Pandemic e-learning and the interruption of higher education's social justice goals: Narratives from the Central University of Technology (CUT) in the Free State (FS)

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DECLARATION

I, **Lehlohonolo Gibson Mokoena**, declare that the thesis **"Pandemic e-learning and the interruption of higher education's social justice goals: Narratives from the Central University of Technology (CUT) in the Free State (FS),"** hereby submitted for the qualification of **Master's in Development Studies** at the University of the Free State, is my own independent work and that I have not previously submitted the same work for a qualification at another institution of higher education.

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Lehlohonolo Gibson Mokoena — 31 July 2023

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My late friend, Boiketsiso Monyane, would have been proud of me. He supported me so much when I was going through a difficult period in my life and has always encouraged me to exert myself more, because I am capable of greatness. I owe all my strength to finish this thesis to him. When I felt like giving up, I held on to his words that stay with me to this day.

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"I Can Do All Things Through Christ Who Strengthens Me"

(Philippians 4:13)

ABSTRACT

South Africa remains one of the most unequal societies in the world. Higher education has been adopted as one of the key tools to dismantle inequalities and promote social justice in South Africa. The global Covid-19 pandemic saw universities move online to complete the academic year. The adoption of e-learning meant a new terrain for all students from different socio-economic backgrounds. Although e-learning has become an integral part of 21st-century education, the reality is that its adoption in South Africa is presented with challenges such as the lack of the internet and digital tools, particularly for students from marginalised groups. This begs the question of how the expectations of institutions higher of learning of social justice have been expanded or disrupted during the pandemic. Furthermore, has students' human development been compromised or enhanced during the pandemic?

This study aimed to conduct a narrative inquiry into the e-learning experiences of tourism and hospitality management students and staff of the Central University of Technology, Free State. The study also sought to investigate how (if at all) the sudden switch to e-learning has affected the role played by higher education as an instrument of social justice for students.

The theoretical framework used in this study is the Capability Approach. This theoretical framework was used as the lens through which to look at the students' individual experiences of e-learning. The framework allowed to assess students' capabilities, agency, well-being, and conversion factors during the pandemic. Data in this study were collected through qualitative methods and a triangulation approach of narrative interviews with the students, semi-structured interviews with the HoDs, and document analysis. Pre-selected themes and sub-themes were constructed to analyse data and to reflect the Capability Approach.

The study findings show that although students value education as a way to improve their standard of living, the lack of resources for e-learning pedagogy compromised valuable educational achievements. Much of the students' agency was constrained by their learning environment. During the pandemic, as a result of the lack of access to lecturers and lack of e-learning training for academics, the capability for knowledge was somewhat constrained, translating to epistemic injustice. Overall, e-learning was

only favourable to few students, thus exacerbating disparities. Soft skills that are critical for human development gained at the university in a social setting may have been lost. The study also found that the university features social justice policies that try to equalise and help students to achieve their academic freedom. Although the university recognised the e-learning challenges and showed agency in assisting students with data and devices, the expectation of playing the role of being an instrument of social justice for students was compromised by the structural inequalities that exist beyond a university setting. It is recommended that through funding, first-entry-level students should be equipped with digital devices as part of the enrolment to combat digital inequality. Lecturers should not only be trained in e-learning pedagogy, but also trained how to factor inclusivity into teaching practices. Blended learning should be an integral part of the teaching practices to prepare for unforeseen circumstances that compel students to learn away from a university.

Keywords: capability approach, e-learning, higher education, social justice, students, university

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid
HE	Higher Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
LMS	Learning Management Systems
NDP	National Development Plan
COVID-19	The novel Coronavirus that debuted in 1019
4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
CUT	Central University of Technology
ERT	Emergency Remote Teaching
PBL	Problem-Based Learning
AI	Artificial Intelligence

CHAPTER 1:
SETTING THE SCENE

1.1 Introduction and background

South Africa is one of the most unequal societies in the world, with a Gini coefficient of 0,67 in 2006, declining to 0,63 in 2021 (Statista, 2021). Over the years, higher education has been recognised as an appropriate tool for combating inequalities (RSA, 1996; Sehoole & Adeyemo, 2016. Walker, 2006; Wilson-Strydom, 2011; Pillay, 2019). According to Haveman and Smeeding (2006) and Brown (2018), higher education can dismantle the generational patterns of income inequality and advance the lives of impoverished people. Education becomes essential for a country like South Africa, whose inequality is deeply rooted in historical systems of discrimination. Haveman and Smeeding (2006) posit that the main premise of education is social equity. Education is key to social justice and breaking the structural patterns of the marginalised. Education can build the capabilities for an individual to lead the life they value (Hall, 2012). The country's constitution is the strong link between education and social justice. In South Africa, under education, the Bill of Rights (1996) chapter of the South African Constitution (Republic of South Africa, 1996:12) states that everyone has the right “to further education, which the state, through reasonable measures, must make progressively available and accessible”. Furthermore, the 2013 White Paper for Post-School Education and Training outlines a vision for a higher education system that promotes social justice and overcomes historical inequalities (DHET, 2013). For this reason, education has an integral role to play in breaking social injustices.

This study adopts the capability approach and its orientation towards evaluating social justice advances in educational settings. The capability approach is a theoretical framework pioneered by Amartya Sen in the 1980s and later developed by Martha Nussbaum. According to Sen (2009:16), the capability approach

> is an intellectual discipline that gives a central role to the evaluation of a person’s achievements and freedoms in terms of his or her actual ability to do the different things a person has reason to value doing or being.

The capability approach serves as a framework for evaluating and assessing individual well-being and social arrangements (Robeyns, 2005). ‘Capabilities’ is defined as “a person’s ability to do valuable acts or reach valuable states of being” (Sen,1999:30); and so, the framework enables an evaluation of life based on people’s capabilities or what people can effectively do. People have things to value, such as health and education, and when the freedom to achieve such things is impeded, it can be construed as a social justice issue. This study sought to assess students’ capabilities to experience and benefit fully from their higher education amidst the change to e-learning as a pedagogy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Walker and Unterhalter (2007) emphasise that evaluating capabilities is essential to tackling social justice in education.

Defining social justice is difficult, as scholars have differing views on one specific definition. It is contested and viewed from different lenses of theories (Novak, 2000:11; Tjabane & Pillay, 2011:10). However, Lambert (2018:227) defines social justice as "a process and a goal to achieve a fairer society that involves actions guided by the principles of redistributive justice, precognitive justice or representational justice". Sen (2009) asserts that in providing education, the capabilities need several ways of assessing social justice to achieve justice in education. The capability approach is not a limited to education. Still, it addresses social issues like race, ethnic inequalities, distribution of resources, and gender in education (Nussbaum, 2003; Alkire, 2005; Mackenzie (2021).

From an education perspective, social justice denotes, among other things, access to learning materials, sociocultural diversity in the open curriculum and representation of marginalised groups. There is a nexus between social justice and education. One of higher education's goals is to foster transformation and social justice (Kissack & Enslin, 2003:47). Mwaniki (2012) asserts that the link between social justice and education is best conceptualised from the role that higher education plays in social functions, particularly given the historical structures of education in South Africa, which is embedded in inequalities and social injustice. Due to these inequalities, social justice has become a fundamental issue in higher education in South Africa (Swartz et al., 2019).

According to Nieuwenhuis (2011:197), educational and social justice must be analysed from “the social realities of the situation within which social justice must be achieved”. In addition, “The goal of social justice education is full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs." (Bell, 1997:3). This study assesses a higher learning institution’s meeting of desired social justice goals. The ability of higher education to equalise historically disadvantaged South Africans with those who were advantaged is dependent on access. Access to higher education in South Africa remains a challenge, and the current status quo of low participation and dropout rates further exacerbates inequalities (Wangenge-Ouma, 2012). However, another challenge to the equalising potential of higher education relates to the growing use and reliance on educational technologies, and it is this challenge that this research seeks to investigate using the experiences of pandemic e-learning as a functioning.

It is based on the nexus between social justice and education presented above that this research submits the import of assessing how changes in education – like a sudden shift to e-learning – may affect the achievement of the social justice goals of a higher learning institution.

E-learning is receiving much attention in education research (Wei & Chou, 2020). Scholars use online, e-learning, digital, and virtual learning interchangeably to explain learning delivered through electronic technology. The discriminating factor for each concept is the primary learning activity. There is no specific definition of e-learning. However, Howlett et al. (2009:372) define e-learning as "the use of electronic technology and media to deliver, support and enhance both learning and teaching and involves communication between learners and teachers utilising online content". E-learning can also be regarded as an add-on to face-to-face instruction (Humrickhouse, 2021:1). For this study, e-learning is a broad term referring to education or instruction delivered using internet technologies, computers, and interactive networks in which the interaction between a student and a lecturer takes place online.

E-learning has become integral to the 21st century, particularly for higher education. The main aim of e-learning is to use electronic training systems to promote learning (Hamidi & Chavoshi, 2018). Higher education institutions also use e-learning to offer online courses (Wei & Chou, 2020). Even more so, the COVID-19 pandemic and

corresponding lockdown measures push institutions of higher learning to embrace and enforce e-learning. The sudden switch to e-learning presented a few challenges, like connectivity to the internet and digital tools (Kaup et al., 2020:1220). Lack of access to the internet makes adopting online learning a challenge; furthermore, the population faces poor connectivity and power cuts (Tamrat & Teferra, 2020). Tamrat and Teferra (2020) raise concerns about students with little or no access to digital resources being left behind and suggest that the marginalised should be a priority. Students from low-income backgrounds will need the backing to overcome the hurdles created by Covid-19 (Bacher-Hicks, Goodman & Mulhern, 2021:8). Another challenge is that it is often assumed that students know digital equipment, but the reality is that not all students and teachers have sufficient knowledge (Kaup et al., 2020:1220). To address this challenge, some South African universities had to partner with network companies to provide students with zero-rated educational platform access and data bundles for students and staff (Tamrat & Teferra, 2020).

The e-learning opportunities have been documented in the literature. From a learning perspective, wireless technology has enabled continuous learning, where students can obtain information from any environment at any given time (Herguner et al., 2020:106; Hamidi & Chavoshi, 2018:1054). Furthermore, online learning allows for flexibility anywhere, any time (Hodges et al., 2020:2). Elzainy, Sadik and Abdulmonem (2020:460) state that e-learning, particularly problem-based learning (PBL), can enhance teamwork, problem-solving and metacognitive skills. Even within these opportunities, Cloete (2017) states that the impact of e-learning is dynamic as it presents several challenges. For example, in South Africa, only some people have access to quality networks and technological infrastructure (Cloete, 2017; Kanjam, 2020). There is also an issue with the need for more capacity to deliver information and communications technology by the South African government to bridge the gaps in digital access (Lesame, 2014:333). South Africa is experiencing slow growth in technological innovation, which indirectly affects institutions of higher learning in their efforts to bridge the digital gaps.

Besides accessibility, many students may not have the necessary skills to benefit from online learning (Chau, 2010:186). Due to the sudden switch to e-learning, digital inequalities in higher education must be considered. The switch to e-learning can

impede the very social justice goals education that a higher learning institution is supposed to fulfil. For this reason, the central focus of this study lies in analysing higher education's contribution to social justice, and the study further investigates how – if at all – the sudden switch to e-learning resulting from pandemic measures has affected the social justice aims/expectations of higher education. This study answered this question and gave voice to students by using the narrative method to present student first-person accounts of how the switch to e-learning during the pandemic has impacted their capabilities.

Subsequent sections situate the significance of asking the question: What impact did the sudden switch to e-learning have on the social justice goals of higher education?

1.2 Problem statement

Institutions of higher learning have roles and expectations of contributing to social justice goals. These prescribed roles and expectations are based on evidence which suggests that education can be used to address the challenges of inequalities in society (Tjabane & Pillay, 2011; Kissack & Enslin, 2003; Van der Walt, Potgieter & Wolhuter, 2014). Similarly, the South African government has an understanding that technology has the power to enable better economic and social inclusion. This understanding was evident when President Cyril Ramaphosa stated that digital transformation must be utilised "to change the way we live, learn, work and govern" (SA Government, 2020, par. 13). The statement above has been magnified with the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing people worldwide to work and learn remotely. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdown as a public health measure presented challenges for many institutions of higher learning in terms of learning, and many universities had to move to e-learning as an alternative to face-to-face learning (Toquero, 2020; Crawford et al., 2020; Czerniewicz, 2020).

According to Queiros and De Villiers (2016), e-learning can be used to reach marginalised and disadvantaged students. However, in South Africa, despite the efforts made during the lockdown to ensure that learning continues online, it was evident that not all students could have access and resources (Mhlanga & Moloi, 2020). Many people in South Africa need more online resources for themselves and their children (Isbell, 2020). This also relates to the digital divide that exists in South

Africa. The digital divide refers to the gap in access and usage of the digital infrastructure. Take the digital gender gap; for instance, almost 21% of men are more likely to use the internet than women (Duchatelet, 2021). To further demonstrate the issue of the digital divide between rich and poor in South Africa, Dudu Mkhwanazi, CEO of Project Isizwe, asserts that an estimated 7.5 million lower-income earners are paying more for the internet, almost 80 times more than the rich. Moreover, only 10% of South African households have fixed, affordable internet (SABCNews, 2019). Worldwide Worx (2017) states that internet penetration is 82.4% among adult South Africans earning over R30 000 a month.

In addition, the distribution of internet access in big cities is mainly dominated by the rich (Aruleba & Jere, 2022). This argument is supported by Mojapelo (2020), stating that digital exclusion remains a challenge for disadvantaged rural communities due to a lack of digital infrastructure. This study argues that this digital divide affects other aspects, like education, closely linked to human development.

Therefore, e-learning needs to be embraced for education and its contribution to the human development of local communities. This study therefore sets out to analyse how the shift in higher education pedagogy towards e-learning has affected social justice goals.

1.3 Research aims and questions

The primary aim of this study is to investigate how (if at all) the sudden switch to e-learning has affected the role played by higher education as an instrument of social justice for students. This study explored this problem through the narratives of tourism and hospitality management students in the Faculty of Management Sciences at the Central University of Technology (CUT), Free State, South Africa.

To achieve this overall aim, the researcher set out:

- to document both the CUT's switch to e-learning as a pandemic measure and the e-learning experiences of selected CUT students;
- to demonstrate the contribution of the Capability Approach to understanding e-learning’s impact on social justice in higher education;

- to examine how – if at all – the switch to e-learning has affected the potential of higher education as an instrument of social justice for selected CUT students; and
- to make recommendations and suggestions based on the CUT case regarding e-learning pedagogy and its impact on social justice.

1.3.1 Key research questions

Under the above objectives, this study mainly asked: How do the pandemic e-learning experiences of CUT students speak to and of achieving social justice aims and expectations of institutions of higher learning?

The research questions underpinning the study were:

- Why and how is higher education attainment by these CUT students expected/promised to enable social justice?
- What did switching to e-learning during the pandemic entail, and what did it mean for various CUT students?
- What challenges and opportunities have arisen out of the switch to e-learning' as per student accounts?
- What does e-learning – with its challenges and opportunities – imply for enabling desired/expected social justice goals per students' accounts?

1.4 Scope of the study

Given the limited scope, this study does not aim for generalisability, but seeks to describe how such pandemic e-learning may have affected what is desired and expected of higher education and therefore inform researchers and practitioners to do better in the future. Institutions of higher learning are expected to equalise and provide inclusive learning opportunities for all in an unequal society. The rationale is to assess whether the university could equalise or promote social justice or further exacerbate the social injustices during the pandemic. The scope of the study was limited to the tourism and hospitality students at the Central University of Technology, Free State only. The two departments are known to have the not so stringent admission requirements, thus making them arguably the most inclusive. The assumption is that,

by highlighting the injustices (if any), the university can consider the factors affecting the role of an equaliser and social justice advocate.

1.5 Outline of the study

This study consists of seven chapters and is outlined as follows:

Chapter 1

This chapter presents the background of the study, problem statement, research objectives and questions, research significance, the research perspective, and the structure of the work.

Chapter 2

This chapter reviews the literature on two variables. The first part of the literature review establishes the relationship between higher education and social justice for (human) development, beginning from the situation of higher education in South Africa and the inequalities caused by it, expectations of higher education, and so on. The second part of the literature review addresses e-learning in higher education during the pandemic times and the specific cases of CUT.

Chapter 3

This chapter contains a theoretical framework. A detailed description of the Capability Approach's theoretical perspective, what it brings to the research, and why it is the best research lens to examine this problem is provided.

Chapter 4

This chapter presents the research methodology - ontological, epistemological, methodological, and ethical considerations of the study.

Chapter 5

This chapter presents empirical data/findings following academic’s voices in the form of HoDs, document reviews and students’ narratives of experiencing e-learning during the pandemic.

Chapter 6

This chapter presents an interpretation of the findings through the lens of Capability Approach.

Chapter 7

This last chapter presents the research overview, conclusions, and recommendations based on what was found and interpreted.

CHAPTER 2:
SOCIAL JUSTICE FOR (HUMAN) DEVELOPMENT: HIGHER EDUCATION AND E-LEARNING

2.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with three variables of this study: social justice, higher education and e-learning. The chapter examines higher education's role in human development, focusing on South Africa. The first part of the literature discusses the historical background of higher education in South Africa and highlights the current state of higher education and its challenges. The last section explores the nexus between higher education, social justice and human development. Furthermore, the chapter is concerned with e-learning. There is a growing body of research on e-learning within higher education. However, the research seldom asks whether e-learning can promote equality. Can the sudden integration of pedagogy like e-learning hinder the role of higher institutions in advancing social justice and address historical inequalities?

