.3.3). It was imperative to start first by understanding safety outside of the COVID-19 pandemic context. I first looked at how international institutions kept their students safe before the pandemic. Firstly, when it comes to the USA, I focused on one of their major safety issues which is gun safety and control. This allowed me to understand how they enforced strategic safety in their institutions. For example, in the USA gun safety policies or guidelines depend on the state in which the institution is based and other states leave it in the hands of individual institutions to make their own policies, (see cf. 2.3.1). Additionally, three major policies help to ensure the safety of students in the USA; these are the *Gun-Free School Zones Act of 1990*, the *Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994*, and the *Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act in 1990*. These are some of the policies which ensure that institutions provide safe learning environments on their college campuses.

China was another country that I focused on to understand how they conceptualised a safe learning environment. In the context of China, there was not a great deal of literature available that focused on institutional safety. The majority of available literature focused on university laboratory safety, health science safety, or university employee safety and nothing on student safety. Finally, in Nigeria I identified several safety concerns within their institutions of higher learning. These range from gender-based violence for students who cohabit because of the lack of student residences in institutions of higher learning, to crimes such as stealing, rape, and drug abuse (cf. 2.3.3). Therefore, before the COVID-19 pandemic, institutions of higher learning internationally still had preexisting safety issues and they normally resolved them by enacting policies.

What remained was to understand how institutions of higher learning responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. With the response to the pandemic, my findings indicate that all three countries had similar if not identical responses. They relied on instructions or guidelines proposed by their governments. From those guidelines and policies, they enacted their own individual institutional policies. For example, in Nigeria, the government started by implementing lockdowns in certain states and these lockdowns ultimately resulted in students and learners not being able to attend institutions of learning. The same directions were later provided by the Federal Ministry of Education, and by the 23rd of March, all teaching and learning stopped. Similarly, in China, the government restricted social gatherings, the sale of alcohol, and in-person retail stores. With regards to institutions of learning, the government implemented an emergency policy initiative “*Suspending Classes without Stopping Learning*”. Institutions of learning also responded by creating and implementing COVID-19-specific policies. For example, the Chengdu Sport University enacted an “*Emergency Plan for Epidemic Prevention and Control of New Coronavirus Infectious Pneumonia of Chengdu Sport University*”. Similarly, in the USA, institutions followed guidelines provided by the CDC, and they quickly emptied their campuses.

Another element that emerged from my findings was the move to online learning. As a means to keep students safe, all of the above mentioned three countries resorted to moving their classes online. But unfortunately, another common feature from my findings is that all three countries experienced challenges with this mode of teaching and learning. In the USA, students struggled with the needed resources for online learning. In China, despite online teaching and learning not being a new concept, some challenges were still experienced. Students pointed out challenges with their learning environment, challenges with Internet connection, and amongst other factors increased levels of anxiety (cf. 2.3.2). In Nigeria, online teaching and learning could not be feasible for several reasons. As discussed previously (cf. 2.3.3), 57 percent of Nigerians experienced electricity shortages and only 42 percent of the population had access to the internet as of 2020. Lastly, several students did not have access to resources to learn online. In brief, online learning did not present positive results for all three countries.

6.2.1.2 South African conceptualisation of a safe learning environment.

My findings also indicate that South Africa is not immune to occasional safety issues within institutions of learning. For instance, there are preexisting safety issues that threaten secure learning environment in institutions of higher education (cf. 2.4.1). These range from challenges in student safety in residences, student alcohol consumption, rape, violence, cyberbullying, and the more prevalent one of student protests. South Africa conceptualises a safe learning environment in a similar way to the above mentioned three countries. For example, various institutions of higher learning have their own strategic safety mechanisms in place which ensure that our institutions of higher learning remain safe learning environments. Various institutions have different policies in place that keep students safe (cf. 2.4.1). The following are examples of this:

- The University of Cape Town has its own *Health and Safety Policy (2020)*
- Rhodes University has a *Sexual Offence Policy for Students (2019)*,
- University of Witwatersrand has the *Sexual Harassment, Sexual Assault, and Rape Policy and Procedures (2013)*
- The University of the Free State has the *Policy of the University of the Free State on Student Mental Health (2019)*,
- The University of Cape Town has a *University of Cape Town Student Mental Health Policy (2018)*
- The University of Johannesburg has *UJ Student Regulations (2007)*

These are just a few of the policies that are implemented in various higher education institutions in South Africa. One important element from my findings is that these policies are different from each other, meaning that, they are structured according to the diverse group of students in each institution and according to their needs. For instance, Rhodes University has a *Sexual Offence Policy for Students (2019)*, which cannot be implemented at the University of the Free State. This is because of the difference in diversity and student needs that each institution has. Therefore, that is why when the COVID-19 pandemic occurred various institution enacted policies that focused on keeping a safe learning environment for their students and employees during the pandemic (cf. 2.4.1). For example:

- The *University of Witwatersrand Mandatory Vaccination Policy* (2022)
- The *University of Johannesburg Mandatory Vaccination Policy* (2021)
- The *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* (UFS, 2021)

The importance of these differences in policies will be discussed next when touching on the South African policy framework.