2.2 Higher Education international perspective

Education is acknowledged as a fundamental human right, and it is seen as a catalyst for socio-economic and personal development. However, many people still need access to it (Blessinger & Bliss, 2016). Higher education is more important, as it benefits a whole community, not just the individual. For this reason, social justice has become a key element in most institutions of higher learnings' policies worldwide, which relate to social inclusion, equity, and diversity (Blessinger & Bliss, 2016). According to the World Bank (2021), higher education significantly reduces poverty and boosts shared prosperity. Harkavy (2006) echoes these sentiments by alluding that when universities prioritise solving real-world problems in local communities, there is a greater chance of advancing social justice. In many European countries, pressure is put on the higher education system to adapt to the ever-changing economic and societal demands (Estermann, Pruvot & Claeys-Kulik, 2013).

Globally there has been an issue of university access as one of the aspects of social justice in higher education. The World Bank (2021) indicates that the demand for access to higher learning and good quality education is escalating in Latin America,

the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and North Africa. Compound to this demand, students compete to attend these universities, while universities compete for the top students. Higher-income parents can make efforts for their children to access higher education; on the other hand, children from poor backgrounds start university later or with few resources (Haveman & Smeeding, 2006). For Blessinger and Bliss (2016), this commercial nature of higher education creates challenges for social inclusion. The exclusion of many young people from disadvantaged backgrounds from higher education participation is a decade-long social issue (Msigwa, 2016). For Brennan and Naidoo (2008), the lack of students from disadvantaged backgrounds at elite universities like Oxbridge is a concern.

Social justice in Australian higher education policy has been prioritised, where students from disadvantaged backgrounds are enrolled to widen participation in higher education and equalise opportunities for all social groups (Gale & Tranter, 2011). This policy has increased university admission for many under-represented groups (James, 2012). However, James (2012) and Brennan and Naidoo (2008) warn that increasing access may only sometimes address social inclusion or equity. Although a country may be well-resourced or have a robust economic standing, equalising educational opportunities may still be challenging. For example, Haveman and Smeeding (2006) assert that the U.S. higher education system still needs to manage to equalise opportunities between students from low- and high-income families. The authors cite the admission process to enrolment, which contributes to inequality. In addition, Enders et al. (2011) assert that European universities have also been criticised for failing to stimulate social cohesion. On the other hand, social inclusion can also be seen where higher education institutions in the United States and other parts of the world are made up of culturally diverse student groups (Ameny-Dixon, 2004).

Another global issue in higher education is funding, a form of exclusion. Many countries have now resorted to government funding, which sometimes comes under pressure due to the demand of the World Bank. Sub-Saharan African countries, for example, have dealt with the challenge of high costs of running higher education since the 1980s (Pillay, 2008). Like South Africa, Tanzania is one of many countries that have adopted the student loan scheme to distribute funds to students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access institutions of higher education (Msigwa, 2016).

Another aspect universities worldwide are grappling with is the integration of information technology, which has opened other avenues of learning, like e-learning; a subject that is not new but was further brought to light by the COVID-19 pandemic. The subject is familiar because, for years, many universities in counties like the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia have been using Learning Management Systems (LMS), which depend on computer technology to improve teaching and learning. Over 2 000 institutions in the U.S. have already provided online and hybrid online courses (Kim, Kwon & Cho, 2011). The transition to online is more complex for a continent where an estimated 24% of the population has access to the internet. This is why universities in countries like Rwanda, South Africa and Tunisia partnered with internet providers for zero-rated student access (Tamrat & Teferra, 2020). Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) denote that online learning is an efficient pedagogy for digitally advanced countries.

Several studies (Kapasia et al., 2020; Adnan & Anwar, 2020; Almuraqab, 2020; Toquero, 2020) were conducted across the world on e-learning amidst COVID-19. Moreover, these studies indicate various hurdles impeding the effectiveness of e-learning, like the unpreparedness of most institutions, digital disparities, and digital infrastructure. Even home conditions create distractions for education (Kapasia et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2020). In the UAE, institutions of higher learning have invested in e-learning before COVID-19 and even adopted blended learning (Ati & Guessoum, 2010; Moussa-Inaty, 2017). However, even in such “e-learning-ready” contexts, adapting learning was slow and did not yield a substantial impact (Daouk & Aldalaien, 2019). Furthermore, this echoes the sentiments of Basilaia and Kvavadze (2020) that e-learning is efficient for developed countries due to access to resources.

This section provided a background on how social justice is adopted and interpreted in institutions of higher learning worldwide and e-learning as a pedagogy, particularly amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Universities are trying to equalise opportunities for all social groups through policy adaptations, enrolments, or access. However, access may not necessarily achieve social justice. In addition, although many universities worldwide had been using e-learning before the pandemic, many were tested, as indicated by the studies (Tamrat & Teferra, 2020; Mpungose, 2020; Gumede and Badripara, 2022), that students experienced hurdles, even in the most developed

countries. The following section further assesses the aspect of e-learning in higher education.

2.3 E-learning in higher education

This is the era of the 4th Industrial Revolution, and there is no doubt that the development of the internet has revolutionised the globe. Technology is used more than ever for everyday life, business, or education (Qurat-ul et al., 2019). This use of technology in higher education is mainly on the increase with e-learning, where traditional teaching and learning takes place remotely on digital platforms (Li & Lalani, 2020). More than 40 million students worldwide have used it to study (Crea & Sparnon, 2017). This section discusses it as a variable to argue that the sudden shift to e-learning during the pandemic potentially furthered existing social injustices, for which higher education has a responsibility and is expected to address.

Paying close attention to the primary goal of this study, the rise of e-learning is an excellent introduction to the education systems if it enhances all students' learning capabilities. However, as discussed previously, the other end of the spectrum could yield not-so-positive results, particularly in an environment built on historical inequalities. The International Association of Universities (2020) states that changing from traditional face-to-face learning to e-learning depends on several critical aspects of an institution's capacity to develop suitable approaches, governance, and availability of resources like labs.

Suppose the role of higher education is to enable access or to achieve social justice through education. How is this achieved through e-learning with institutions of higher learning that might be incapable of suitable approaches? South Africa has always been a country of economic and social inequalities. According to Lesame (2014), progress has been made in becoming a "network and information society." However, it asserts that much must be done to reach a development status. Lesame (2014) relates to the establishment of policies in South Africa's Constitution (Ch. 2, sec. 32 of the Bill of Rights in the South African Constitution 1996), which stipulates that:

Everyone has the right to access any information held by state or another person, which is required for the executive protection of rights.

Such policies and the state of inequality necessitate the study questions as to whether the switch to e-learning in higher education addressed inequalities. There is a vast digital divide (Oyedemi, 2011). The digital divide is connected to inequality, and in South Africa, the reality is that many without material wealth neither have access to information technology nor access to education (Lesame, 2014).

Notwithstanding the above concerns, e-learning has received much positivity as the future of higher education. Institutions of higher learning increasingly lean towards integrating and supporting digital pedagogy (Naidoo, 2020). The perceived benefits mainly drive this support, and the research in this study is intentional with the statement of “perceived benefits”, as the study tries to investigate whether these “benefits” are applicable to all the statuses from different social standings. From a learning perspective, wireless technology has enabled continuous learning, where students can obtain information from any environment at any given time (Herguner et al., 2020:106; Hamidi & Chavoshi, 2018:1054). Furthermore, e-learning allows for flexibility anywhere, anytime (Hodges et al., 2020:2). In the same breath, Hamidi and Chavoshi (2018:1055) state that the premise of e-learning is to save time and money and promote easier pedagogy by utilising digital methods like computers and the internet. Wei and Chou (2020:50) said it is more flexible, and students can learn at their own pace, thus making e-learning convenient; however, adapting to a changed environment (Herguner et al., 2020:102).

Perhaps the disconnect is an opposing spectrum to the above-mentioned perceived benefits, which relate to the challenges of e-learning as outlined in the literature. Murgatrotd (2020) considers these challenges as drawbacks; the main drawback of e-learning is student withdrawal caused by education policy, infrastructure, financial constraints, connectivity, internet reliability, lack of family support, and poor academic performance. Furthermore, Naidoo (2020) identifies two types of students in e-learning: digital natives and digital immigrants. Digital natives are tech-savvy and can use digital tools and platforms. On the other hand, digital immigrants are students who need more know-how with technology-based tools and platforms. Kaup et al. (2020:1220) concur that the assumption that all students and lecturers are tech-savvy is invalid.

This assessment shows that e-learning may create a situation where students are in the same class; however, one is disadvantaged in the learning process due to social background. It demonstrates the systemic limitations in higher education on the integration of e-learning. This situation does not enable equality by any means, but rather widens the gap between the social groups. The research questions of this research around e-learning are also in line with a statement made by Meskhi, Ponomareva and Ugnich (2019); the authors purport that students are not responsible for integrating themselves into the educational system; it is the system that must be ready to integrate any student.

I argue in this study that any pedagogy, including e-learning, should be inclusive. Others have indicated that for e-learning to succeed, students must have a positive attitude towards e-learning. However, Wei and Chou (2020:50) argue that positive attitudes do not transfer to performance or success. Horowitz (2020) says that e-learning might affect students from impoverished backgrounds negatively due to a lack of online resources. It is more than attitude; students from disadvantaged backgrounds need the means to engage effectively with the digital or e-learning pedagogy. There is also an issue of e-learning today in higher education being used to advocate inclusive education. However, Meskhi et al. (2019) emphasise that inclusive education requires unique mechanisms and principles of learning, and so is e-learning. For this reason, e-learning as a mechanism for inclusive education needs to be investigated and not just used to highlight its ‘benefits’, considering the South African inequalities and the conditions around the institutions of higher learning in South Africa.

E-learning is capable of widening access to education. However, one of the biggest concerns due to exclusion is that there is also a potential for the access rate to higher learning and the participation of the marginalised groups to drop and the (Chedrawi, 2021). The researcher views this as further exacerbating the inequality issue, which is quite the opposite of the role of institutions of higher learning of being an equaliser. Students from disadvantaged backgrounds are most likely to bear the brunt. This does not suggest that groups with better social standing do not value education, but previously marginalised people highly value education. It is a valuable resource to escape poverty. For this reason, higher education institutions focus on developing

infrastructure (Meskhi et al., 2019). There is a need to ensure that the internal policies address e-learning.

2.3.1 E-learning in higher education during the pandemic

In 2020 the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak compelled many governments worldwide and South Africa to lock down. This meant that institutions of higher learning had to close campuses. This closure saw many universities migrating from conventional learning to e-learning. The sudden integration of digital pedagogy came into effect. Mncube, Olawale and Hendricks (2019) state that there have been leading discussions for the South African education system to integrate e-learning technologies in response to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). The primary concern coming from COVID-19 in higher learning was the suddenness and totality of the shift to e-learning pedagogy (Mittal, 2020), or what Aslam, Sonkar and Owan (2021) coins a “total paradigm shift”.

Although a sudden switch in the learning mode due to the pandemic would have affected everyone (students and teachers) in some way, it did not affect all students equally. At the start of the year 2020, many universities, including the case study for this research, the Central University of Technology, Free State, the students embarked on a strike due to a lack of devices and data to access e-learning (Hartzenberg & van Heerden, 2020). Much of the protests in higher education in South Africa emanate from resource inequities, and the #FeesMustFall protests in 2016 are one example. For Hedding et al. (2020), it is not surprising that many institutions of higher learning experienced resistance from students to migrate to e-learning, given that many students in South Africa rely on funding, data are relatively expensive, and digital tools like laptops cost a fortune. The idea of this narrative says there is a gap between the success of e-learning and the capability of the students to succeed in the realm of higher education.

To address the challenge stated above of resources, during the pandemic, sought assistance from cellular network companies to make data available to students with free access to educational platforms (Tamrat & Teferra, 2020; Mahlaba, 2020). Universities also made devices available to disadvantaged students (Molosankwe,

2020). However, most of these efforts to assist students involved bureaucratic processes that took longer and frustrated students further (Dube, 2020).

Notwithstanding the actions taken by some universities, these actions are barely scratching the surface, as some students may come from rural areas with electricity and poor network coverage; the inequality is deeply rooted beyond the provision of data or a laptop. Most students encounter laptops or technology for the first time at university; there must be digital education from grassroots level, and the teachers must be equipped with technology integration. Aristovnik et al. (2020) stress that students from the most rural and undeveloped areas need help with poor internet connectivity and electricity. Few students at universities or Schools of Education had access to the e-learning platform, which hindered the migration to e-learning (Mpungose, 2020:5). In a study by Naidoo (2020), at one university in KwaZulu-Natal, it was found that the majority of students did not have the basic requirements for e-learning pedagogy. Besides needing more suitable and compatible devices, the study by Gumede and Badripara (2022) found that students need to be more tech-savvy and, at most, comfortable with the e-learning processes. Another challenge experienced by students as a result of e-learning is the issue of working from home (Naidoo, 2020). It is common knowledge that many students from poor backgrounds live in small households share with many family members. Besides the issue of internet connections, these students still have to compete with many distractions in their home environment, thus leaving them demotivated and more disadvantaged than their better-off counterparts.

This study argues that such challenges point to the possible furthering of social injustices in and through higher education due to the sudden shift to e-learning during the pandemic. If students do not have the resources and the social support, the idea that a university is an equaliser in an unequal society is flawed. This research also tries to establish the distribution of resources needed for e-learning.

Literature indicates that education needs to be prepared (Dube, 2020). To support this, Schleicher (2020); McDonald (2020), and Ali (2020) state that, if anything, COVID-19 highlighted the deficiencies and inequalities of social standing and digital resources that already existed within the education systems regarding supportive environments with resources. Overall, literature on e-learning in higher education

during the pandemic highlighted the following challenges: internet facilities, unequal access of students to laptops, the teaching of practical modules and data affordability (Dill et al., 2020; Mittal, 2020; Aristovnik et al., 2020). From the researcher's point of view on the back of this literature, all these challenges brought by e-learning do not inspire inclusive education, which is supposed to enable equality and social justice. If anything, these challenges outline how the shift to e-learning has reinforced the social inequalities at South African universities.

E-learning challenges are bringing equity into this discussion, which is about fairness, justice and the ability of individuals to achieve their freedoms. The lack of equitable access to learning due to the sudden shift to e-learning without proper planning meant that the idea of the right to education needed to be more balanced (Dube, 2020; Moodley et al., 2020). The authors state that the right to education, as embedded in the Constitution, is somewhat compromised because of e-learning. Institutions of higher learning should be the custodians of this right to ensure equality. Most students from impoverished backgrounds seek to obtain a qualification to support their families. Sahu (2020) indicates that interruptions in teaching due to e-learning brought about by COVID-19 would impact the careers of 2020 graduates. This is far worse for students from impoverished backgrounds.

Mahlaba (2020) states that the socio-economic realities of many South African students make e-learning difficult. Digital inequalities exist in society (Rashid & Yadav, 2020). The lack of social justice justice regarding e-learning makes Du Preez and Le Grange (2020) doubt that e-learning in this climate of institutions of higher learning in South Africa is possible. I argue that this may further widen the gap between inequality and accessibility to higher education. For this reason of inequalities, an argument is made that with the integration of e-learning pedagogy, universities cannot assume that all students can access resources to access e-learning. The mechanisms and strategies applied by institutions of higher learning need to facilitate the important role of universities in breaking down the barriers of inequalities in universities. There is a need for policies in favour of the students to enable them to access the digital resources required for e-learning pedagogy.

In this study, I argue that e-learning may have exacerbated academic exclusion and inequities. Whether thirty or ten students were left behind, the transition to e-learning

still created barriers to learning and entrenched exclusion. The protests by CUT students show that while measures were implemented to facilitate access to e-learning, it was not sufficient to ensure success. Many students dropped out and this is an indication that students have different social backgrounds, which affect academic success. It is for this reason that the role played by higher education in social justice is analysed.

2.4 The role of higher education (HE) in social justice

Social justice can be defined as "a process and a goal to achieve a fairer society that involves actions guided by the principles of redistributive justice, precognitive justice, or representational justice" (Lambert, 2018:227). Social justice ensures that all social groups have fair access to opportunities (Furlong & Cartmel, 2009:3). This fair access needs to be distributed across all things valued in a society, like health and education. According to Nieuwenhuis (2010), social justice recognises the previous structures that have created barriers to social and economic opportunities. Overall, the social justice perspective further acknowledges that the same structures generate unequal results in an unequal society. Thus, the social equity policies must be able to assess their effectiveness in achieving social justice.

2.4.1 Nexus between education and social justice

Although measuring education's role in achieving social justice is challenging, there is a link between the two concepts. The nexus between the concepts of higher education and social justice are best explained when assessing the role of higher education in society (Mwaniki, 2012). The relationship between education and social justice is considered, because education is moral, while is attainment for an individual (Waghid, 2014). This is particularly important for individuals (students) who have previously been disadvantaged. An important point to consider is raised by Walker (2003), who states that education can produce both justice and injustice. This research understands this phenomenon in that e-learning can produce injustices or justice and the main goal is to understand how, when, and why injustices occur.

Social injustice occurs when an individual enjoys few advantages; in other words, social justice concerns the fair distribution of benefits among individuals (Miller, 2003). Considering the historical injustices in higher education, I believe social justice can

only be established if there is equal distribution of resources to all students so that success can be ensured. Furthermore, social justice concerns human rights like education freedom (Grant & Gibson, 2013). For Miller (2003), a lack of resources can be construed as an impediment to an individual's freedoms. Currently, in South Africa, university fees are high and unaffordable for many students from disadvantaged backgrounds – this is a question about attaining freedom. With historical inequalities, higher education in the South is regarded as a human development tool that needs to be inclusive to close the gap created by the inequalities.

Tjabane and Pillay (2011) state that social justice in South Africa is interpreted through its connection with inclusive education. Furlong and Cartmel (2009) state that institutions of higher learning significantly support social justice. Universities are the custodians of transformation and social justice (Kissack & Enslin, 2003). Institutions of higher learning contribute to social transformation and development by empowering the marginalised (Van der Walt et al., 2014). Education in general – and the attainment of higher education in South Africa in particular – is recognised as crucial to addressing historical inequalities (Mafumo, 2011). This is further evidenced by policies and initiatives like the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) put forth by the South African government as a means of fostering wider and more just access to higher education for the marginalised (Swartz et al., 2019). Yet, as several student protests across the years have made clear – even such efforts fall short as they still reflect the systemic injustices (Wilson-Strydom, 2011; Mzileni & Mkhize, 2019).

In an unequal society like South Africa, education can be utilised as an equaliser through which the marginalised are given equal opportunities to do and be the things they want. As stated by Sutton (2015: 37), education in itself is "a vehicle for individual and social change … [and] … a means of creating the conditions of possibility for a more socially just world". A different perspective is brought by Rowan (2019), who provides two sides to higher learning's role in social justice, in that universities can either perpetuate or transform broader patterns of justice or inequality. This suggests that the policies that govern a university can easily do harm or create progress. This notion supports the purpose of this research, which is to assess whether e-learning is hampering social justice goals or advancing a just society.

2.4.2 Higher education and human development

Higher education can be regarded as a catalyst for human development (Nafukho, 2020). It contributes to higher levels of social equity about the quality of life (Peercy & Svenson, 2016). Through higher education, there are individual benefits like personal and career development, social status, and the capacity to earn a lifelong income. Students who do not have the opportunities do not develop skills to compete in the economy. For Roche (2016), social equity relates to inclusion and access to education, which is critical for human development. Higher learning can also be seen as a tool for alleviating poverty and reducing inequality (MacMaster, 2014). This is common in a country like South Africa, where higher education is commonly understood as addressing historical injustices and as a pathway out of poverty (Swartz et al., 2019). Higher education plays an important role in consolidating democracy and social justice. Democracy entails the freedom to participate in a society, so widening participation in higher learning ensures the fair distribution of opportunities to disadvantaged groups. Mwaniki (2012) states that higher education gives a graduate an advantage in distributing resources available to society. When resources are made available to students, it allows for access and the freedom to do what they want to be or do.

Mbati (2019:254) could not have said it any better; the reality is that “higher education should actively seek to address social inequality and promote equity and social justice”. This study argues that the integration of e-learning into the education system without proper planning and addressing the digital divide could threaten social justice. For this reason, this study investigates the possible social inequalities experienced by the students during the pandemic and e-learning, especially in the context of higher education in South Africa. The following section assesses South Africa's higher education, its role in social justice, and the aspect of e-learning.

2.5 Higher education in South Africa

Historically, the general South African education system was configured based on race, with Black students attending what would be classified as inferior institutions and well-resourced institutions catering for White populations. For example, the Bantu education system enacted in 1953 that the marginalised Black majority were taught to

view themselves as unskilled labourers only (Walker, 2003). Through this system, the education offered to the White minority was better resourced and comprised more academic programmes than African indigenes subjected to more vocational education (Sehoole & Adeyemo, 2016). This historical segregation in South Africa's higher education was also maintained through language, with policies reinforcing the supremacy of English and Afrikaans (Napier, 2006) over South African indigenous languages.

With this background, when South Africa transitioned to a democratic country, the higher education system was inherently racially divided (Mekoa, 2018). Given that the pioneering democratic government's initial main goal was to purge the inequalities of the apartheid, it was clear that the new South Africa would need to be proactive in ensuring more equitable access and opportunities for Black students. Mekoa (2018:236) purports that the higher education system became a mechanism through which government intends to advance the social development of previously marginalised groups. In other words, social transformation in and through higher education became a priority on the national agenda post-1994. The intention was demonstrated by formulating a White Paper on the Transformation of Higher Education that would pave the way forward.

2.5.1 Policies: The White Paper on the transformation of higher education

In 1997, the government put forward a policy paper called White Paper 3: A Programme for the Transformation of Higher Education (DoE, 1997), which sought to address the challenges facing higher education in South Africa. The White Paper 3:1 asserts that it aims "to redress past inequalities and transform the higher education system to serve a new social order, meet pressing national needs, and respond to new realities and opportunities". With this policy, the government recognised the important role played by higher education in the social, cultural, and economic development of the new South Africa. Furthermore, the paper outlined the higher education system as fragmented, inefficient, and lacking the participation of students from different population groups (White Paper, 3:2.1). The policy also pronounced the role of institutions of higher learning as that of meeting the needs of society, contributing to the production of knowledge, and preparing students for the labour market.

The National Plan for Higher Education was adopted from the White Paper goals in 2001 (RSA, 2001). The main aim of this National Plan was to provide a framework within which to implement and realise the policy goals outlined in White Paper 3 for the proper restructuring of the higher education system in South Africa. The plan intends to develop a higher education system that "promotes equity of access and fair chances of success to all seeking to realise their potential through higher education while eradicating all forms of unfair discrimination and advancing redress for past inequalities". In addition to White Paper 3, the NCHE had to develop a policy for transforming the higher education system, and from this, the Higher Education Act (RSA, 1997) came into effect. Among other recommendations from the policy were the increase in student enrolment and broadening access to other social groups (Hay & Monnapula-Mapesela, 2009:13).

It is not the intention of this paper to dissect the policies concerning higher education; however, the purpose is to paint a picture of the South African higher education system and establish why it is expected to further social justice aims as well as how efforts have been made thus far to do so (through such policies). Furthermore, the government has always emphasised the importance of transformation and the need to redress the inequalities created by paid policies (Fomunyam, 2017). The inequalities and challenges that need to be addressed are vast, and as addressed in the White Paper 3 (DoE 1997:1), funding was one of the main issues; the policy supported the funding of marginalised groups and historically disadvantaged institutions.

The National Student Financial Aid (NSFAS) was enacted through such policies. The White Paper, 3 (DoE 1997:4) considers financial support "an essential condition of a transformed, equitable higher education system". The paper further stipulates that free higher education is not an option. Still, finances should not be the barrier to accessing education (White Paper, 3:4). This background posits that attaining social justice through higher education in South Africa remains a challenge. Hence, looking into whether pandemic e-learning interrupted HE's recognised goal is necessary.

2.5.2 Higher education in South Africa Today: Issues of funding, accessibility, and globalisation

Given the above-outlined goals of the post-1994 government as regards ensuring more equitable higher education for South Africans, and the fact that (for most students) the expanding access to higher education (HE) is invariably linked to the issue of financial support (MacMaster, 2014), funding for access to higher education, particularly for Black South Africans has always been a contentious issue (Timmis et al., 2019).

Although there has been an improvement in the demographic makeup of higher education, the widening of access to higher education – and subsequently the equalising of HE – is greatly impeded by the challenges of lack of funding (Swartz et al., 2019). Research by the Council on Higher Education (2014:5) shows that despite increases among all social groups entering a university, inequalities regarding universities' racial and class demographic makeup are still prevalent. Black participation in higher education saw an increase from 13 to 15% between the period of 2009 and 2014, and White participation saw a decline from 58% to 54%. With only a 2% increase over those five years (2009-2014) and the participation of historically marginalised Black South Africans still being low, it is clear that widening access and policies around inclusion continue to be a challenge for higher learning in South Africa (Cooper, 2015; Leibowitz & Bozalek, 2014; Badat & Sayed, 2014).

Mekoa (2018) states that this is in part due to the inability of stakeholders – HE institutions and the government – to address how the need for funds that are imperative to increasing access are to be raised, sustained, and distributed. This lack of funding has resulted in several protests, most notably the #FeesMustFall movement, which saw many universities in 2015 shut down as students protested against the rising tuition fees, which have made higher education even more inaccessible to many (Swartz et al., 2019).

The role of universities in South Africa post the apartheid era has been viewed as catalysts for reparation for reform, where previously marginalised groups, particularly Black South African students, would get opportunities to better their lives. This reform has also been examined around the free higher education discourse and decolonising

curriculum (Leibowitz, 2017; Maistry & Lortan, 2017). However, if free higher education in South Africa is considered the mechanism to achieve social justice, then the education system will remain unjust for a while, as it can be argued that free education does not exist; someone must pay for it. Studies (Speckman & Mandew 2014; MacMaster, 2014) affirm that many students who receive financial aid from the National Student Financial Aid Service (NSFAS) often drop out of university with nothing but debts, further exacerbating their poverty. NSFAS is struggling to keep up with the increase in Black South Africans desiring to access university through loans.

According to Letseka, Breier and Visser (2010), other remnants of the unjust education system under apartheid are still present and continue to impede the success of mainly Black students from impoverished backgrounds. Authors like Mwaniki (2012) have looked at the issue of language as one of the critical issues that privileges access to higher education, which is contrary to what constitutes social justice. There seems to be a challenge for universities in balancing widening access through affordable higher education and addressing systemic inequalities (Swartz et al., 2019).

The new policies that took effect in 1994 have brought mixed results. Although they managed to remove oppressive policies and increase access, these policies still need to create equal opportunities and resolve institutional issues (Mekoa, 2018). The National Development Plan (NDP) policy that came into effect in 2012, has addressed education in a chapter titled ‘Improving education, training, and Innovation’. This chapter indicates that enrolments in higher learning have increased, but funding has not been able to grow, and this has led to several deficiencies like poor university infrastructure, equipment shortages, and insufficient student resources like accommodation (Matsolo, Ningpuanyeh, & Susuman, 2018; Mdepa & Tshiwula, 2012; Van Der Bank & Nkadimeng, 2014). The higher education system remains unreformed, further perpetuating social injustices (Mwaniki, 2012). Given the historical background, institutions of higher learning must emphasise human rights and dignity (Dlamini, 2018).

Tshiwula and Magopeni (2014) explain that it is concerning that after almost three decades of democratic South Africa, issues like unequal resources still prevent disadvantaged groups from accessing higher education. Owing to the inequalities

brought about by the legacy of apartheid, limited resources still make the higher education system complex (Fomunyam & Teferra, 2017; Fiske & Ladd, 2004).

With the new government's goal being transformation in higher education, Mwaniki (2012) states that the South African higher education system has been caught in the transformation discussion, which has led to interventions that seek quick-fix solutions to weaknesses in the education sector system. Mwaniki (2012) argues that e-learning as a pedagogy challenged universities to complete the academic year under the circumstances brought on by COVID-19. Interventions must consider historical factors shaping higher education in South Africa.

Fomunyam (2017) states that the transformation in higher education in South Africa has been affected by globalisation, internationalisation, and the digital revolution, which compromises social justice. MacMaster (2014) seems to support this notion by stating that there is much pressure on South Africa due to the globalised world to produce competitive graduates. This pressure has left higher education in South Africa in a precarious position of meeting these global demands, remaining socially stratified, or increasing participation in higher learning (Swartz et al., 2019). The issue of globalisation has left South African institutions of higher learning needing to define their societal role (Brooks & Normore, 2010). The need to meet global ideas has meant that students' needs are not effectively catered for. For example, the new pedagogical response in the curriculum does not support the students. Given the literature above, if e-learning is to be to the curriculum to adjust to the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), students' needs, like the resources for 4IR, are critical. This will ultimately translate into limited access, and entities in the new democracy are tasked with increasing access. Furthermore, Dlamini (2018) states that entrepreneurial universities do not address social justice and access to higher education for Blacks.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to synthesise the historical background of higher education in South Africa and the nexus between higher education and social justice. The chapter also aimed to analyse e-learning within the context of higher education. It has demonstrated that while policies were put in place post-1994 to address the inequalities in education, the higher learning sector has not transformed sufficiently to

purge those inequalities brought by the apartheid government, as the accessibility and issues relating to funding still leave the marginalised groups neglected. Furthermore, South African institutions of higher learning seem caught in too many objectives contradicting universities' role in achieving social justice. There is a correlation between higher education and social justice, but with historical disparities in South Africa. E-learning, which is a pedagogy practice that is not suitable for a developing country, may be a result of this caution. The lack of resources and the digital divide make it impossible for higher education to meet the justice goal of being an equaliser. Social justice must be at the centre of higher education policies to create equality in higher learning.

CHAPTER 3:
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (CAPABILITY APPROACH)

3.1 The Capability Approach: a theoretical perspective

Reflections on the responsibility and expectation of higher education regarding fostering social justice and redressing inequalities viz a viz the sudden shift to e-learning by institutions of higher learning in pandemic times compel my consideration of what frame would best enable adequate interrogation in my research of these issues. This consideration begets the presentation of Amartya Sen's (1999) Capability Approach in this section as the theoretical perspective I adopted to investigate the potential of pandemic e-learning to increase inequalities and advance the role of his education in addressing inequalities. The choice of the Capability Approach as the theoretical basis for this study hinged on the belief that "the transformative potential of education lies at the core of the human development and capability approach" (Suransky, 2017:116).

3.2 Why the capability approach for evaluation of higher education and social justice?

Since its conception by economist-philosopher Amartya Sen in the late 1970s, the Capability Approach, has been described as a normative framework used to understand an individual's freedom and well-being (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009; Ribeiro, 2015). The framework has been advanced by several scholars in the fields of humanities and social sciences, most notably Martha Nussbaum, who is renowned for her conceptualisation of a capabilitarian theory of justice. The capability approach is multidisciplinary; as stated by Sen (1993:49), "[there is a] plurality of purposes for which the capability approach can have relevance". Yet, its application in certain disciplines like education research has been greatly developed over the years (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). I adopted this as an approach for the underlying framework.

I also adopted this approach because it draws attention to group disparities and participation (Clark, 2005). As indicated earlier, higher education in South Africa is rooted in historical disparities. This research argues that the sudden switch to e-learning pedagogy may have furthered disparities that higher education should

reduce. Given its repertoire, the capability approach is ideal for evaluating the impact of this switch to e-learning on equality in learning opportunities (Walker, 2006).

Likewise, I believe that this framework is ideal for evaluating how – if at all – higher education institutions, like CUT, met students' expectations and its responsibilities as equalisers despite the switch to e-learning pedagogy during the pandemic. The concept the Capability Approach offers a better understanding of complex issues and the difference between opportunity and realisation (Robeyns, 2017). Work by Hart (2009), for instance, notes that the capability approach enables the paying of attention to several complexities, "social, personal and environmental factors which influence what a person chooses to) do and be" (Hart, 2009:395).

Research on higher education indicates that many Black students cannot succeed due to several mental factors (Sehoole & Adeyemo, 2016). So, despite being admitted as students, other aspects may impede the ability to 'equalise' in and through higher education. Work by Gore and Walker (2020) demonstrates that using the Capability Approach would be the best to analyse variation in the distribution of opportunities as well as what inhibits the realisation of the opportunities between Black and White students due to this country's enabling and disabling historical, structural, and environmental factors.

3.3 Employing the Capability Approach in this study

3.3.1 Capabilities and functionings

Perhaps the best way to understand the capability approach is to highlight two main concepts. As a framework, the capability approach holds two critical ideas. Freedom is important for achieving well-being and relates to an individual's capabilities and functions. Functionings denote what individuals are able to do or to be. As mentioned earlier that the approach can be applied to education, Wilson-Strydom (2011) provides an example within this context that, within higher education, examples of functionings would include, amongst others, being able to pass, read, or participate in university life. With the understanding of functionings, I argue that if the higher learning pedagogies introduced, like e-learning, hinder the functioning, like the ability to participate in education, this situation threatens the social justice agenda. Functionings, in essence, are the critical resources for capability and depend on the

environment, be it personal or socio-political. Functioning allows this research to analyse if all students under pandemic e-learning could pass and participate in university life.

Capabilities are the doings and beings that an individual can achieve if there is the freedom to choose such opportunities. For example, this can be choosing to get educated, the opportunity to study, the freedom and space to read and the opportunity to participate in student life. Sen (1992:44) asserts that education is a relatively small number of centrally essential beings and doings crucial to well-being. Sen equates doings to what activities people can do and beings to the kind of person an individual can be. Thus, this framework allows us to assess what students could do within the context of e-learning during the pandemic. Capability, therefore, becomes the real freedom (Alkire & Deneulin, 2009; Sen, 1999) to achieve doings and beings.

The capability approach as a framework is not only limited to the means (which, in this case, are the resources people have or can access), but it extends to what people can achieve with those resources. The literature (Dube, 2020; Molosankwe, 2020; Mahlaba, 2020; Tamrat & Teferra, 2020) on e-learning during COVID-19 asserts that students received data and devices. However, one needs to assess what was achieved with those resources. This notion is justified on close inspection because resources at an individual's disposal do not equate to the conversion of doings and beings. Two individuals with the same resources may achieve different outcomes due to their surroundings. Moreover, the distinction between capabilities and functionings requires critical understanding, as two individuals with similar results may have different capabilities. In the case of this study, for instance, two students with the same outcome of qualification do not reflect their experiences in attaining a qualification; therefore, capabilities, and fundamental freedom become essential in evaluating an individual's well-being.

Wilson-Strydom (2011) warns that in higher education, if only the educational outcomes are considered, there is a potential that certain areas of injustices and inequalities may be glossed over. This indicates that, despite claims made by the CUT management (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022) of a pass rate of over 80% for the 2020 academic year (during COVID-19), such academic performance needs to address injustices due to the sudden switch to e-learning. The pass rate speaks only

of one outcome of higher education; other factors of students' well-being do not receive attention. This is precisely what Wilson-Strydom (2011) is stating, that there is too much focus on the outcomes (functionings) when it comes to university access, and little attention is paid to opportunities (capabilities).