6.2.2 Objective 2: To go through the South African policy framework for a safe learning environment for university students and to position the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* in this framework;

The findings for this second objective will be divided into two. First, I will discuss my findings on how a safe learning environment is encouraged through the South African Policy framework. Second, I will discuss my finding of whether or not the CRRVP (2021) was in line with the South African policy framework for a safe learning environment.

6.2.2.1 South African policy framework for a safe learning environment

Within the South African context, the findings are also similar to those of the three countries discussed above. The *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996*, ensures the safety of all its people (cf. 2.4.3). For instance, under the Bill of Rights, everyone has the right to freedom and security, (RSA, 1996:6, Chapter 2, section 12c,). In addition to this, everyone has the right to an environment that is both not harmful to their health or well-being and for that environment to be protected for the good of the present and future generations (RSA Chapter 2, section 24a-b, 1996). Under section 29 of the constitution, every citizen has the right to Education, which includes basic education and adult basic education (RSA Chapter 2, section 29a-b, 1996). These findings then point out that because education is a basic right, it remains the responsibility of various institutions to ensure the safety of individuals who enter their premises, this responsibility is both for public and private institutions.

One of the key findings in this study is how the Department of Education keeps students safe; this is another example of strategic safety. There are various policies and guidelines that the Department of Higher Learning expects higher education institutions

to abide by. One of the key policies in my findings is the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997). This policy indicates that the DHE does not micromanage institutions and therefore it is each institution's responsibility to handle its affairs so that diversity is achieved and the institution's needs are prioritised. This means that individual institutions can enact their own policies which are within the context of their students and employees. Furthermore, another crucial element of this policy is that institutions can create their own mechanisms that focus on allowing a safe and secure environment within their individual institutions (DoE, 1997, chapter 3, (3.42)). These findings indicate that it remains the responsibility of institutions of higher learning to enact their own policies which ensure the safety of their students, employees, and any other person who enters their premises (cf. 2.4.1).

Another key policy from my findings is the *Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation* (1996). This policy affirms what I have discussed above. It refers to "...creating an enabling and safe work and study environment" (DoE, 1996:35). Additionally, my findings revealed that it is not enough for institutions to enact their individual policies but that these policies need to reflect the kind of students that they have in their institutions. A policy that affirms this is *The Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training Institutions* (2016). As discussed in previous sections (cf. 2.4.3), this policy framework aims to promote social inclusion in higher education institutions by making sure that policies and legislations in individual institutions have mechanisms for social inclusion. This framework also calls for an analysis of existing policies and making improvements where necessary. Furthermore, it declares that policies should promote "substantive equality that aims to remove all barriers that perpetuate and create inequalities in society" (DHET 2016).

6.2.2.2 CRRVP positioning with the South African policy framework.

Now with regards to how the CRRVP (2021) is situated within the SA policy framework, findings come from Chapter 2 and Chapter 4. In Chapter 2, I provided the necessary policies which are crucial in ensuring a safe learning environment (cf. 2.4.3 and cf. 6.2.2.1 above), and the other findings come from Chapter 4 from the policy analysis.

When analysing the CRRVP (2021), my findings indicate that to a certain extent, the policy is compliant with the SA policy framework. For example, it complies with *The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa Act 108 of 1996*, as discussed above, every citizen in the republic has a right to an environment that is not harmful to their health or well-being, and for that environment to be safe for the good of current and future generations (RSA Chapter 2, section 24a-b, 1996). Therefore, the policy was in line with these factors. Additionally, the institution had a responsibility to ensure that its university community was safe and protected from the virus and there was no transmission of the virus among the university community, hence the enactment of this policy was a need at the time. Furthermore, the institution was also compliant with the *Education White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education* (1997) because it is the responsibility of each institution to enact its individualised policies because the DHE does not involve itself in the affairs of institutions. Lastly, when it comes to the *Green Paper on Higher Education Transformation* (1996), institutions are obligated to create safe working and learning environments; this was also present in the policy.

But in contrast, some of the policy contents present contradictions from what the constitution declares (cf. 4.4.1). The notion of mandatory vaccination from the CRRVP seems to contradict section 12, which is the right to bodily integrity, and section 15, which is the right to an opinion (RSA, Chapter 2, sec 12 (b-c): 1996). Therefore, individuals cannot be forced to vaccinate because they have control over their bodies and they can voice their opinions. Another important element is the right to education. Nowhere in the constitution do students have to get vaccinated to attend any educational institution in South Africa. Even when the pandemic, occurred the government of South Africa did not force its citizens to vaccinate. People were merely encouraged, but it was not mandatory.