What is clear from the capability approach is that it argues that, in a just world, social organisations should expand people's capabilities (their freedom to achieve what they value). (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). In this research, institutions of higher learning are viewed as these social structures or organisations. In addition, the capability approach can highlight inequality and, according to Alkire and Deneulin (2009), inequality is more pronounced when people have different capability sets. It can be argued that e-learning brought about inequalities as most students during the pandemic could not receive an education due to the lack of digital resources. As noted by Oyedemi (2011), Lesame (2014); Du Preez and Le Grange (2020), there is a digital divide that exists, suggesting that students have different capability sets because of e-learning pedagogy.

3.3.2 Conversion factors

The capability to achieve something depends on what Sen (1992) calls conversion factors, and these factors play an essential role within the capability framework. Conversion factors are essentially what allow an individual to convert a capability (opportunities) into a function (achievements) (Ribeiro, 2015). The basis of conversion factors is that people are different, and these differences have impacted people's conversion capabilities into functionings. It is important to understand that these differences do not constitute inequality. As noted by Sen, "There is either that the conversion of goods [resources] to functionings varies from person to person substantially, and the equality of the former may still be far from the equality of the latter." (Sen,1979:219). Borrowing from Walker and Unterhalter (2007) to make this theory of conversion factors much more practical for this research study, the research makes use of the following example:

> A student from a poverty-stricken background is different from a student with a well-off socio-economic standing. Suppose resources like a laptop and access to the internet needed for a disadvantaged student need to be provided. In that case,

> the educational capability set of this student will be limited compared to a student from well-off socio-economic standing.

The above scenario illustrates the disparities in the education space, and when evaluating these educational (dis)advantages, Walker and Unterhalter (2007:134) suggest we ask one fundamental question:

> Do some people get more opportunities to convert their resources [social and cultural capitals, talents, and agency freedoms] into achievements than others? If so, who, how, and why?

The capability approach also argues that people's environments influence many of these opportunities (capabilities and functionings) to resources. Individuals' capabilities are controlled by the available social, political, and economic opportunities (Gore & Walker, 2020). To support the statement on people's environments and influence on capabilities, for example, the reality that many students faced inadequate social living conditions made e-learning a difficult pedagogy (Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). In this study, I used the capability approach to analyse students' environmental, social and personal factors during a pandemic. As stated by Mahlaba (2020), students did not have sufficient data to access e-learning despite data being provided by universities, and there was also the issue of struggles with connectivity. Face-to-face classes provided a learning environment without distractions, access to the library and Wi-Fi/internet.

According to Walker (2006), access to resources enables our functioning in and through education, and our circumstances and social conditions affect individual functioning. The most important question to ask in promoting capabilities in education is how resources known as capability inputs, be they computers or books, are deployed. (Walker, 2006). During the pandemic, as many universities did, CUT set aside a budget for devices and data to assist students without resources to a value of more than R600 000 (Timeslive, 2020). The fundamental thing with the capability approach is not necessarily the available resources, but how they are deployed. For instance, Walker (2006) stresses the ability of an individual to convert the available resources into valued capabilities. For example, in the case of universities making laptops available to students to enable e-learning, to put what Walker (2006) is

painting into context, let us consider the following scenario from the research problem of this study being investigated:

> A non-tech-savvy student with the same digital resources and opportunities as a tech-savvy student will nonetheless encounter challenges in converting these resources and opportunities into capabilities (the capability for the ease) of using e-learning pedagogy with the resources.

The redistribution of resources and opportunities calls for acknowledging diversity and demographics (age, social class, ethnicity, gender, and disability); therefore, conversion factors play a critical role in evaluating education. The researcher argues that e-learning needs to be a socially just pedagogy to achieve social justice; the university must understand that shifting to learning pedagogy may widen the gap between social groups if capabilities are not factored in. Suransky (2017) states that socially just pedagogies are practised in historical and political circumstances, as in South African institutions of higher learning, and often are attached to structural inequalities and injustices.

> At the heart of the capabilities approach since its inception has been the importance of education (Nussbaum, 2011:152).

This statement by Nussbaum (2011) validates the capability approach framework as the lens through which to evaluate the problem of this study, which is to assess if the switch to e-learning furthered existing inequalities and thwarted the expected social justice outcomes due to the higher education context of the CUT. The capability approach components of capabilities, functionings, and social, personal, and environmental conversion factors will be applied to explore the constraints – if any.

3.3.3 Agency

One of the most important elements of the Capability Approach is the concept of agency. According to Sen (1999), agency entails an individual pursuing valuable functionings. It is also important to note that this persuasion can either be constrained or enabled by the conditions under which these valuable functionings are pursued. In other words, there are social and environmental conditions that influence agency. This study is concerned with e-learning during the pandemic. A student may want to attend

an online class, which is a goal they value, but may need access to the internet. Thus, the agency is constrained. Agency in this study will be determined by how students and universities pursued education during the pandemic. According to Walker (2006:106), “agency and well-being are then deeply connected”.

3.3.4 Well-being

Simply put, well-being relates to what people can do Sen (1999). The Capability Approach teaches that through achievements, well-being can be used to evaluate how well an individual is doing. In the quest of this study to evaluate student experience of e-learning, I use the Capability Approach to explore students’ educational well-being. I conceptualise students’ well-being by the freedom they had during the pandemic to do and achieve education, which they have a reason to value.

3.4 Conclusion

In conclusion, the capability approach is employed in this study as a framework to assess the real freedoms available to CUT students from marginalised backgrounds to equalise through their higher education, particularly considering the switch to e-learning during the pandemic. This framework allows us to analyse people’s functionings and capabilities. Through this approach, the researcher may also find the conversion factors in relation to e-learning enabling or further disadvantaging students. Furthermore, the Capabilities Approach is not about inequalities only, but also historical systems of oppression, denying individuals to live the lives they value.

CHAPTER 4:
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the approach to investigating the research problem outlined earlier in this work. Here I detail my paradigmatic assumptions as the researcher, the decisions made regarding the student sample, data collection and analysis strategy, and steps taken to ensure research ethics.

4.2 Research scope (case study)

According to the Department of Higher Education and Training [DHET] (2013), there are 26 public institutions, of which eleven are universities, nine are comprehensive universities, and six are technology universities. About ten of these universities are historically White and previously divided into English-medium universities and Afrikaans-medium universities. Approximately 16 are historically Black universities divided into universities for Africans, Indians, and coloureds (Bunting, 2006). The Central University of Technology (CUT) is the case study in this research. It is one of the two institutions of higher learning in the Free State province. The other is the University of the Free State (UFS). The CUT has two campuses: Bloemfontein and Welkom. Previously known as the Technikon Free State, the university was established in 1981. The CUT enrols an estimated 21 000 students with various qualifications in the following faculties: Built Environment and Information Technology (IT), Engineering, Health and Environmental Sciences and Humanities and Management Sciences (CUT, 2021).

The CUT is a historically White Technikon preserved for White students and advantaged by the apartheid government. This background is worth noting as it supports the necessity and expectations of higher education for students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds who are now accessing this university which was historically designed to entrench the power and privilege of the White minority.

Students applying to the university for entrance must possess at least a Grade 12 Certificate or equivalent qualification. A candidate must have at least 27 points or more on the CUT scoring scale to be admitted. Those who score fewer than the minimum

points on the CUT scoring scale are subjected to selection tests applicable to a particular program. Proficiency in English is essential as candidates are required to have a mark of 50% for English as a home language or first additional language.

In 2021 the university had a headcount of 21 817 students, with 4 622 graduates in 2020. Out of 21 817 students, 54% comprise females, and 20 895 are African, followed by White (448 students) and 421 (Coloured), with the minority being Indian (21 students). Despite the Africans being the majority, the student success by a group on the institution profile shows that Whites have a higher percentage of success. In 2019, Whites had an 83% success rate compared to the 75% success rate of Africans (CUT, 2021). Against this background, I argue that although 75% is a good success rate, the discourse in institutions of higher learning needs to address social justice through pedagogy like e-learning. Limited access to e-learning pedagogy may further exacerbate the inequalities of the past.

4.2.1 Case study: CUT's stance on social justice

Despite the efforts of higher education in South Africa to equalise, there remain disparities between students from lower and higher socio-economic backgrounds. Universities have included social justice goals as a key mechanism to tackle the inequalities in their mission statement and vision.

One of the CUT's strategic goals as part of Vision 2030 is to promote good governance, human rights, and social justice (CUT, 2020). This study is also concerned with social justice by looking at the impact of e-learning during the pandemic. The CUT institution does not have a policy on social justice per ser. However, it follows the Bill of Rights and its implementation within the university. The university is committed to human equality as stipulated under **2.1.2.1** Chapter 3 on regulations on how the bill of rights is to be implemented within the **CUT** section below:

> ***2.1.2.1*** *CUT's commitment to maintaining the human dignity of individuals and groups of individuals is central to this document. CUT is committed to a university free of discrimination and harassment and is dedicated to the highest standard of human equality and academic freedom. CUT actively endorses these standards at every level of the CUT community and in all aspects of students* (CUT Calendar, 2023:115).

The university's Leadership Charter is also construed as a primary core value for academic freedom. Section **2.1.5,** under academic freedom and human rights, illustrates that the university knows that academic freedom's core values may sometimes be compromised.

> ***2.1.5.5*** *CUT acknowledges that situations may arise in a perceived conflict between academic freedom and human rights. A violation of either freedom is of great concern to CUT. CUT will, through this policy, find possible avenues to establish a balance in the interplay between human rights protection and the practice of academic freedom* (CUT Calendar, 2023:116).

The policy above may apply to the situation with e-learning, where many students' academic freedoms may be compromised due to the lack of resources for a specific pedagogy, like e-learning, during the pandemic. As outlined in section **2.1.8.1.5** on students' rights, students have rights to resources to be able to achieve their desired academic goals.

> ***2.1.8.1.5*** *Appropriate access to facilities, resources, and materials to support student engagement and learning* (CUT Calendar, 2023:119).

It is not forgone conclusion that there was a violation of the freedoms of students during the pandemic. However, this study tries to establish whether the university could manage a balance or promote social justice during this period. Perhaps sentiments by Walker (2010:486) are justified in that:

> we are better at critiquing what constrains higher education policy and its misalignment with the social good but imagine less about what to do in its place, or how to advance the spaces of freedom which persist in universities.

However, in the case of pandemic learning, one wonders if the policy was applied as a roadmap to the guiding principle to finish the academic year, although under difficult circumstances but in line with the social justice policy. The critique I put forward is the top-down approach of such policies; the benefits or achievements on the ground cannot be assumed, and students need to be at the centre when applying policies.

Insofar as the policies on e-learning are concerned at the CUT, during the pandemic, the university, adopted the strategic plan 2021-2025: digital transformation. The plan

recognises the digital disparity that exists among students. As described in the insert from the plan on digital transformation below, access to the internet remains a challenge: “The inequity about internet access remains a stumbling block in the efforts of CUT (and other universities and most schools) to provide online learning opportunities for students” (CUT, 2020:11). Although such strategic plans are necessary, I argue that the problems associated with over-providing e-learning may not be solved by mere administrative action. Therefore, tangible actions which support such policies or strategies in the form of the provision of infrastructure and the training of academic staff is a step in the right direction towards helping students and the university to achieve academic freedoms as stipulated in the policy.

The motivation for this study area is that the CUT, like other universities of technologies (UoTs), has unique challenges and opportunities. Unique opportunities entail accessibility regarding entry minimum requirements, as traditional universities like the UFS have stringent requirements that may sideline several students. More than 90% of the students at the CUT are Black, coming from marginalised groups (Mtshali & Sooryamoorthy, 2018). Furthermore, CUT holds itself responsible for playing a critical role in addressing deep socio-economic inequalities. The study was conducted at the CUT on the Bloemfontein Campus.

4.3 Research paradigm

A research paradigm is important in guiding a researcher in the research inquiry process (Makombe, 2017). A paradigm is a set of belief systems and theoretical frameworks with assumptions concerning ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology (Creswell, 2013; Neuman, 2014). It entails the enquirer’s understanding of the reality of the world being investigated (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

Denzin and Lincoln (2000) refer to a paradigm as human construction, because it gives the point of view from which the researcher will construct the meaning of the data gathered. In this study, the researcher outlined the philosophical assumptions underpinning this research. As indicated earlier, there are four paradigm components: epistemology, ontology, methodology, and axiology (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These paradigm components will be defined to provide context to the researcher's assumptions.

Ontological assumptions are concerned with the nature of reality (Creswell, 2013; Mills & Birks, 2014; Neuman, 2014). Ontological assumptions assist the researcher in conceptualising the nature of reality and are essential in how the researcher makes sense or brings meaning to the data collected (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). In the case of the current study, the ontological assumption was based on the question of the reality of the e-learning pedagogy in affecting students' capabilities. Is it the reality that e-learning during the pandemic has not enabled social justice or higher learning institution as an equaliser? Therefore, the ontological assumption is the argument that e-learning has not enabled social justice due to resource inequalities in institutions of higher learning; the reality is that this has widened the inequality gap.

On the other hand, epistemological assumptions seek to create knowledge through the experiences of the study populations (Mills & Birks, 2014; Neuman, 2014). The focus of epistemological assumptions is on the nature of human knowledge that the researcher can attain to expand understanding of the phenomenon (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). This research acquired knowledge through the students' narratives to better understand e-learning and its impact on students.

Axiological assumptions assess the role of values, in which the researcher uses biases to interpret the data. Axiology deals with ethical issues, distinguishing between right and wrong conduct in research (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Narrative inquiry entails intimate engagement with the study population; for this reason, the methodology in this study was aligned in such a way that the search enacts an ethical relationship with the students, treating their stories as sacred and not imposing researchers’ narratives.

Methodological assumptions focus on the research process (Creswell, 2013). It encompasses the following procedures to estimate the phenomena in gathering data, study participants, and data analysis (Keeves, 1997). The process followed to gather the desired data from the students through their narratives to answer the research question is explained in this chapter.

There are generally two common paradigms of positivism and interpretivism. Positivism assumes a single reality exists (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). In other words, positivists assume that reality is the same for each person (Ryan, 2018). Interpretivism, on the other hand, also known as anti-positivism, argues that the truth

is subjective; it rejects the idea of a single reality (Flick, 2014). The capability approach by Sen, which is used to assess the research problem of this study, is also based on the premise that everyone has a unique set of capabilities. For this reason, I believe that reality differs from person to person. The students in this study were allowed to narrate their stories as their individualistic realities. The interpretivism paradigm that underpins the ontological, epistemological theoretical, and methodological beliefs is undertaken in this study. I constructed information from the students' narratives based on their lived experiences of e-learning and its equality impact.

4.4 Research design

Research design is the framework, blueprint, or overall strategy in which the researcher combines all the components required to address the study objectives (Bryman, 2012:46; Creswell, 2013). In this section, I outline the research approaches adopted in this study to address the study objectives.

Research can be conducted using various methodological approaches like qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods (Rubin & Babbie, 2013). The choice of methodological approach depends on the research aims; given my exploratory aim of seeking an in-depth understanding of the students' experiences of e-learning during the pandemic, I opted for a qualitative research approach to fulfil this purpose. According to Mason (2002), qualitative research allows study participants to share their viewpoints on a phenomenon investigated without some predetermined framework. For this reason, this study was approached as qualitative research, which employs the qualitative data collection methods of narrative interviews and primary document review. Considering the overall aims and research questions, the narrative method is regarded as the most appropriate qualitative method to capture the experiences and perceptions of CUT students regarding pandemic e-learning and the social justice impact thereof.

To support this choice, literature (see Mills & Birks, 2014:161) indicates that using narrative methods and exploring the stories humans tell enable the sense-making of lived experiences. The choice of employing the narrative method in data collection is therefore based on scholarship that attests to its ability to create an environment where the researcher can immerse himself in a specific world and observe and reflect on it

(Mills & Birks, 2014). As this research, as indicated earlier, sought to understand students' lived experiences of e-learning, the narrative method offers an advantage in that in-depth data can be gained as participants reveal their accounts (Ntinda, 2018). Central University of Technology, Free State serves as a case study for this research.

4.4.1 Study population and sample

The study adopted non-probability sampling by purposively selecting students and academic staff from two of the CUT's vocational learning programmes of Tourism and Events Management and Hospitality Management, which fall under the Faculty of Management Sciences. Given the choice of narrative method for data collection and presentation in this study, I chose purposive sampling as the most appropriate means of selecting the right fit of participants from the pre-selected departments. The rationale for utilising purposive sampling is that the study participants can purposely inform an understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2013). I chose purposive sampling rather than other forms because the research purposively sought students who had first-hand experience with e-learning during the initial pandemic lockdown period in 2020 when the switch to e-learning was sudden. As such, these would-be students were in the first and second year of HE in 2020 and are now in their third or fourth year.

The two departments are further chosen because the tourism and hospitality industry has always been seen as sectors capable of promoting the inclusiveness of marginalised groups through creating opportunities for involvement by small, medium and micro-enterprises (SMMEs) (DoT, 2018). The intention is to increase the participation of Black entrepreneurs, as White entrepreneurs dominate tourism and hospitality (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2019). Therefore, policies like the National Tourism Sector Strategy 2016-2026 were created to ensure that the entry of barriers compared to other industries are conducive to the previously marginalised groups, and this has allowed students from these marginalised groups who may seek vocational skills to obtain a qualification to enter the job market. Such students are further equalised from a higher learning institution in terms of obtaining qualifications in the already competitive tourism and hospitality labour market. Like many fields of studies that were predominantly White dominated, tourism and hospitality as qualifications in higher education in South Africa are increasingly chosen by Black students who previously

did not have access to such fields, but the industry is still White dominated in managerial positions (Wakelin-Theron, Ukpere & Spowart, 2019).

In some cases, students in tourism and hospitality programmes would need more entry requirements to enter scarce skill programmes like Science and Engineering due to their high school education. In addition, the Tourism and Hospitality industries are deemed key in widening opportunities for the marginalised groups to attain technical and soft skills to enter the job market. Both qualifications can absorb students with minimum entry requirements and give them a chance to develop soft skills in the service sector. In essence, these two departments should speak to education being an equaliser for social justice. Furthermore, the academic staff in both departments could solicit information regarding the impact of the switch to e-learning; for this reason, one academic staff member per programme in the form of an HoD was included as part of the target population.

The sample size in qualitative research is influenced by the purpose of the study, available time, and resources (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:84). The institution (inquiry site) is close to the researcher, which formed the study area for this research, saving time and resources. The sample size in qualitative research will depend on the inquiry question. The number, therefore, can range from an individual to a large group (Mills & Birks, 2014). For a narrative approach, a researcher must find one or more participants accessible and willing to share stories on the phenomenon studied (Creswell, 2013). The size can also be determined if no new information is forthcoming or when the research reaches saturation (Maree, 2016). Thus, this study targeted eleven interviews per department (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1: Sample size

Participants	Hospitality Interviews	Tourism Interviews
Students:	**n= 5 (3rd years)** **n= 5 (4th Years)**	**n= 5 (3rd years)** **n= 5 (4th Years)**
Academic staff (HoD)	**n=1**	**n=1**
TOTAL = 22	**n=11**	**n=11**

This research collected narratives from 20 students and two academic staff members. The participants must have studied in 2020 when the lockdown occurred, and the

university entered the e-learning pedagogy. The students enrolled for academic years 2021 and 2022 were excluded from this study as by the academic year 2021, the university had started integrating hybrid learning in one way or another. For this reason, this study will seek to document students' narratives registered in the 2020 academic year. Most of these students are currently doing their third- (Diploma) and fourth-year (Advanced Diploma) level. This group of students were ideally suited to be research participants in this study as they have experienced e-learning challenges or opportunities in its totality.

4.4.2 Data collection strategy

Data were collected in October 2022 after obtaining ethical clearance from the University of the Free State ***(UFS-HSD2022/0802/22)*** and the Central University of Technology, Free State ***(FMSEC27922)***. I developed an interview guide for the students and academic staff for the data collection instrument. One of the characteristics of interviews is that the researcher has specific themes or topics to cover (Mason, 2002), and for this research, the interview guide was designed on the construct of the Capability Approach theory or theoretical framework.

Upon receiving ethical clearance, a call via email was sent to all the students and respective HoDs for recruitment. After participants stated their interest in participation, interviews were scheduled and conducted based on the suitable time and day for each participant. Before the interviews, the study was explained to the participants, and the participants signed the consent form. All interviews with the students were conducted in English, but due to my understanding of the other South African languages, students were given the option to use their home languages if needs be to be much more expressive and comfortable.

4.4.2.1 Narrative interviews: students

Narrative interviews elicit a more detailed account of experiences or events, and formulating generative narrative questions is important (Flick, 2009). For this typology of data collection, Mills and Birks (2014) advise that the recruitment of the participants may need preliminary relationship building in which trust is built. The authors further assert that the researcher's position in narrative inquiry is that the relationship between the researcher and the participants may sometimes be personal and sometimes

conflicting. The researcher in this study is employed at the university (inquiry site), and the trust with the participants was somewhat established. I recognise that this might pose an ethical dilemma for tourism management students as the researcher works for the department. To address this problem, a fieldworker in the form of a postgraduate lecturer without contact with the students was used to conduct the interviews.

The idea for the narrative interviews is to get the respondents' life stories (Muylaert et al., 2014). It was intentional in this study not to set out a fixed agenda in narrative interviews, but rather allow the interviewee to take the lead regarding the interview's direction, content, and pace (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). As a data collection method, narrative interview involves a one-on-one meeting between interviewee and interviewer, discussing specific issues in-depth (Hennink, Hutter & Bailey, 2011). The main premise of qualitative interviews is to gather data to help understand the study population's construction of knowledge and social reality (Maree, 2016).

4.4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews: HoDs

For qualitative research, data collection primarily takes place in the form of interviews and documents (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, data collection for this study converged on individual semi-structured interviews as a key research tool with two departmental HoDs. Qualitative interviewing or semi-structured interview involves interaction in the form of a dialogue; this can be a one-on-one interview or with a large group (Mason, 2002). With semi-structured interviews, I used an interview guide to prompt the direction of the questioning (Mills & Birks, 2014).

These interviews took place face to face, and with the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed for analysis (Van Wyk, 2015). Prior to interviews, the purpose and process of the interviews were explained to the study participants. Both narrative and semi-structured interview times ranged from 30 to 60 minutes; this excluded the pre-interview discussions.

4.4.2.3 Document review

For analyses, I examined mainly the communique and documents that speak to e-learning strategies during the lockdown period. I reviewed the communique and

policies such as strategic plan 2021-2025 during COVID-19 from the CUT for document review. The criteria were to source documents starting from March 2020 to 2022. The intention was to examine and interpret these documents to elicit understanding and develop empirical knowledge on strategies employed by the CUT on e-learning and the social justice impact within the context of the university and the impact on students.

4.5 Validity and reliability

Due to the philosophical underpinnings of this study, I saw it fit to use more than one data collection method to research a question. This study's validity was consolidated by using more than one independent measure. Therefore, this study adopted triangulation as a form of data collection strategy. "Triangulation of data combines data drawn from different sources and at different times, in different places or from different people" (Flick, 2005:178). Interviews are one of the most frequently used methods of qualitative research (Mason, 2002), and a narrative researcher collects data primarily from interviews and documents (Creswell, 2013). For this study, triangulation for data collection was employed using three information-gathering methods: document/policy review, narrative interviews for students and semi-structured interviews for academic staff.

4.6 Ethical considerations

Participation in this study was strictly voluntary and confidential; information like respondents' information was treated with confidentiality. Furthermore, the participants were assured confidentiality through pseudonyms (Creswell, 2013). There were no foreseeable risks or harm involved in this study, and respondents could withdraw from the research process at any given time if the project involved what they may deem a risk. After the data collection, the data gathered were protected via a password known to the researcher, and post the publishing of the results, data will be made available via email to the respondent.

This study involved human subjects as part of the data collection. Therefore, ethical considerations were a priority. However, this research did not target students based on any vulnerability. It did recognise that some students may form part of the disadvantaged groups. For this reason, in the storytelling process, it was important to

ensure no harm by respecting and treating the participants with integrity. Based on human subjects, obtaining permission from the appropriate committee is an essential ethical consideration in qualitative research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2015). Therefore, before conducting the research with the targeted population, ethical clearance was obtained from the CUT ethical committee and the Human Research Ethics Committee (GHREC) at the University of the Free State. A completed research study information leaflet and consent form for this study was also provided to the participants (Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls & Ormston, 2014. The consent forms from the participants were kept separate from the data collected for confidentiality purposes.

4.7 Data analysis

The data collected through narratives, semi-structured interviews and institutional document reviews, were analysed thematically. According to Willig (2014:147), thematic analysis involves the "process of identifying themes in the data that carry meaning relevant to the research question". The main themes were unearthed from data based on that which responded to the guiding research questions and was made to fit into pre-selected themes. In other words, the main themes and sub-themes were constructed to reflect the Capability Approach components of capabilities, functionings, wellbeing, agency and conversion factors. As stated in the previous chapter, Sen's (1999) Capability Approach framework was employed to analyse students' experiences with the e-learning pedagogy and its impact on their capabilities. This approach was not tied to a specific set of theoretical constructs, making it applicable to the Capability Approach theory. Fundamentality this current study analysed qualitative data using the six steps in data analysis and interpretation suggested by Creswell (2013): Organisation and preparation of the data generated; thorough reading of all the data; commencement of a detailed analysis of the data with a coding process; utilisation of the coding process to generate categories; representation of the data and finally, making sense of the data through interpretation.

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the research methodology applied to this study. The target population was defined, and the data collection method and the sampling in this

chapter were justified. The data analysis and ethical aspects were elaborated on. The next chapter focuses on the study findings.

CHAPTER 5:

PERSPECTIVES ON E-LEARNING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE DURING THE PANDEMIC AT CUT

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents empirical findings on HoDs, students, and document review perspectives on e-learning and social justice during the pandemic. Two staff members at the CUT in the form of heads of departments took part in this study. The HoDs were initially selected because their managerial positions may inform adopted strategies that guided e-learning during the pandemic and contextual information on the challenges that students and academic staff faced and the impact of the social justice goal of the university. The identities of these staff members are not necessarily anonymised since they are office bearers of the programmes selected for this study.

As part of data collection, I used semi-structured interviews to capture the academic staff member's perspective on the shift to e-learning. HoDs were interviewed individually at their convenience and the interviews lasted 30 to 60 minutes each. The questions posed to HoDs tried to solicit information on their involvement with the students**,** challenges facing students in higher education:

- Does the department tend to attract students from a historically disadvantaged background?
- Can higher education attainment by students enable or promote social justice?
- What did the switch to e-learning pedagogy during the pandemic entail for each department and students?

This chapter also presents the perspectives of twenty tourism and hospitality students on their experience with the shift from face-to-face classes to e-learning, the challenges they faced, how they overcame them, and the opportunities e-learning presented, if any. The main premise of this empirical data from the students was to allow each student to tell their personal story of their value on higher education, including their experience accessing higher education and any expectations they may have had or still have. I wanted to understand education's ability to 'equalise' and its

capacity to foster social justice. Participants were interviewed individually, and before the interview, the purpose of the interview and consent forms were explained.

In addition, I looked at the strategies employed during the pandemic at the CUT. Communiques to students and staff and strategies adopted between March 2020 and 2022 were collected and analysed. These strategies were analysed to have a much broader perspective from the university and to augment both students and HoDs' viewpoints on e-learning.

The research questions underpinning the study were:

- Why and how is higher education attainment by these CUT students expected/promised to enable social justice?
- What did switch to e-learning during the pandemic entail, and what did it mean for various CUT students?
- What challenges and opportunities have arisen out of the switch to e-learning' as per student accounts?
- What does e-learning- with its challenges and opportunities- imply for enabling desired/expected social justice goals per students' accounts?

To comprehensively answer the above questions, this chapter is divided into four sections, A, B, C, and D, which seek to answer each question from the HoDs, students, and document review perspectives. To further answer these questions effectively, pre-determined themes of the students' profile, the value of education, the expectation of education, e-learning challenges and opportunities and social justice guided by our interview guides were used. Furthermore, this chapter will analyse the data presented through the lens of the theoretical framework (Capability Approach). Table 5.1 below presents the study participants in this empirical study. Due to word-count limitations, some of the narratives are not reflected in this chapter. Selected narratives are primarily based on the fact that information was becoming saturated and the rich reflections on their stories regarding their e-learning experience during the pandemic.

Table 5.1: Tabular profiling selected participants

	Student Participants Pseudonym names	Gender	Field of Studies	Year of study
1.	Thabiso	Male	Tourism Management	4th Year
2.	Lebo	Female	Hospitality Management	3rd Year
3.	Jene	Female	Tourism Management	4th Year
4.	Jack	Male	Tourism Management	4th Year
5.	Victor	Male	Hospitality Management	3rd Year
6.	Lerato	Female	Hospitality Management	3rd Year
7.	Lizel	Female	Hospitality Management	4th Year
8.	Bongi	Female	Hospitality Management	3rd Year
9.	Bradley	Male	Tourism Management	3rd Year
10.	Bianca	Female	Tourism Management	4th Year
11.	Martha	Female	Tourism Management	4th Year

12.	Mooi	Female	Tourism Management	4th Year
13.	Thabo	Male	Hospitality Management	3rd Year
14.	Pule	Male	Hospitality Management	3rd Year
15.	Tshepo	Male	Tourism Management	4th Year
16.	Nolwazi	Female	Tourism Management	3rd Year
17.	Lucky	Male	Hospitality Management	3rd Year
18.	Daniel	Male	Tourism Management	3rd Year
19.	Tammy	Female	Tourism Management	4th Year
20.	Stephen	Male	Hospitality Management	4th Year
	Academic Staff Participants	**Gender**	**Department (Programme)**	**Years of experience in the (HoD) position**
1.	HoD 1	Female	Hospitality Management Programme	3 years

2.	HoD 2	Female	Tourism and Event Management Programme	7 years

5.1.1 A Tale of Two Stories

Before analysis of the results, below I provide anecdotes from two of the students sampled to understand the dynamics of students that went into e-learning:

Martha

For as long as Martha can remember, she has never failed a grade, which meant that she was smart, but unfortunately, Martha never really knew much about higher education. She grew up in the small town of Bothaville. Being from a single-parent family structure and being the first to go to university, all she knew was that after matric, she would get a job and then make money. Her value for education is inspired by her late mother, who bought her clothes for school, emphasising the importance of education. The last conversation with her mother before her passing kept her studying hard. She recalls the open day for her first time at the university, where she saw people in red gowns, which fuelled her love for education. Her difficult background and witnessing what education can do for a person motivated her to achieve more. She plans to one day to be a professor.

Lizel

Lizel is from Bloemfontein; for as long as she can remember, she has been surrounded by education all her life and was aware that it would be a direction she would eventually take due to her environment. Her mother is a high school teacher, and her father is also at a higher learning institution and has a PhD as the highest qualification. She asserts that her father has always encouraged her and her siblings to study further. Her sister is also doing her MBA. Lizel expects to get a job within the academic space after their master's degree, and she enjoys research.

5.1.2 Students and HoD background

In this section, I first present the profile of the students, HoDs and the programmes to understand the data presented better.

HoDs interviewed in this study have over ten years in academia and have attained a qualification in Tourism and Hospitality. Academia has always been a path for one

HoD, as the family background influenced the decision to go this route. For **HoD #1**, the family has always had people in education, as stated in the extract,

> *I come from an academic history. My father, almost everybody from my father's side of the family was a teacher.*

HoD #2 recalls that after graduation, the path was heading to the hospitality industry until an offer came through for a lecturer assistant position. The HoD stated:

> *I was not sure if I could do it, I could not speak in front of people, and I phoned my father, and he said, no man, you can do it. So, I declined the permanent contract in the hospitality industry and started working as a lecturer assistant. Since then, I knew this is where I want to be.*

Furthermore, understanding HoDs' involvement with the students is critical as it provides validity in answering the research question on *why and how higher education attainment by these CUT students is expected/promised to enable social justice*. Capability for affiliation in the form of a lecturer-student relationship is critical for students' success. Academic staff can serve as resources for students to convert opportunities into achievements. Therefore, the involvement of academic staff with the students cannot be undermined. The interviews reveal that despite their executive positions, both HoDs are involved with the students and are still lecturing to be on the ground regarding understanding the issues that students are grappling with, as indicated below.

> *So, I still lecture, but we would have lectured four or five subjects in the past as a lecturer. I am now required to lecture at least a subject as HoD. Yeah. That is a good thing because I believe that Deans must lecture and be on the ground. You get to see the frustration. I think that it helps to see the challenges that students are going through. It feels to me that when you are HoD, there is almost a wall you need to break down, but if you lecture, It opens up communication channels, I believe.* ***(HoD#2)***

The literature consulted in this study tells us there has been an increase in higher education attendance in South Africa (Machika, Troskie-de Bruin & Albertyn, 2014). This has also meant that there is more competition to enter university. For these programmes, students that come through are put to the test to meet the minimum entry

requirements. This is also done to select the right prospective students to avoid the high drop-out rates. One HoD asserted that:

> *Applications have boomeranged like crazy. However, we need to make it easier for you to get in. We do interviews, and we do a psychometric test so that you can show us your passion, you can show us your aptitude. We have an extended programme also, which increases the accessibility for the students with lower scores in school that might not have had the opportunities.* ***(HoD#1)***

The extended programme is also for students from ill-equipped schools to prepare them for higher learning. This means that their low scores may have also been a product of a disadvantage. The extended programme has allowed students to adapt quickly and has the advantage of getting into the undergraduate programme. Further, in our interviews, it was clear that for programmes like hospitality, a student might need more than just the minimum entry requirements to succeed. The HoD indicated that the programme is quite expensive, given its practical nature:

> *Our programme is expensive in the sense of your practical subjects. We need to buy all the food you will cut up and fry and burn, knife sets, everything you need to practice on, and you need to buy. That is not the same with the theory subject. However, our practical subjects might get more expensive also our students must be in uniform that they must buy in their first year, which makes it much more expensive.* ***(HoD#1)***

The extract above shows that students may need the necessary funding, and the funding challenges in South Africa may make such programmes inaccessible for those without funding, especially students from disadvantaged backgrounds. In the context of the switch to e-learning, this would have meant that things like uniforms and food then did not become a priority since students are attending remotely. When one assesses the profile of students in these programmes, these might be quite a challenge, given that the majority of the students are from disadvantaged backgrounds and rely on government funding as stated:

> *Most of our students come from previously neglected groups, people from poor environments. I mean, a majority of the students are dependent on NSFAS funding. So that tells you from what background the students come. Although the programme is diverse, It is one stream of students coming from the same background.* ***(HoD#2)***

In the literature (MacMaster, 2014; Speckman and Mandew, 2014), I highlighted issues with NSFAS; now, with the switch to e-learning, accommodation and transport would not have been a factor or one less financial burden for the students since they were studying remotely. Students would have to deal with digital resources to access education. The students' backgrounds are further highlighted by the hospitality programme's efforts to collect food parcels for their students with contributions from staff members and the provision of transport when students have night functions to get home safely.