Another important concept from my findings is that the policy is not contextualised according to the diverse student needs (cf. 4.5.4). This means that the policy is not in line with the earlier mentioned policy: *The Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training Institutions* (2016). This is

because this policy was implemented on three campuses, one is in a rural-based area and another two in an urban area. As discussed in (cf. 2.5) rural-based universities face some inequalities compared to urban-based universities and if you look at the area in which the rural campus is based, the conditions are not the best, see (cf. 4.5.4). This policy was not fair to the students of that campus. This is because they did not have any choice other than to vaccinate in order to gain access to education. The main reason for this is that most indicated that they did not have the required resources to learn online, see (cf. 5.5.2). Therefore, many disadvantaged students vaccinated so that they could be granted access to the university campus. This is not acceptable because people should only vaccinate to protect themselves from diseases, not because they want to have access to education. My findings then indicate that the policy did not have the required social inclusivity mechanisms encouraged by *The Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training Institutions* (2016).

Finally, the CRRVP itself did not provide us with any other policies that supported the notion of mandatory vaccination. The policy only refers to the notion of “the greater good” which is understandable and valid from an ethical standpoint. However, the most important finding from this study was that the policy was only thorough when it came to the employees of the institution, especially with the notion of mandatory vaccination. This is because the policy provided other supporting legislature that encouraged employees to vaccinate, see (cf. 4.4.1). For instance, the CRRVP provided the following supporting legislature for mandatory vaccination when it came to employees:

- *Government Gazette, No 44700, 11 June 2021 (CRRVP, 2021)*
- *Labour, Consolidated Directions on Occupational Health and Safety Measures in Certain Workplaces (2021).*
- *Basic Conditions for Employment Act, No. 75 of 1997,*
- *Occupational Health and Safety Act, No. 85 of 1993*
- *Notice on Compensation for COVID-19 Vaccination side-effects published in terms of section 6A(B) of Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act 130 of 1993 as Amended*

- The *Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act 130 of 1993*

The CRRVP was also very detailed about how employees could apply for compensation if a life-threatening side effect of the vaccine occurred (cf. 4.4.2.3) but no compensation was indicated for students. In conclusion, findings suggest that this policy was originally intended for the employees of the university and not students. This is because most of the policy frameworks provided were only relevant to employees, not students. But as much as this is true, the policy was a positive means, as it allowed employees to work in a safe environment. If there was no mandatory vaccination, the working environment would not have been safe and there would have been easy transmissions of the virus amongst employees and eventually students. Finally, the institution also had a moral obligation to keep its university community safe (cf. 2.6).

6.2.3 Objective 3: To understand challenges faced by students with the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* in a rural university campus

The findings for this objective come from Chapter 5, the thematic analysis from the focus group discussion. Participants indicated the following factors were challenges which occurred with the implementation of the CRRVP.

6.2.3.1 Online teaching and learning during the pandemic

One of the major findings to emerge from the implementation of the CRRVP has to do with the challenges that students faced with online teaching and learning during the pandemic. The CRRVP failed to provide details as to how online teaching and learning would take place, and it also did not indicate the allocation of resources for students to successfully partake in online learning (cf. 4.5.3.2). Participants confirmed that most of them did not have resources like laptops to write assessments, or attend online sessions, and some had no choice but to use their smartphones for their academics, which was not convenient (cf. 5.5.2.1). Additionally, when looking at the environment where the campus is situated and the disadvantaged nature of rural-based students, it

was also not feasible for students to purchase things such as laptops. However, some participants did indicate that the institution did provide them with laptops.

The majority of the participants came from Qwaqwa and others came from other rural areas in KZN and WC (cf. 5.1). Participants indicated that another challenge that they faced with online learning was their environment at home. Some participants indicated that it was not convenient for them to learn while at home. For example, some participants were living with large families (cf. 4.5.4) which made it difficult to learn online. A few participants, indicated that they were still expected to do chores to the extent that it affected their studies, because they were at home and their parents did not understand the concept of learning from home. First-entering students in 2022 seemed to mostly suffer the bulk of the challenges faced with online teaching and learning. To start, some students had never used any technological devices like laptops nor had they ever used learning management systems like Blackboard (cf. 5.5.2.3). Participants indicated that this presented a challenge for them. Additionally, some participants stated that they were not provided with enough knowledge to navigate the learning management system. For example, some first years did not even know how to properly attach a document on Blackboard Turnitin to submit an online writing assignment.

Furthermore, those who did manage to vaccinate and have access to the university facilities could not properly engage and participate in online classes. This was because the computer labs did not allow students to respond via audio to their online classes and some lecturers and instructors required students to respond like that so that they knew that students were still present in the session (cf. 5.5.2.4). Lastly, another challenge with online teaching and learning from my findings was that some modules did not restructure to accommodate the move to online learning. Participants indicated that some modules still required students to complete group activities and the likes though classes were online and it was close to impossible to meet with other student (cf. 5.5.2.5).