> *A very high percentage of our students are disadvantaged. Students come and ask us daily for food also, you know, and we provide food parcels. We can only expect the student to come in the morning and work with food at midnight, and he has yet to eat; he is hungry. How do you study if you are so hungry? I mean, I cannot even think if I am hungry. The other thing is because of our night functions from our departmental budget. We also give transport because we cannot expect to walk to the taxi immediately. So, we also do that to try and try and ensure to get them safely home quicker.* ***(HoD#1)***

The extract above shows the state of the challenges students find themselves in at institutions of higher learning, and this is before e-learning. Learning is demanding on one's mental health and, compounded by the physiological need or lack thereof is a social justice issue. A student must struggle to have the courage to ask for food so they can go to bed on a full stomach. Remote learning meant that the support for food would have stopped, and thus, such students had no means of food support at home. The positive spin-off with the lockdown would mean no need for night classes; thus, less risk to students' safety. Safety concerns at South African universities have been raised, like rape incidents. Unfortunately, most universities in South Africa cannot meet students' housing needs (Gopal & Van Niekerk, 2018).

The close-knit relationship with the student is critical for the tourism department, and trying to provide personalised or individual service to the students is essential for the HoD. The interview reveals that, given the disadvantaged backgrounds of many of the students, going the extra mile in supporting the students goes a long way, as the Capability Approach informs us that education is about going beyond attaining a degree and focusing on the well-being of students. About our research question, how

is higher education attainment by these CUT students expected/promised to enable social justice? The quote below answers this question of what is promised to enable social justice.

> *Fortunately, we are a small department with a much closer relationship with our students. We have much closer contact with students regarding what issues they might have. It might seem irrelevant that my idea of social justice is also to treat people as human beings. They are not just a number. I sometimes feel like at the institution, you are just another number. So it might be that students are going through bad times, and I am just acknowledging how they feel and understanding how they feel that they can relate to you and contribute to social justice. Many of them do not have parents or guardians that participate in them. So yes, there are some situations where you feel you become too involved, but at the end of the day, I feel that many of the students' value that they feel they are heard and that this is somebody that cares to help them.* ***(HoD#2)***

The extract above supports the idea that social justice is also about social inclusion; through such measures, equity can be achieved from a social standpoint. This is also another way higher education attainment promises to enable social justice. Deploying such approaches to learning may build students' capabilities in terms of human development.

5.2 Section A: Higher education attainment by CUT students expected/promised to enable social justice

5.2.1 Value of education

I begin this section by looking at the value HoDs place on the education offered by these programmes; the value students place on education, and why education is so important for each student. I start within because values and aspirations underpin functionings and capabilities.

5.2.1.1 HoDs' perspectives

The theoretical framework for this study, the Capability Approach, suggests that people placing value on things like education is critical. From the departmental point of view, I wanted to understand the value placed on educating students. From the

interviews, it was clear that providing students with the necessary skills to earn a living is what these programmes strive for. The extract below indicates that both programmes are more than just being about the value of attaining a qualification, but building students holistically and providing students with self-confidence, as stated below, and the Capability Approach by Sen advocates the capability of confidence. Walker (2006) asserts that educational quality and well-being are assessed by one's ability to achieve valuable functionings like confidence.

> *We are preparing students for the world of work in our industry. We try and prepare students holistically. For us, it is about portraying the passion that you have and, through that, earning an income. Moreover, I think the other thing is that we provide students with many opportunities to practice skills so they can make a living independently. They get self-confidence in it, and if; they if self-confidence, they will get something out of it.* ***(HoD#1)***

> *Tourism has its finger in every pie in society. It creates jobs and develops your communication skills and opportunities. I would say that the skills we can offer our students, even if they do not enter the tourism industry per se, can make them well-rounded human beings.* ***(HoD#2)***

5.2.1.2 Students' perspectives

I have adopted the Capability Approach as a theoretical framework in this study. According to Sen (1999), the Capability Approach looks at individuals' freedom in the things they value. Education is one of the things that most people value. For this reason, I tried to understand the value the students put on education and investigate why education is so important. The students' narratives indicate that the value placed on education by the students is subjective and varies. Depending on one's interpretation of success, being successful was one of the key values placed on education. Lebo explained that:

> *Growing up, we were usually told that education was the key to success. I saw most people around me being successful through education. So, I thought that this was the way to success. I wanted to become one of the successful people around me because it indicated it was possible. I wanted to inspire my younger brother. I have two siblings and one niece who are still growing up currently. They are looking up to me as the older brother currently in the city, and I can see the impact that I have made on their*

*lives, even though it has not been that much ever since I came to university. I can see they are developing some love for and need for the school (**Lebo**).*

Lebo is showing agency by being responsible for determining her destination by changing her life towards what she values: education. Lebo's value for education is also demonstrated as impacting others other than herself. Upon further investigation, I also noted that examples of education success and inspirations around them heavily influence the value placed on education by the student. Lizel's narrative below is supported by Walker (2006) in that our identity is influenced by the people with whom we associate, including allowing us to be:

My mom is a high school teacher. So, I have been surrounded by education all my life. My father is also he was in higher education space, you know, academia and all of that. And he is still publishing some research and so on. He has a PhD as well. So, he encourages us to continue studying, even though it is not to get a job. But it is really, it is nice. It is enjoyable, and my sister is also doing her MBA. So, I feel that everyone in my family is just in that space. And you know, when you are surrounded by something so much, get influenced by it. I am also enjoying it; it is not because these people are doing this, I am also doing that, but I have fallen in love with it if that makes sense. ***(Lizel)***

Lizel's story also indicates an advantaged individual with high agency due to being exposed to success, particularly in higher education. I gathered from the students' stories that family background played a huge role in why they pursued studies and valued education. This came through in the form of their socio-economic status or background and referred to either parents not working or siblings relying on them for economic freedom, as illustrated below by Lerato:

For me, education is all about learning new things, and I think that it is because of my background. I thought if I ever wanted to succeed, school was the way. I need to go to school because I know my goals in life. A side hustle was not an option for me because of how we lived. Back then, my father was not working, my mother was still in school, and my grandparents were not working. So, it was kind of a difficult situation because we had to plant our vegetables so that we could eat. After all, we did not have much. So, years later, everything started to get better after my father graduated. But back then, we sometimes went to bed on an empty stomach. I want to go to school because I do not want my children to go through the same situation. ***(Lerato)***

Taking note of Lerato ‘s father changing the situation at home through education, it is important to note that a social setting of disadvantage should not be a determining factor for one’s future, and this is where education is meant to be a conversion factor for freedoms. It is evident from Lerato that there is an expectation that obtaining education would enable social justice by improving their financial situation at home by securing employment. However, Gore and Walker (2020) caution that obtaining a qualification does not automatically translate into getting employment. Much of this notion is supported by the high number of unemployed graduates. This value placed on education shows that students need more than resources and freedoms. There must be the ability to convert opportunities into success. I argue that their conditions, like upbringing and educational background, will most likely enable them to convert resources like personal capabilities and structural social arrangements. In this case, success can be measured by a student taking the family out of poverty or achieving financial freedom through education. After all, Alkire (2005) points out that achieved functionings relate to successfully persuading and realising the functioning.

Many students are from disadvantaged backgrounds, and from the sample, eleven of students are the first generation to attend institutions of higher learning. This is a huge achievement for them and resonates with the value of education. Given their first-generation status to go to higher education, the family needs more knowledge or experience. I argue that such students need conversion factors like talents, attitude, access to funding and agency to succeed. This also challenges many students, as this pressure is driven by the need to address poverty-related issues or find a way to economic freedom (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2022). I gathered from (Jack) that education is an opportunity to create a generation of educated individuals. He said:

> *My parents only managed to study until Grade 12 and did not attend college. But I decided to pursue my study because I just wanted to break the chain. After all, I am the first child to graduate in my family. So, I feel like it also inspires my siblings and other family members. I am not only doing it for them but also enjoying and loving it.* **(Jack)**

Jack’s narratives above also support the premise by Sherman (2016) that value creation is binary and comprises both an individualistic and communitarian activity. The value placed on education by the students is individualistic in terms of their

aspirations for themselves and communitarian in terms of aspirations for their families. Thus, education can develop students from a human development perspective by allowing them to become who they want to be (expanding their capabilities) while enabling them to equalise, thus achieving social justice.

The narratives further indicate that the value of education is also personal for other students. The quote below illustrates that it is more than obtaining a qualification. For some students obtaining an education is tied to a promise with parents or guardians or a personal relationship with family members: Martha recalled the last conversation with her late mother regarding education, and she asserted:

> *My last conversation with my late mother about school is why I value education. She had just bought me a new school uniform that Monday morning, and I wore my school uniform and went to school. Before I left the house; she said, you look so happy with your school uniform. I hope you will forever be happy when you wear your school uniform, I returned that afternoon, and she had passed away.* ***(Martha)***

The geographical elements or environment in terms of the communities' students are from came through as strong personal views on why education matters to students. It is important to note that the aspiration to attend varsity is an internal capability that most students have to escape their disadvantaged social setting. So, during the pandemic and the switch to e-learning, students were forced to go back to the same surroundings, which did not inspire much of their expectations to achieve. Many of the students are from low-income families in rural areas, and the situation in such areas paints a picture of young people sitting at home without a proper plan or goals to achieve something in life; the quote below illustrates this:

> *I am from a rural area, so I have seen how not getting an education has impacted people my age. They are just sitting at home. They must be open-minded about trying new things or getting a better life. They think where they are, life ends there. So, education has allowed me to get out of that village and sleep better.* ***(Tshepo)***

Tshepo saw higher education as a door to opportunities that do not exist in rural areas. Therefore, he had an agency to decide about his life, thus indicating the freedom to determine what he wanted to do (Sen, 1999). With e-learning forcing him to return to the same environment, this affected his self-esteem and deterred his freedom. Overall,

as the theoretical framework adopted in this study has indicated that functionings are the aspects of life that individual values and Sen indicates that education is critical to well-being, the narratives show that students value education and their functioning is intuitive. Furthermore, the stories illustrate that education is seen as an enabler to having the lives that students have a reason to value.

It also came through in one of the interviews that individuals cannot value what they do not know. The Capability Approach is about individuals being able to achieve the freedom to make decisions on what doings and beings they value, and these freedoms are suppressed even before a student enters a university. A narrative below illustrates this point that from a capability approach, such individuals without the knowledge resource may not show agency for their aspiration:

> *I never knew from a young age that there was a university because I grew up in Bothaville. So, after matric, I told myself I would get a job and then have money* ***(Martha****).*

This highlights that many students need more knowledge on things they can pursue beyond their environments. Even when students like Martha from such backgrounds enter a university, the gap is wider compared to students who have access to information about higher education, thus enabling a lack of agency. This is where a university is meant to equalise and not widen the gap further.

5.2.2 Expectation placed on education attainment by students

It has been noted that students' expectation of higher education is changing, and it concerns that often, these expectations are not aligned with the educational values (James, 2002). The value placed on education comes with expectations. Across the board, most students in this study cited getting a job, having a better life, and escaping the environments that they are from in terms of their expectations for education. The following extracts capture this:

> *My expectation with my qualification is basically to get a job. I expect that I will start my guesthouse. After this qualification, I also expect to do my PGCE and go into education, but ultimately, I expect to get a job. Ultimately, to empower my knowledge more than anything and improve my living standard.* ***(Thabo)***

I'm expecting to get a job and be stable, and I am fighting so hard not to get back to villages. So, I hope this advanced diploma will keep me out of that place. ***(Tshepo)***

I expect education to create generational wealth for me. Generational wealth, for me, is significant. Because of my background, I want the next generation to have everything they want and opportunities wherever they want. I have little brothers, and they want to do amazing things in life. ***(Bradley)***

The narratives above show that many students' socio-economic status drives the expectations for education, and getting a job is the primary goal. In essence, the economic value of higher education is more pronounced than the value of education (Walker, 2010). These expectations also beg the question of how detrimental it is not meeting such expectations once the educational goal is met. Ninety percent of the students at the CUT is Black, and according to Walker and Fongwa (2017:41), Black students are more likely to be unemployed than their White counterparts. The socio-economic inequality outside qualifications further hinders many of the students from achieving the expectations that they may have, as illustrated in the quotes from the students' narratives.

It was also interesting that Lucky needed to see or place more value on education. He stated**,**

I am not going to lie; if I had a choice, I probably would not be studying. I grew up in an environment where I was always told I needed to study. But as I grew up, I realised you do not need to study to develop. I do not have expectations; I intended to study law, and that did not work ***out (Lucky****).*

I believe that students' capabilities for knowledge on career opportunities should be enhanced before a university so that individuals can create their aspirations. The lack of knowledge, which is epistemic injustice, could hinder the students from making better choices for themselves and possibly dropping out because they do not have the freedom to achieve their desired opportunities. Thus, regarding this study's research question, higher education attainment by such students may not promise to enable social justice as many will fall back on the social standings.

Overall, the narrative from the students clearly illustrates that as far as the value of education is concerned, it is critical to understand that the value placed on education

is subjective, therefore, differs from one individual to the next based on social structures. The narratives further indicate that students aspire beyond their circumstances, and education, for many of them, is valued as a ticket to improve their standard of living or as a pathway out of poverty. The narratives also make one pay attention to Nussbaum's (2011:157) take on education that "good education requires sensitivity to context, history, and cultural and economic circumstances". This is critical for higher education institutions to consider social justice as one of the goals.

5.3 Section B: Challenges and opportunities out of the switch to e-learning

5.3.1 Students

Education is meant to equalise, and challenges that come with it may disadvantage students, particularly students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It was therefore critical to analyse the challenges and opportunities, if any, that these students experienced.

Insights from the students' narratives reveal that the shift from face-to-face classes to e-learning was frustrating at the beginning of the lockdown because it was a new pedagogy for the students, and there was a lack of digital resources. The major issues raised by the students were the lack of data, devices and access to the internet. In addition, students also reported difficulties in using the learning management system (eThuto). The narratives further affirm capability approach principles in that the students may aspire to and value education. However, they may have imposed restrictions in achieving their educational goals, like a lack of access to digital resources, as illustrated in the quote below:

> *The challenge was that I needed help to use the learning management system. I did not have a laptop to type my assignments. Sometimes, I would log in late due to technical issues. One of the things that made me manage, in terms of typing assignments, is that I asked this friend of mine. To assist me, I also managed to download Word on my smartphone so that I could register. There was also an issue with the data. I would buy data for one hour, which is the data that I can use to type an assignment and do some research. So, regarding where we get money for my data, I would use my money for an allowance from NSFAS because I could not ask my family. After all, they do not have money.* ***(Lerato)***

Although Lerato showed agency by buying data, she used a cellphone to write assignments. As a low-income student, she had poor access to digital resources required for e-learning, which perpetuates inequalities. With already limited financial resources, her NSFAS bursary meant for other things needed to be used as a capability.

> *I struggled; I still had a few modules from 2019 that I had to do. So, when Covid happened, and we had to go back home and do e-learning, in a way, I was excited. But in 2020, I was starting to progress. So, in March, when we had to leave, I was bummed about leaving because I was starting to do well at school. As the e-learning progressed, I realised I was doing better than on campus. I do not know if it was the assignments or what, but my marks improved. I was more confident again in my work. I was more determined and ambitious to finish, and the struggles came in the data situations at home. I do not have Wi-Fi.* ***(Bradley)***

The quote above illustrates that despite the challenge with digital resources and data, e-learning presented opportunities for others, and the students' work improved, which can be attributed to several reasons. As indicated by the student, the assessment form was different as it was presented online, and this method may have worked for other students like Bradley. The theory applied in this research also asserts that the Capability Approach, in a pedagogical sense, must consider how knowledge is catered, and students like Bradley may have been receptive to e-learning. Thus, positive outcomes and conversion factors may have attributed to such outcomes.

The students needed more resources to access education during the pandemic. It must also be noted that amid this challenge, students had to show agency by acting in their studies by finding means to purchase data even with limited financial resources. In essence, some needed more agency than others, given their social class; the lack of digital resources hindered their agency and thus inhibited the social justice promised. It is fair to say that material resources for an e-learning pedagogy are foundational to converting opportunities to success. Upon further analysis of the students' narrative, the flipside of disadvantaged students from low-income families is that the lack of financial resources can motivate them to use their agency to succeed in challenging pedagogy practices. The extract below shows this:

> *I would buy data from my pocket, which was a bit difficult because I stay with my grandmother, a pensioner, so she only sometimes contributes to my school things like data and all those things. She only contributes to ensuring that I am fed, clothed, sheltered, and I am okay. But other things that involve me personally, I had to do myself. The allowance that I was getting could not satisfy those needs.* ***(Thabo)***

Thabo is already dealing with the socio-economic barriers compounded by e-learning, which impedes the free wisdom he must enjoy. The challenges highlighted above by students regarding e-learning resources are supported by the literature (Kaup et al., 2020:1220; Tamrat & Teferra, 2020). According to the authors above, the e-learning challenges during COVID-19 included access to digital resources, leaving some students behind. The narratives show that digital resources limited some students from exercising their freedoms and agency. I argue that the notion of students being left behind directly translates to exclusion and the widening social equity gap in education. It is also important to note that resources are the means, not the end, of human well-being (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007).