6.2.3.2 Restricted access to the university campus

The second major challenge which participants indicated from the implementation of the CRRVP was the restricted access to the university (cf. 5.5.3.1). The policy

implementation meant that students did not have access to the university for the first six months of the academic year and this presented many challenges for them. First-entering students were not orientated about how the campus was structured, meaning they did not know how to get to certain facilities, and they did not receive the proper first-year experience. This resulted in some participants confirming that they did not feel as motivated to study nor a sense of belonging. If a student is not comfortable in their learning environment or if they are not motivated, successful learning cannot occur.

6.2.3.4 Mandatory Vaccination

Lastly, the noting of mandatory vaccination also presented a challenge to students. Some participants indicated that they were not happy with the notion of mandatory vaccination. Additionally, others indicated that this notion of mandatory vaccination was forced on and that they had no choice. After all, learning from home was not an option (cf. 5.5.4.2). My findings indicate that participants were mostly vaccinated as a means for them to have access to education, and unfortunately, this is not acceptable. Although some participants pointed out that they were vaccinated for health reasons but the policy did eventually contribute to their choice to vaccinate.

6.3 Objective-based conclusions

6.3.1 Objective One conclusion

Ensuring a safe learning environment is key in any learning institution. Findings (cf. 6.2.1) show that the majority of higher learning institutions both internationally and in South Africa make use of policies to keep both students and staff members safe. It is evident that policies provide the norms and standards which every person in higher education has to follow to ensure a safe learning environment. In brief, the creation of the CRRVP was a need because the institution had to keep its community safe during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6.3.1 Objective Two conclusion

The South African policy framework for higher education institutions allows individual institutions to enact policies as they see fit according to their institution's needs. What is important is that institutions need to make policies relevant to the needs and contexts of their students. Therefore, from my findings above (cf. 6.2.2), it is clear that to a certain extent, the CRRVP was not contextualised according to students' needs. Students from rural-based campuses have certain disadvantages compared to urban-based campuses. As such the institution had to ensure that these disadvantages were taken into cognisance and provide contextualised solutions.

6.3.1 Objective Three conclusion

The implementation of the CRRVP did in fact present students with several challenges. These ranged from, challenges with online teaching and learning, restricted access to the university, and the notion of mandatory vaccination. Rural university students do experience several challenges (cf. 2.2.23). Therefore, it should be the responsibility of each institution to lessen these challenges and not add to them. In brief, the implementation of the CRRVP inconvenienced students as it came with more challenges than solutions.

6.4 Recommendations

6.4.1 Objective 1 recommendations

A safe learning environment is conceptualised and contextualised similarly all around the world. Therefore, what I suggest especially with the concept of strategic safety is that institutions and governments should strive to enact policies that are reflective of their people. For example, in a country like Nigeria, the government responded to the pandemic by introducing restrictions and other limitations. Unfortunately, these policies showed policy paralysis (cf. 2.3.3) as they were withdrawn from the realities of everyday citizens in the country. Yes, the intention was to keep people safe but keeping them away from their livelihoods did not make sense especially if there was no compensation

for them. Similarly, higher education institutions and departments of higher education have to ensure that there is a proper mechanism in place in their institution that ensures a safe learning environment. What is crucial is that those mechanisms need to reflect the realities in their country and their individual higher education institutions. Adopting similar mechanisms from the international community is important, but what is even better is if we adopt and contextualise our policies to fit our student population.

6.4.2 Objective two Recommendations

As discussed in my findings, the CRRVP was not fully in line with the South African policy framework. With that in mind, I provide the following recommendations. To start, before a policy can be enacted higher education institutions need to ensure that that policy is contextualised according to students' needs. Secondly, the policy needs to have social inclusion mechanisms as recommended by *The Policy Framework for the Realisation of Social Inclusion in Post-School Education and Training Institutions (2016)*. Thirdly, it is important to provide and indicate all the supporting legislature for the enactment of a policy. This is because the CRRVP only made reference to the right to a safe environment and the "greater good" as a means to enact the CRRVP, and unfortunately, this was not enough. The majority of the supporting legislature was focused on the university's employees (cf. 6.2.2.2). Finally, the institution should also make sure that public opinion is of value. This is because participants indicated that the surveys that they completed before the policy was implemented were superficial and not personal (cf. 5.5.1.2). Therefore, these questionnaires need to ask more personal questions and allow the public or students to come forth fully and provide their feeling about a policy before it can be implemented.

6.4.3 Objective three Recommendations

In this section, I will provide recommendations based on the challenges that students faced with the implementation of the CRRVP.

6.4.3.1 Online teaching and learning.

This was by far the biggest challenge that participants discussed. To start, I recommend that institutions should ensure that students are properly orientated with the use of

learning management systems. It was not possible to receive face-to-face training but other means should have been provided, other than reading PDF documents with the intention that students would easily understand. The majority of first-year students have no computer background which is because they mostly come from quintile 1 to 3 schools (cf. 4.5.4) therefore for them to merely read a PDF document is not enough. The institution should have provided more assistance with how to acquaint students with online learning and how to navigate learning management systems.

Secondly, the university should make it possible for students to use their computer labs to attend online sessions and to use audio. This might entail the development of new facilities but it would be very helpful. This is especially in a rural-based institution where students do not have the required resources to learn from home. Poor network connections and power cuts are a problem, so ensuring that students can attend online classes from the university's computer labs will be beneficial.

Thirdly, if another pandemic like the COVID-19 pandemic were to occur, institutions should ensure that their courses are adapted and changed according to the circumstances. For example, group activities and on-campus tests should be changed to accommodate changes. Finally, it remains the responsibility of parents to provide a conducive environment for their children to learn at home. This means that parents from poor backgrounds need to understand that teaching and learning can take place at home. In addition, if it is not possible to learn from home, it then becomes the responsibility of the institution to provide students with conducive learning spaces, like campus residences.

6.4.3.2 Restricted access to the university campus

The CRRVP restricted access to the university campus and that presented some challenges. I recommend the following. As much as the institution had to abide by social distancing standards, they needed to ensure that students still had an opportunity to be orientated to the university campus. This is crucial because students need to feel that they belong to their institutions and this is especially important for first-year students. If students are familiar with their learning environment, it increases their motivation to study and they feel a sense of belonging which will positively influence their academics.

Therefore, I recommend that students, especially first years are orientated to their campus and are allowed limited access to the institution so that they feel like they are university students.

6.4.3.3 Mandatory Vaccination

The notion of mandatory vaccination was quite controversial. I recommend that this should not have been made mandatory for students, especially in a rural campus where many students come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The CRRVP failed to provide the necessary supporting policies for this notion. Therefore, it was not just for the university to oblige students to vaccinate. Vaccination should have been a personal choice for students and not a means to acquire access to education. The institution should have focused its efforts on encouraging students to vaccinate and not mandate them to vaccinate. Yet the question remains, if the policy did not mandate the university community to vaccinate how would the university have maintained a safe learning and working environment?

This then becomes an ethical issue and part of being a responsible citizen of the republic. Therefore, the institution should have focused its efforts on encouraging people to vaccinate and informing them of the societal benefits of herd immunity (cf. 2.6). Students and staff members needed to understand why it was so crucial to vaccinate as a moral and ethical obligation to others, and not just for individual health (cf. 2.6). Furthermore, there are other less coercive methods that the institution could have used (cf. 2.6.2), for example, educational programmes that are focused on the importance of vaccines and herd immunity may have proved valuable. If students understood that vaccinating was not just for their own good but for the good of others in the university community and society in general, maybe there would have been less resistance from students.

6.5 Limitations and suggestions for future research

This study carried with it many limitations. To start, this study was only conducted at one rural-based institution, with a limited number of ten participants. Additionally, only one COVID-19-specific policy was analysed whereas there are other similar policies at other

universities in South Africa. The study only focused on a rural-based campus, and no urban-based campus participants were involved. Therefore, the research methodology used and the participants selected were limited to this study to a certain extent.

However, the small sample size was also advantageous. This is because I was able to look at individual students and identify their own specific challenges. If the sample was on a larger scale, it would have been more difficult to see and identify those challenges that were unique to certain participants. A larger sample would have made it impossible to conduct a focus group discussion, which means that participants would not have been able to express themselves as they have in this study.

I therefore suggest the following for future research. Firstly, a wider sample might be beneficial. The inclusion of more students, members of the student representative council, members of the institutional forum or senate, and maybe a representative from the department of higher education could prove beneficial. This would allow for opinions and perspectives from both sides and could provide perspectives that were not identified in the initial research. Secondly, I suggest that other methodological standings be used. For example, this study used focus group discussion to collect data, maybe in the future, in-depth interviews would provide different findings. Focusing on more than one rural-based university campus can also prove to be beneficial. This can allow for the identification of how different universities with rural campuses incorporate social inclusion mechanisms in their institutional policies. In summary, many future suggestions can be implemented to receive better results when conducting a study similar to this one.

6.6 Reflections

6.6.1. Theoretical reflection

This study was directed by the realist social theory (cf. 2.1.1) which assisted me in understanding how **students experienced the implementation of the COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy at a rural University campus**. Central to the theory is the morphogenic approach which looks at the relationship between structure and agency. This was crucial in this study because I needed to understand how the decision made by the university influenced and affected student's agency. This

theory is advantageous because if used as a framework, one can up with several theories that aim to introduce change (Tsoetsi and Mile, 2021). Now, my initial assumptions were focused on how this policy was of consequence to students and it was an inconvenience especially when it comes to the way in which it took away their autonomy and agency. To a certain extent, this is true because when looking at the policy analysis there are many omissions and silences when it comes to students.