It is essential to note that increasing resources can expand other elements, like confidence and participation, which may translate into a broader range of capabilities. In essence, the absence of resources for the students during the e-learning could have resulted in a lack of participation in education, and confidence in the education promise to equalise would have been lost as part of their narrative. Students also indicated below that the challenge with data became much better later when the university provided data and free academic sites to be able to do assignments. Like many other universities, CUT negotiated with network providers and was able to secure data deals that were critical for e-learning, as indicated from the extracts below:

> *In October 2020, I had a laptop, which became easy for me. But then CUT also provided us with data, and I could now access online links for the online lessons.* ***(Tammy)***

> *It became easier when CUT provided free data sites, and I could do my tests properly. So, the transition for me, I feel like it was all over the place. It was a rollercoaster of emotions, to be honest.* ***(Thabo)***

It is evident from the narratives above that the absence of the necessary resource capability leads to a disadvantage. However, resource capability combined with a

sense of agency, enables the students to expand their capabilities. Although these students managed to achieve their educational goals during the pandemic, it means that the lack of capability during the months without the e-learning resources meant that they were disadvantaged and could not realise other functionings like obtaining good marks required to obtain merit bursaries or meeting their educational targets of passing with distinctions. Also, the provision of resources months later demonstrates a need for more agency from the university, constraining the students' confidence in participating in learning (Walker, 2006:174).

From the students' narratives, I discovered that the students had entered uncharted territory, where they had to exercise self-directed learning. The majority needed help with being focused and motivated with this form of learning. My interest was lost from studying and attending online classes. The attention span was short for some, and they easily got distracted and ended up doing work not related to academic work. Below are some of the quotes on how students struggled to stay motivated:

> *It was hectic at the start because I was used to face-to-face classes, and it was now online, and you had to do everything by yourself, maybe 90% of the work. It was a bit challenging for me, and I could not balance my subjects because I had 13 modules in the first year, and the whole year I had 13 modules. That also means we have 26 assignments to complete. At that point, I considered dropping out and returning the following year.* ***(Lebo)***

> *I did not take it seriously. So, it affected my studies because I would go to a class and log in and do something else. I wouldn't be listening to lectures.* ***(Tshepo)***

This shows that digital resources are insufficient; students need wider capabilities to achieve, which most disadvantaged students still need to gain. E-learning exacerbated the lack of concentration and was compounded by the heavy workload that required self-regulated work habits, which is a capability that many students need to possess as a conversion factor to achieve. Sen (2009) calls for self-efficacy for one to overcome adapted preference. The likes of Tshepo needed to improve in self-efficacy, thus being disadvantaged. E-learning was a circumstance beyond students' control, which may have made this period difficult for students to realise valuable capabilities, to the point of dropping out due to failing to cope with the e-learning demands. One of the challenges I picked up from the students' narratives is regarding the lack of need for

communication from their lecturers and lecturers' confidence in using e-learning. Jack's account below not only exposes the lecturers' competency in delivering e-learning but also highlights pertinent issues of epistemic justice and social justice impediment in that knowledge production during the pandemic resulted in some students being excluded.

> *It was horrible, because even our lecturers needed to learn how to teach with this e-learning. Because we did not need more information, we first needed motivation between students and lecturers.* ***(Jack)***

> *Some lecturers have yet to reply to emails in some departments. I got assisted with the academic writing centre, but the experience could have been better. I drafted my research assignment and sent it, and she has yet to call me back, and then she only replied after I submitted the assignment. So, what is the point of asking for assistance if someone takes time?* ***(Lizel)***

The narratives above also describe the difficulties students endured with the access to the lecturers and information. Of concern is that the lecturers lacked agency in communication and feedback to accommodate the needs of students at a distance. In essence, students' academic freedoms and choices were constrained. Sandars and Hart (2015) state that there needs to be a mediating role for a person to achieve freedom. An educator plays a critical role in developing capabilities and facilitating the growth and development of a person (Hoveid & Hoveid, 2009). Sen's work in capability approach asserts that our agency can be elevated by people acting on our behalf. I argue that the absence of lecturers during the pandemic, as stated in the narratives, compromises this achievement. Students' skills for human development were constrained, and affiliation as a function also constrained students' well-being.

For those who appreciated e-learning, it came to how they saw their marks improve over time, and Thabo cited the form of assessment, which was in the form of an assignment as opposed to a sit-down assessment. He asserted:

> *As the e-learning continued, I realised that I was doing better than before, I do not know if it was the assignments or what, but my marks improved. I was a bit more confident, again, in my work. I was more determined, more ambitious to finish and all that.* ***(Thabo)***

Hashey and Stahl (2014) and Almaiah et al. (2020) point out that e-learning provides students with some degree of control; in other words, there is an opportunity for self-management of the learning process. In essence, it allows students to apply agency in taking control of their studies; the implication for social justice is that students can increase their academic freedoms, allowing them to be on equal footing with their counterparts. Self-directed learning requires students who are responsible and capable of achieving the expected outcomes. Manase (2021) points out that students prefer assignments over exams, which requires memorisation. The positive feedback regarding e-learning may emanate from students who can scan; not all students have those freedoms.

It is critical to point out that some of the narrated students' experiences pointed out that some students adapted well to e-learning because they had at home remote learning resources, which positioned them in an advantageous position, and the narrative below demonstrates this:

> *I feel like it was not as bad for me because, at least, I was in an environment that allowed me to study online, at home, and so on; I had a laptop and everything else. So, for me, it was easy. It was okay, and I transitioned in quite well.* ***(Lizel)***

When you consider Lizel, in contrast to students like Thabo without resources, it shows that the capability of those students to learn online made it more difficult for them to participate in e-learning on an equal footing with students like Lizel above, thus constraining their capability. It also confirms the digital divide as covered in the literature. I am arguing that this disparity in e-learning is a form of social injustice and creates unequal space for disadvantaged students. The conversion factors worked differently for Lizel; she managed to achieve her because of functioning, which is an advantage. Furthermore, the narratives illustrate that e-learning also took a toll on students' psychological well-being exhibiting stress and anxiety in terms of the conditions under which they were studying. The capability approach used here advocates well-being and quality of life. I argue that higher education should create freedoms and purge the hindrances that students face to achieving what they value. Failure to accomplish this does not reflect the essence of human development. The students' stories further confirm Naidoo Naidoo's views that e-learning and studying from home are challenging for students with small households sharing with large

families. The narratives tell us that learning from home became challenging as some shared rooms with siblings and lacked a private space to attend an online class. The following extracts demonstrate this:

> *The problems at home are just looking at you, and you cannot escape them. So, when I was sitting at home, you saw what was wrong. My aunt also passed away last year due to depression. As I said, for me, books and school were an escape.* ***(Lebo)***

> *I feel that, to a certain extent, psychologically, e-learning held me back a little bit.* ***(Jack)***

> *It was so difficult because, at home, I just wanted to be comfortable. I do not want to stress. With e-learning, I had to learn how to navigate home life and school now because I have two little brothers, so they will come running while I am in class, and it is like, I am in class, I need to hear the lecture. I would then go back to the recordings later at night when everybody was sleeping.* ***(Lucky)***

> *It was a bit difficult for me. The environment could have been better because we shared a bedroom at home, so it was chaos like my brothers would come in and out, in and out, while I was in class. So yeah, they could have been better for online learning.* ***(Tshepo)***

The students' narratives above illustrate that the conversion factors were disabling to students during the pandemic. This further shows that resources were insufficient to achieve; social structures like historical injustices impeded freedoms. For this reason, I question the effectiveness of achieving social justice through e-learning.

5.3.2 Staff: HoD perspectives of e-learning challenges and opportunities during the pandemic

Before understanding the e-learning challenges, I wanted the HoDs to give a synopsis of the challenges in higher education before the pandemic. My literature synthesis showed that higher education challenges had always existed before COVID-19. The interviews show that many challenges are tied to financial resources, like accommodation and transport. Extracts from HoDs below illustrate this point:

> *Finances, I think many things like accommodation, the transport to get to the accommodation. The availability of resources like study materials, I mean, I think that it makes learning difficult if you do not have the book. I just believe that you are*

disadvantaged already. Going back to your question, I think finances are the biggest challenge for students. Moreover, I think that as a result of finances, there are secondary challenges that influence students' motivation to succeed. ***(HoD#1)***

I can see that many students want to study but need more resources. ***(HoD#2)***

The interviews above highlight the realities of higher education in South Africa. Challenges inherent to historically disadvantaged African students include accommodation, transport, food security, and lack of funding or dependence on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) (Naidoo & Cartwright, 2022). Funding is a challenge in South Africa, and the FeesMustFall movement in 2015 exemplifies this crisis, as highlighted in the interviews. On top of these challenges, students had to go into lockdown with an entirely different pedagogy practice, and these challenges are estimated below.

My interviews with the HoDs revealed that e-learning presented challenges, as indicated by the students. In particular, it brought complexities to disciplines like hospitality as the programme is tied to the practical component; thus their practical teaching, which is the main component of hospitality, was constrained. Furthermore, this would suggest that the students' capability for knowledge may have been compromised. This also shows that with e-learning, a blanket approach or one size cannot be applied as it depends on the discipline, an HOD stated that:

*For example, one of the most significant differences between us and tourism would be our practical classes. We started looking for videos. We started making plans on how to add this. The clay-made videos in a kitchen at home baking. We put that online in a video format for students just e practical things. We could not open our rants, get dinners, or have external guests on campus (****HoD#1).***

The fundamental issues with e-learning were the resources required for this pedagogy, like data and connectivity. Molosankwe (2020) stresses that universities can only expect students to participate in e-learning if they provide the required resources. Lack of resources results in a lack of participation; therefore, students' capabilities are constrained. I argue that there is also a ripple effect of lack of agency. In other words, the students' ability to pursue their educational goal is compromised. The expansion

of their choices is limited, thus affecting their individual human development, and the principle of equity to have equal opportunities is constrained.

The extracts from the HoDs below indicate data and the internet as critical issues and also highlight that students needed to be provided with efficient resources for self-regulated study during the pandemic. When considering the theoretical framework for this study, the Capability Approach, functioning means what an individual can do. From an educational perspective, being able to take part in university life is a function. However, the absence of resources constrained students from participating in university life:

> *Everybody was worrying about the internet and data issues and ensuring the students' connectivity. But there were also laptop or devices issues.* ***(HoD#1)***

> *Obviously, with everything going electronic and online, many students need access to data or internet connectivity, and some live in areas with no signal or anything like that. Many of the students still need cell phones. So, they need help with basic connectivity, not even having a cell phone that can operate WhatsApp. So never mind, obviously not having a laptop or a tablet that they can do their work or sometimes waiting a very long time for the data to come from the university.* ***(HoD#2)***

The extract above indicates that although e-learning may be perceived as providing flexibility, institutions must pay attention to the value and not underestimate the costs involved. It is important to note that e-learning interventions, like WhatsApp, challenge students from disadvantaged backgrounds, as it requires airtime and connectivity. From the capability approach, achieving educational functionings like knowledge attainment may have compromised for some students. The students' personal and environmental conversion factors do not enable them to achieve their educational goals, thus impeding their human development and further widening the epistemic injustice. In addition, South Africa is one of the countries that have portrayed poor practices of distance education through a lack of support for students and proper learning materials (Badat, 2005). The interview with the HoDs also showed other negative issues besides digital resources, like the absence of online students, which I think is directly related to data and connectivity. As indicated below from these extracts:

I did not believe in the integrity of the e-learning. I did not, and I think if you do not believe in something, you almost lose power over it. My biggest challenge with e-learning was student attendance. Students would not attend. They would be two out of the 40 students in a class, and you would hope and pray that they will listen and watch the video later. I think that confusion and that almost desperation of where? Why are you not attending? I think that was my biggest challenge. ***(HoD#2)***

I think it left a huge gap. I think we, as staff, as well as the students and the staff, needed more connect other. Initially, we communicated with them through WhatsApp groups and so on. However, at the end of the day, if you do not see the students in class and they do not see you, you do not see anybody listening to you while you are giving an online class, and you assume everybody is there based on the numbers. So, I think a huge part of the human connection was lost. ***(HoD#1)***

The extract above shows that we learn as social beings. Face-to-face learning allows students to interact with others and promote social skills. When I use the capability approach to examine student well-being during the pandemic, it is clear that students' well-being was constrained due to a lack of social setting. Furthermore, the interview above poses a question regarding the quality of education provided during e-learning; lecturers could only hope and believe that the students are watching the video, as class attendance was poor, and beyond the class attendance, quality education was compromised. Poor online attendance may present a lack of agency from the students. However, it is important to note that the absence largely contributes to a lack of resources to achieve. The soft critical skills students are supposed to obtain from higher learning were lost, as alluded to by **HoD#2** below:

Unfortunately, many students did not receive the quality education they would have received if they were in a physical class. I think that gap is going to stay there forever; it is something that's going to be visible always. They missed that part of their student life which is to operate in a social setting and the soft skills you could have also conveyed to them are lost forever.

The extract above poses a question on the quality of education and the ability of e-learning to be inclusive pedagogy, which Meskhi et al. (2019) support in that e-learning methods cannot exclusively be interpreted as inclusive education. The premise of education is to develop students, and if certain skills critical to human development and navigating social settings are lost, I argue that it then becomes a social justice

issue. It does not allow students to expand their capabilities and perpetuate historical injustices.

I further wanted to understand the critical aspects derived from the literature concerning e-learning. I wanted to determine whether HoDs agreed with the statements related to e-learning during the pandemic. The idea was to gauge the effectiveness of e-learning. Both HoDs did not agree that teaching and learning activities received adequate time, particularly practical subjects that required of students to be on campus. This also meant that students needed more practical experience. When one applies the Capability Approach, this also implies that the students' capabilities to achieve their functionings were compromised, as stated below:

> *Because of the practical component, there was not enough time. We could not be on campus and provide students with enough experience.* ***(HoD#1)***

HoD#2 argues that one cannot call it e-learning. It was what could be done at the time, as she calls it, "the second-best thing" to ensure that the academic activities continued. The literature consulted by Hodges et al. (2020) in this study warns that it is critical to understand the difference between emergency remote teaching (ERT) and e-learning in that ERT is a temporary shift or alternative delivery forced by external factors like crisis and e-learning is more structured. Given the students' experiences regarding the lack of resources, the scenario plays itself to ERT, and the extract below speaks to this:

> *We need to find a way to call what we did online learning, taking the tool and using it, the second-best thing because we could not see the students face-to-face. I do not think it can be categorised as having been online; that is not the same.* ***(HoD#2)***

I argue that fostering participation that ensures agency and a full set of student capabilities is rather difficult in a temporary educational setup. The interviews further indicate that the lecturers tried what they could when it came to communicating with the students via WhatsApp, but as noted earlier from one of the extracts, some students do not even own smartphones to have access. This means some students could have been left on the sideline of communications. In addition, the HoDs agree that students are tech-savvy. However, they state that students might be tech-savvy

in social media, but during the COVID-19 pandemic, new educational programs were introduced to facilitate learning. Moreover, it is equally important to understand that many students might not have the technical skills to navigate some of the e-learning educational programs:

> *I think our young people are so tech-savvy, and I think for them, it was that I know my technology, but suddenly I was thrown into a new online educational program and classes being assessed online.* ***(HoD#2)***

Online assessments, their integrity could be more able. HoDs do not believe in the effectiveness of online assessments. Much of the HoDs' concerns are also due to academic dishonesty and cheating, which has improved students' marks exponentially. They believe that face-to-face contact is one's most significant resource for learning. They believe in sitting in a class with students struggling through work, asking questions, and doing groupwork. The HoDs asserted that face-to-face learning enhances student's development. I theorise that the bias towards face-to-face learning could also mean that during the pandemic, e-learning could potentially not have received the concerted effort viz a viz face-to-face learning. The interviews revealed that HoDs did not perceive the same level of benefits from e-learning in terms of assessment and learning context. These interviews shared the same sentiments that e-learning handling of assessments has compromised the quality of graduates (Mahabeer & Pirtheepal, 2019).

> *In retrospect, I do not believe in online learning. There is also a difference between whether it was effective and had integrity and whether students got quality education. I believe in students being class***. *(HoD#1)***

Sufficient staff and student training on e-learning is essential. However, there was also a disagreement regarding whether academic staff received sufficient training in e-learning to facilitate learning during the pandemic. It is also important to note the different needs of the courses; for example, hospitality would have been affected as students rely on the kitchen and restaurant to learn. However, videos were used to facilitate the learning and the proficiency of the lecturers to facilitate such practical modules online, but without sufficient training it could mean that the learning could have been more constrained in terms of knowledge capability. One HoD pointed out that there was training, and only some staff did it. There was resistance from the older

academic staff members***, "****the older ones would end up being resistant against that because we also did not know how long it was going to be*".

Nevertheless, the interviews revealed that HoDs disagreed that enough training was received, as illustrated below:

> *I do not think we have enough training. We did not have a chance to prepare ourselves for this so. No, not.* ***(HoD#2)***

It is essential to understand that students' opportunities are either enabled or hindered by the action and choices of others (Wilson-Strydom, 2011). Therefore, lecturers' preparedness is critical to enabling students to learn. The insufficient training of the academic staff for e-learning constructs disadvantages for students and deprives them of their capability for knowledge.

5.4 Challenges and opportunities of e-learning - enabling desired/expected social justice goals

5.4.1 Students

In this study, I also tried to understand the impact of e-learning on students' educational goals. After capturing the students' narratives on their values for education in this research, I probed to understand if e-learning impacted their educational goals and desired social justice. In probing, it became clear that students were affected in different ways, both negatively and positively. The negative perspective is related to being behind and repeating some modules. The evident e-learning resource inequality highlighted several injustices experienced by students during the pandemic. For the students below, e-learning has diminished their freedom to attain educational goals in higher education.