However, with this framework, I was able to understand that the visible reality is not always what it seems. As much as there are many disadvantages in this policy, and that structures imposed certain consequences on actors, there was actually a need for this policy. One of the major factors that the policy mentioned was the “greater good”. Initially, I did not believe this was enough of a reason to enact a policy until I understood that this notion of the “greater good” stems from an ethical standpoint. This is the invisible reality that stems from this study. The institution needed to make sure that its community was kept safe. Therefore, it had a moral obligation to keep students and employees safe. Furthermore, according to the realist social theory human beings are social actors, thus they can bring about agency. This then implies that the responses that I have accumulated from this study can be beneficial in bringing about change. We can use students' experiences to better prepare our institutional policies for the next pandemic.

In conclusion, this framework mostly showed me that institutions do really have consequences for individuals that occupy them. However, the actions of structures can be viewed as consequences if there is a miscommunication between structures and the people that occupy them. If students were properly educated about the importance of vaccinating and herd immunity, (cf. 2.6) then there could not have been so much resistance. However, this does not take away the consequences that came with the enactment of this policy. Students faced many challenges and going forward it would be advantageous if institutions of higher learning minimised these challenges, especially for those campuses that are rural by nature.

6.6.2 Methodological reflection

My choice of methodology has presented me with more than I had anticipated. For example, the critical paradigm allowed me to create a firm connection to my theoretical framework (cf. 3.3). Both the paradigm and the framework focus on structures in society and the relations in societal systems and power relations among them. The critical paradigm focuses on the emancipation of the oppressed in society. This was a good lens to view the world, especially when looking at students on a rural campus and attempting to understand how the policy acted as a form of oppression. I had already known that rural-based students have certain disadvantages and I needed to understand how the CRRVP added to these already existing disadvantages. Therefore, this paradigm allowed me to create a bridge between the reality I already knew and the phenomenon that I wanted to understand.

Additionally, the qualitative research approach was advantageous because it allowed me to fully understand participants' lived experiences. Without this approach and the focus group discussion, it would not have been possible to fully grasp what students experienced during the implementation of the policy. The policy analysis was also an advantageous method to collect data because it was crucial for me to understand how the policy was conceived and eventually implemented and discontinued. I have to say the method of analysing the policy was the crown jewel of this study. Critical policy analysis allowed me to focus my analysis in a very unusual way but it was in my opinion, the best way as I was looking at an institutional policy that was not for the greater society. Therefore, both these methods of collecting data allowed me to understand how **students experienced the implementation of the COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy in a rural University campus**. Finally, I was able to do some form of crystallisation and interpretation of my data successfully, mostly because of the use of more than one data collection tool.

6.6.3 Personal and Academic Reflections

Embarking on this academic journey has been one of the biggest challenges I have faced but similarly, one of the best challenges as an academic. This study has allowed me to grow as an academic in general. It has also allowed me to have an understanding

of the field of educational policy which I am very passionate about. I have always understood that policies have a way of emancipating learners and students. However, they can also cause inequalities in our respective institutions of learning especially if those who are supposed to implement them do not understand their intentions and objectives. One of the key reasons which encouraged me to go in the direction of education policy studies was and is still, to ensure equal access to institutions of higher learning for students, especially for those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds. This study has allowed me to realise this dream of mine because advocating for those who are less privileged in society is my goal.

6.7 Conclusion based on the aim

In conclusion, this study aimed to **explore students' experiences with the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy at a rural University campus***. This study has collected data through critical policy analysis and a focus group discussion. The policy analysis indicated that this policy had many omissions as well as silences when it came to students (cf. 4.5). The policy seemed to favour the employees of the university and not its students. The analysis also indicated that this policy was not contextualised according to the needs of a rural-based campus. Because of the many omissions and silences in the policy students did experience a wide range of challenges when it policy was implemented. For instance, the policy was silent about how the blended learning approach will commence, and as such participants indicated that they experienced several challenges with online teaching and learning. Furthermore, participants were not in favour of restricted access to the university campus. This was a disadvantage and a challenge because the majority of them did not have the proper means to learn from home. In brief, the notion of mandatory vaccination drew a line between students having access to an education or not, which was not fair for students who had no other option because learning from home was not possible. In conclusion, the implementation of the CRRVP did present students with several challenges.

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Appendix A: Ethical clearance



GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

22-Mar-2023

Dear Miss Juliet Mokone

Application Approved

Research Project Title:

The implementation of the COVID-19 regulations and required vaccination policy: Rural university students' experiences.

Ethical Clearance number:

UFS-HSD2022/1856/23

We are pleased to inform you that your application for ethical clearance has been approved. Your ethical clearance is valid for twelve (12) months from the date of issue. We request that any changes that may take place during the course of your study/research project be submitted to the ethics office to ensure ethical transparency. Furthermore, you are requested to submit the final report of your study/research project to the ethics office. Should you require more time to complete this research, please apply for an extension. Thank you for submitting your proposal for ethical clearance; we wish you the best of luck and success with your research.



Yours sincerely **Dr**

Adri Du Plessis

Chairperson: General/Human Research Ethics Committee

205 Nelson Mandela Drive P.O. Box 339

Park West

Bloemfontein 9300

Bloemfontein 9301

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South Africa

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Appendix B: Gatekeepers Letter

UNIVERSITY OF THE
FREE STATE
UNIVERSITEIT VAN DIE
VRYSTAAT
YUNIVESITHI YA
FREISTATA



Office of the Vice-Rector: Research and Internationalisation
Kantoor van die Viserektor: Navorsing en Internasionalisering

14-Mar-2023

Dear Miss Juliet Mokone

UFS AUTHORITIES APPROVAL

Research Project Title:

The implementation of the COVID-19 regulations and required vaccination policy: Rural university students' experiences.

This letter serves as confirmation that your request to collect data from students and/or staff members at the University of the Free State for your research project has been approved **provided that you also have ethical clearance for the research from the ethics committee at the University of the Free State.**

Please make sure that you also obtain your ethics clearance letter containing your reference number from the ethics committee after you have received this letter before you conduct your research.

Kind Regards

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'RC Witthuhn', written in a cursive style.

**PROF RC WITTHUHN
VICE-RECTOR: RESEARCH & INTERNATIONALISATION CHAIR:
SENATE RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE**

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Appendix C: Participant consent form

Research study information leaflet and consent form

Date

Title of the research project

The implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*: rural university students' experiences

Principle investigator / researcher name and contact number:

Ms. Juliet Mokone 2014130955 073 7654 977 **Faculty and**

Department:

Faculty of Education

Study leader name and contact number:

Dr. CT Tsotetsi

058 718 5003

What is the aim / purpose of the study?

This study aims to understand students' experiences with the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* in a rural university campus. Rural university students experienced a lot of challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, this study aims to explore how the implementation of the policy in question affected students. Furthermore, this study can assist with the creation of future policies when another pandemic occurs.

Who is doing the research?

The primary researcher in this study is Ms. Mokone. And this research is part of her Master's degree dissertation. She is currently a part-time employee at the University of the Free State, working as a literacy assistant.

Has the study received ethical approval?

This study has received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of UFS. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.

Approval number: UFS-HSD2022/1856/23

Why are you invited to take part in this research project?

You are invited to participate in this study because you are a student of the University of the Free State, specifically on the Qwaqwa campus. Again, you are also invited because you experienced the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*. This study will make use of nine participants who are studying at a rural university campus (Qwaqwa campus). As a student who experienced the implementation of this policy, the researcher believes that you will contribute greatly in this study.

What is the nature of participation in this study?

The researcher is inviting you to be a participant in this study. If you accept to participate, you will take part in a focus group that will include a total of nine students. During the focus group, an audio recorder will be used to record the responses from each participant. This focus group will not take more than two hours and it will be conducted in a specific venue at the Qwaqwa campus. The researcher will be asking questions in the focus group and you may respond if you have a response. You will be provided with a list of the questions which will be asked at the focus group and you will have an opportunity to look at them before participating. Participating in this study will not cause you any harm.

Can the participant withdraw from the study?

Please note that your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate or not. The choice that you make will have no bearing on your studies as a university student. You may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What are the potential benefits of taking part in this study?

There are no direct benefits with participating in this study. But, your participation will be beneficial in assisting the researcher to understand how students in a rural university campus experienced the implementation of the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*. Furthermore, your participation can assist relevant stakeholders in the future when they need to implement such a policy in

a rural university campus. Your participation in this study will be confidential. The only other person who will have access to your information is the supervisor.

What is the anticipated inconvenience of taking part in this study?

The researcher acknowledges that there is a risk that you may share some personal or confidential information, or that you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. However, the researcher does not wish for this to happen. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the focus group if you feel that the question(s) are too personal or if talking about them makes you uncomfortable.

Will what I say be kept confidential?

The researcher assures participants that their identity and responses will be regarded as extremely confidential and they will not be made available to any unauthorized user. The identity of the research participants will not be known, under any circumstances, to an organization, party or persons who or which has some form of power over the participants. The researcher assures the participants that their real names will not be used, instead, codes or descriptive assumed names will be used. The confidentiality of the participants will be of great importance throughout the research. Your answers may be reviewed by people responsible for making sure that research is done properly, including the transcriber, external coder, and members of the Research Ethics Committee.

Otherwise, records that identify you will be available only to people working on the study, unless you give permission for other people to see the records. The data collected in this study may be used for other purposes such as research reports, journal articles or conference presentations. Because we will be using a focus group to collect data. This means that there will be more than one person participating in the discussion. While every effort will be made by the researcher to ensure that you will not be connected to the information that you share during the focus group, I cannot guarantee that other participants in the focus group will treat the information confidentially. I shall, however, encourage all participants to do so. For this reason, I advise you not to disclose personally sensitive information in the focus group. You can choose to not participate at any time during the focus group.

How will the information be stored and ultimately destroyed?

Hard copies of your answers will be stored by the researcher for a period of five years in a locked cupboard/filing cabinet at their place of residence. For future research or academic purposes; electronic information will be stored on a password-protected computer. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable. After the fiveyear period has ended the information will be destroyed by burning any hardcopies of the transcripts and by deleting them in the computer.

Will I receive payment or any incentives for participating in this study?

Please note that you will not be provided with any incentive to take part in the research, since it is purely voluntary. If you are not comfortable with this point you are welcome to not take part in the research.

How will the participant be informed of the findings / results of the study?

If you would like to be informed of the final research findings, please contact Ms. Mokone at 0737657977 or email julietmokone@gmail.com. The findings are accessible from November 2023. Should you require any further information or want to contact the researcher about any aspect of this study, please contact Ms Mokone again on the provided details. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact Dr. CT Tsoetsi at 058 718 5003 or send him an email at TsoetsiCT@ufs.ac.za.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and for participating in this study.

Consent to participate in this study

I, the undersigned,

_____ (participant's full names to be included), (the "Participant")

confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study referred to as the

_____ (the "Study") in relation to

_____ and which Study is being conducted by

_____ (insert the name of the researcher), (the "**Researcher**").

I, the undersigned Participant, further confirm that–

1. the Researcher has explained the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of my participation in the Study;
2. I have read (or had explained to me) and understood the Study as explained in the attached information sheet;
3. I have had sufficient opportunity to ask questions and am prepared to participate in the Study;
4. I understand that my participation in the Study is entirely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without penalty (if applicable);
5. I voluntarily provide the UFS and the Researcher with my personal information and consent to the UFS and the Researcher collecting, disclosing and processing my personal information in order to conduct the Study and any related activities in relation thereto;
6. I hereby acknowledge and confirm that I understand the purpose for which the UFS and the Researcher may collect, store, use, delete, destroy, outsource, transfer or otherwise process, as the context and circumstances may require and as contemplated in terms of POPIA, my personal information as set out herein;
7. I am aware that the findings of the Study will be anonymously processed into a research report, journal publications and/or conference proceedings and that my personal information will be aggregated and deidentified at such stage;
8. I also give the UFS permission to share, without notification, the collected data with other researchers at the UFS or other Higher Education Institutions. This permission is dependent on the same principles of ethical research practices, anonymity/confidentiality, safekeeping of information, and other issues listed above applying.

I, the Participant, agree to the recording of the focus group.

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): _____

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

Appendix D: Focus group discussion questions

Mokone JS

2014130955

The implementation of *the COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy*: rural university students' experiences

Focus group questions:

Student policy knowledge

1. Are you aware of the *UFS COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* which came into effect at the start of the academic year in 2022?
2. Were you aware of the policy before it was implemented? Meaning did you get an opportunity to submit any comments before it was implemented?
3. As a student from a rural university campus, do you think you were given enough time or opportunities to voice your comments about this policy before it was implemented?
4. Do you understand why the policy was implemented?
5. In your opinion, did you see a need to have such a policy at the institutions?

Experiences with online learning

1. During the pandemic, the majority of students had to learn using online modes, how did you experience this?
2. Being that you are students from a rural institution do you think that this presented any challenges for you when it came to online learning?
3. Did you have the needed resources to learn online successfully?
4. Because some of you did not have access to the institution during the first six months of the academic year, how did this affect you specifically looking at online learning?

Policy implementation effects

1. How did the implementation of this policy affect you as a student?
2. Do you think that the inability to access campus, which is stipulated in this policy disadvantaged you in any way?
3. What challenges did you come across when this policy was implemented?

Vaccination choice

1. For those who are vaccinated, why did you vaccinate for COVID-19?
2. The policy stipulated that if you wanted to have access to campus you had to be vaccinated. Do you think that this was fair for students on a rural university campus?
3. Did the *COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy* contribute to your choice of getting vaccinated? Why do say so?

Suggestions

Seeing that chances of having more pandemics are high. What do you suggest can be done differently in the future when implementing such policies? Especially considering students who study at rural institutions.

Appendix E: Proof of language editing



19 February 2024

To whom it may concern,

Certification of language editing and proofreading

This letter hereby certifies the language editing and proofreading of the Master's dissertation entitled "The implementation of the COVID-19 Regulations and Required Vaccination Policy: rural university students' experiences" by Juliet Mokone (student number: 2014130955). The constructs of academic discourse were adhered to during the editing process.

Yours Faithfully,



Linda Sparks

Language practitioner and editor
Lecturer/Researcher/Coordinator
BA Hons (English), MA (Gender Studies),
PhD Candidate (English)