> *E-learning did not help me advance my educational goals because now, remember, I am repeating accounting; you cannot do it online.* ***(Thabo)***

> *E-learning affected me hard last year because there were assignments that I could not write. So now, as a result of e-learning, actually repeating almost all of my subjects except for tourism practice. So, it affected me negatively regarding progressing and ensuring that I attained my qualification.* ***(Lerato)***

If education is meant to equalise, I argue that Thabo and Lerato's story above does not reflect equalised human capabilities and enabled social justice. The likes of Lizel found e-learning flexible to meet their academic needs. For example, e-learning allowed her to work and study simultaneously, which is needed experience and as one of the students narrated:

> *I believe that somewhere, I think it has also given me an advantage because I was also able to find some part-time work, which is an experience for me. So, I think it did help me.* ***(Lizel)***

This narrative above shows the complexity of e-learning. On the one hand, e-learning revealed the world of academic frustration for Thabo and Lerato and, on the other hand, showed a positive side to it attaining employment. My interpretation of this being positive stems from James (2002); the author indicates that getting part-time employment may be significant for a student to support their financial costs of education, at the same time obtaining valuable work experience.

5.4.2 HoDs' perspectives on social justice goals and e-learning

Interviews with the HoDs reveal that human development, which is one of the primary aims of a higher learning institution, was compromised during the pandemic. The interviews show compromised equality regarding opportunities for historically disadvantaged students. Furthermore, the Capability Approach reminds us that people are different, and these differences do not inherently mean inequalities. However, such differences translate into inequalities when they affect capabilities. The interviews suggest that the difference in students' socioeconomic status had an impact on students' capabilities:

> *I think human development suffers if you sit in front of a computer or a cell phone to study, compared to being in a classroom. The other thing is that I strongly believe in a physical exam. Because development-wise, it teaches perseverance and forces an individual to push himself. Much growth is happening, which needs to be improved during Covid. Coming from matric, you do not have contact with a group of people you are now with first year. I think e-learning negatively influences development and growth, and I am concerned about whom we are sending out, who is graduating, who you are when you go out, and how much you did.* ***(HoD#1)***

Analysing the extract above, I argue that during the pandemic, students may have lost the benefits and the essence of education, which is promoting social inclusion and cohesion. Furthermore, attainable personal capabilities built over the years of studies were compromised. With higher education meant to dismantle the structured inequalities and be an equaliser, one HoD believed that e-learning might have widened the gap so that disadvantaged students without the resources were left behind. On the other hand, students with resources had the upper hand. The interviews reveal that barriers to e-learning may have exacerbated social inequities whereby some students had advantageous positions of resources, as hypothesised by Dawadi, Giri and Simkhada (2020) in that e-learning is likely to widen the inequalities. It also confirms the digital divide in society highlighted earlier in the literature. Such social disparities may have enabled or disadvantaged students. In addition, the pedagogical implications of this rapid shift to e-learning also mean that the university will have underdeveloped graduates in competencies, knowledge, and skills. The extract below illustrates this notion:

> *It does divide much more. It was a big trigger in the sense of social inequality or injustice. The weakest students, who only needed a little, fell much further. The ones that had the resources benefited. They benefited because they got marks much easier. After all, online is much easier than it would have been face-to-face. So, some are already in a powerful position, positions greatly and got distinctions. In the beginning, the students in an unfavourable position just fell back even more. So, its division is much bigger.* ***(HoD#2)***

Resources are not the end itself, but if students had resources, it would have equalised in the realm of e-learning, not necessarily social equality. The disparity between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those in positions of privilege demonstrates the widening of inequalities.

5.5 Document review on strategies for e-learning during the pandemic

5.5.1 Background

In this study, I used document review for corroboration with the students' stories and HoDs' interviews. Not much was implemented as permanent strategies, so I relied mainly on the Communique from 16 March 2020 and the Strategic Plan 2021-2025

published on 15 December 2020. From my analysis, it appears that the CUT implemented the temporary measures for e-learning as the idea was to return to face-to-face teaching; this is what the literature calls emergency remote teaching (ERT). I investigated all the Communiques (2020, April 2; April 9; June 17; April 24; April 29) and the strategies applied during COVID-19 and the documents reviewed show that, starting from March 2020, as the country went into a lockdown due to the outbreak of COVID-19, like many other universities across the country, the Central University of Technology, Free State only requested the essential services workers to report for work. Students residing on campus were encouraged to return home and prepare for the continuity of academic activities. All academic activities commenced online on 17 March 2020, and all face-to-face sessions were suspended, including laboratory-based work.

5.5.2 Social justice

It soon became evident that the shift to e-learning was a challenge. The communiqué from the Vice-Chancellor and Principal Prof. Henk de Jager asserted,

> Access to appropriate technology and the internet has been a significant challenge due to the deep inequalities between students. Not all our students are equally equipped to access online learning (CUT Communique, 2020c).

This statement alone indicates that the university knows the deep inequalities and social justice matters. The university pledged that no-one would be left behind academically due to the COVID-19 pandemic (CUT Communique, 2020a). Considering students' narratives, it appears that students like Thabo who had to repeat modules were unfortunately left behind, thus putting a question on the promise of academic freedom and social justice through educational attainment.

5.5.3 E-learning measures

The university then applied measures like providing data and devices to address these challenges. Approximately 5 000 tablets were dispatched to students in need nationwide, as well as zero-based and other data options (CUT Communique, 2020b). The data were made available after the university had agreed with mobile cellular networks to effect zero-rated data on the CUT's URLs. This data were made available

to NSFAS and unfunded CUT students. With the data provided, there was still a connectivity issue, especially with students in remote areas. The university's existing learning management system (LMS) (eThuto) was expanded to include a collaboration module to enable lecturers to present online classes and communicate with students via WhatsApp (CUT Communique, 2020c). Overall, during the pandemic, the university's measures had come in the form of online platform training, approximately R4,972 million spent on device support for both students and staff, the acquisition of 21 500 data bundles ranging from 30GB to 40GB, and pay-outs for NSFAS-supported students. Almost was spent on devices and R2,1 million a month on data bundles (CUT Communique, 2020a).

The university then also pledged to assist in developing alternatives for such students with limited or no access to e-technology. The students' narratives support this measure in that things later improved once they had data and access to zero-rated data on our URLs. It can be said that there was agency from the university's point of view through applying the Capability Approach.

The students' narratives also highlighted that the students' challenges were compounded by the lecturers' readiness to shift to e-learning. As this proved to be a challenge, the university implemented guidelines, learning platforms, and training to ensure staff readiness for e-learning (Gratia, 2020:9). The premise of the intervention was to upskill our academic staff on e-learning curricula (CUT Communique, 2020d). With this agency, the HoDs' interviews indicated that some lecturers did not need to provide training. The CUT, also in a Communique, acknowledged that many lecturers were fully equipped to embark on their e-learning training methodology (CUT Communique, 2020a). The interviews with the HoDs reflected a concern regarding the quality of online assessments. The fundamental question was that there was no way of knowing who answered a question paper. The CUT then applied a strategy to have the assessment written simultaneously by all the relevant students, with strict and enforced time completion (CUT, 2020).

5.5.4 Well-being

Apart from being unable to access education due to digital devices, students' narratives indicate that e-learning took a psychological toll on some students. The

university showed agency throughout the pandemic and implemented measures for staff and students' physical and academic well-being (CUT Communique, 2020a). As a result of this anxiety and depression brought on by the pandemic, the CUT offered online counselling services to students through the Wellness Centre (CUT Communique, 2020e). Based on student narratives, I argue that students would have needed more data and devices to access these services. Furthermore, one interview with the HoD revealed that they support students with food from time to time. This was supported by CUT Communique, 2020e, in which about R428 000 donations were made available to needy students.

Despite all these measures ensuring that every student would be included due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there were still dropouts and changes in the pass rate. All these dropout rates are attributed to connectivity, support needed from lecturers, remote assessment, and psychological and emotional turmoil (Parliamentary Monitoring Group, 2022). After revising the academic calendar and the measures to assist students during the pandemic, the CUT lost days of academic activities due to protests, with students citing the lack of resources and NSFAS funding (Morapela, 2021). The efforts demonstrated by the university in assisting students with e-learning during the pandemic are only one aspect of the spectrum in terms of social justice. If resources are made available, how many of these students have access to the distribution of these resources, and who are these students? The continuous protests suggested that injustices may be done to some students despite the noble measures of the university.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter allowed me to examine e-learning from the perspective of the academic staff in the form of HoDs. Their perspectives on the sudden shift from face-to-face classes to e-learning reveal that students needed help with digital resources. The interviews reveal that students' capabilities and functionings were constrained, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, thus further widening the inequalities. The institution's value to students through education is also compromised if the lecturers do not have sufficient training for pedagogies like e-learning. The narrative from the heads of the departments was that e-learning somewhat needed to have taken place with more integrity, and it might have constrained students to

harness soft skills and potentially widened the gap between the privileged and previously disadvantaged students, thus failing to achieve inclusive education.

The mission and vision of CUT are tied to promoting human development and social justice. In the quest to achieve this, the university recognised that conflict between academic freedom and human rights might arise. Furthermore, e-learning has undoubtedly presented itself as a paradox, whereby unintended repercussions are that few students were excluded from academic activities; thus, academic freedoms are compromised. Although the university showed agency with strategies for digital devices, access to data and psychological assistance, the complexities of e-learning in this regard are that during the pandemic, the university's priorities were aligned with the core values, vision, and policy but fell short due to the lack of preparedness. Policies on social justice need a worked-out and articulated framework to understand the application of the protection of academic freedoms and human rights. In the next chapter, I use my theoretical framework (Capability Approach) to analyse students' e-learning experiences during the pandemic and social justice.

CHAPTER 6
A CAPABILITY APPROACH TO UNDERSTANDING STUDENTS' E-LEARNING EXPERIENCES DURING THE PANDEMIC

6.1 Introduction

This chapter analyses objective three of this study, which is to demonstrate the contribution of the Capability Approach to understanding the impact of e-learning on social justice. This section discusses the students' e-learning experiences during the pandemic through the lens of the Capability Approach. In this study, I use the Capability Approach as a theoretical framework for analysing students' capabilities and impact on social justice. The capability approach offers a set of mechanisms to assess the impact of e-learning during the pandemic regarding inequalities. I analysed students' narratives to highlight their capabilities regarding e-learning and the social justice.

6.2 Capabilities grounded in students' narratives

Social, economic, and environmental factors can impede individuals from expanding and achieving their capabilities. Students ideally need conversion factors to succeed. I use five pre-determined capabilities of aspirations, knowledge, confidence, affiliation, and resilience critical to achieving educational goals and freedoms to analyse a set of students' capabilities.

6.2.1 Capability for aspirations

According to Hart (2012:79), "Individual aspiration is both goals orientated and concerns the future of the self or the agency of the self about goals concerning others." Furthermore, the capability to aspire is being looking into the future (Mutanga, 2019). In other words, students' success contributes to positive outlook. Educational freedoms that allow students to reach their full potential are important. I assessed students' aspirations regarding the value of education and expectation. All students had different individual aspirations. However, their capabilities during the pandemic hindered social justice. For instance, ***Lebo*** expects to open a restaurant in the period

ten years after graduation. However, when I analysed this aspiration on e-learning, Lebo was concerned about her capability to own a restaurant due to epistemic injustice. She asserted that:

> *e-learning disadvantaged me because most content of the first year, I do not understand it as I could have understood it better if it was face to face* ***(Lebo).***

Despite the e-learning challenges indicated in the previous chapter, students still aspired, like Martha***,*** who explained:

> *I want to become a lecturer, study further, and become a professor. Maybe one day, I will be the Vice Chancellor of one of the universities in South Africa. So far, education has opened so many opportunities for me. For instance, I am going to the United States of America with more than a thousand applications. I have witnessed throughout basically what education can do for a person. That is probably why I was holding on during e-learning, and I am still holding on* ***(Martha)****.*

Nussbaum (2000) considers aspiration to be an internal capability. Although students showed capability for aspiration, I argue that e-learning as an external condition could have effectively enabled students like Thabo and Lerato, who are repeating modules, to exercise the capability as an achieved aspiration.

6.2.2 Capability for professional and self-knowledge

Knowledge gain is critical to a students' success in educational endeavours. Capability for knowledge can be described as the ability to obtain knowledge in a specific field or subject of your choice (Mutanga, 2019). It also relates to students being well-prepared to gain university knowledge (Wilson-Strydom, 2015). In this study, I was curious as to whether, during the e-learning, students were learning. From the narratives, it is clear that some students learned because they sought information or engaged in self-directed learning, self-efficacy; self-efficacy displayed by students like Lerato, who explained that:

> *Somehow e-learning increased my knowledge. Because you had to research on your own, find more information on the topic you were given. So, I can say yes, it gave me some insights into some things I could not find in books. So, I can say it also brought a new way of learning* ***(Lerato).***

Calitz (2018) emphasises the importance of students having the necessary skills and knowledge to participate in research. Lerato was able to apply self-independence, gain knowledge, and develop research skills. The self-efficacy as a personal capability from Lerato displayed agency.

On the other hand, some students who needed self-efficacy encountered problems obtaining knowledge, as they preferred face-to-face classes. It was clear that contact classes are useful for some students as the feedback and interaction are instant, and the lecturer is there to explain further. Students are educated through rigorous interaction with the lecturers, and e-learning limits their freedom or capability. Tammy explained,

> *I preferred face-to-face lessons because I could listen and interact with the lecturer. Face-to-face gave me a better understanding of the topic we discussed in class. Online, I just watch and then do not interact with the lecturer* ***(Tammy).***

I argue that this impacts students' human development, and knowledge denied, directly or indirectly, is epistemic injustice. The different narratives also indicate that any pedagogy can never be a blanket approach due to disparities. The HoDs' interviews indicated that face-to-face classes are better for human development as students acquire soft skills one cannot transfer over the internet. It is important to note that obtaining knowledge may widen an individual's career opportunities (Sandars & Hart, 2015). It, is therefore a concern that during the pandemic, some students did not obtain knowledge due to a lack of digital resources.

6.2.3 Capability for resilience

Wilson-Strydom (2017) states that resilience entails succeeding in academic aspirations despite the challenges. Perseverance and the ability to respond to educational challenges and opportunities are regarded as a capability for resilience (Mutanga 2019). In this study, the capability for resilience was identified in terms of students navigating the challenges brought by e-learning discussed in the previous chapter and succeeding in their educational endeavours. The students valued education and agency and increased their resilience despite the e-learning challenges. Some students even purchased data from their already limited funds.

> *What kept me going this time was that I told myself that I needed to finish my studies. Thus, this was important for me just to make sure that I pass* ***(Martha).***

Although e-learning provided some challenges, the students were eager to complete their studies, and the main goal was to achieve their academic freedom with limited functionings.

6.2.4 Capability for affiliation

Affiliation is linked to having a sense of belonging at the university (Gore & Walker, 2020). The capability for affiliation relates to having a social connection with others. Moreover, students need relationships that enable them to achieve their academic goals. Students had a different connection during the pandemic as they were far from campus. The students' narratives paint a picture that during the pandemic and going through the e-learning challenges, students had connections with family members, friends, and lecturers in terms of assisting with the challenges, from buying data to encouraging them not to drop out. Like Tshepo said,

> *I think the people around me because I wanted to drop out at some point. I was emotionally and mentally tired, and I was going to drop out. But everybody around me kept saying; you can do this. You can get your qualification. They told me I should not focus on when I am finishing but on how I am progressing, learning, and all that* ***(Tshepo).***

All these functionings allowed Tshepo to achieve his valued educational aspiration during the pandemic.

Students also revealed that the capability for affiliation with the lecturers was also challenged as there needed to be communication breakdowns between the lecturers and the students. Thabo explained:

> *The experience could have been better. I wrote my research assignment and sent it, and the lady never called back to me, and then she only replied after I submitted to assist. So, what is the point of asking for assistance if someone was not willing to make time?* ***(Thabo)***

The lack of agency on the part of some lecturers may have been a huge hindrance to students' achievements.

6.2.5 Capability for confidence

According to Walker (2008:483), the capability for confidence can be described as "being confident to express an opinion, to succeed with learning tasks, being encouraged and supported in learning". I argue that confidence is required for a pedagogy like e-learning in a country with a digital divide. From the students' narratives, it is evident that some students such as Jack lost confidence in their studies during the e-learning. He narrated:

> *I am a very confident person. At that time, I somewhat slipped into some depression **(Jack).***

There is also Lucky who lost interest; he narrated that:

> *I lost my confidence because I lost even my interest in studying. Cause now it felt like some sort of a hobby that, okay, at nine, I have to be in class. I did not feel active enough in my studies. When I come to class, I can ask questions, and engage with my classmates, but now it feels like I am not a student anymore **(Lucky)**.*

6.3 Conversion factors that influenced students' e-learning experiences.

Sen (1992) states that the capability to achieve something relies on conversion factors. Conversion factors allow people to convert opportunities or resources into achievements (Ribeiro, 2015). The conversion factors associated with e-learning can ascertain the way circumstances may impact the things students value (Manase, 2021). Conversion factors can be categorised into social, personal, and environmental factors. The students' narratives show how conversion factors can be a barrier to achieving their educational goals. The students' circumstances, be it personal, environmental, or social, contributed to their abilities to succeed. Understanding the enabling and constraining conversion factors is significant to conceptualise interventions that can be created for educational conditions or environments that will allow disadvantaged students to have the freedoms that can be converted into academic success, thus dismantling the inequalities.

6.3.1 Personal factors

Personal factors like academic skills, university settings, and teaching arrangements somehow intersect to either enable or hinder students' ability to achieve their functionings (Gore & Walker, 2020). This study established that e-learning can affect students' ability to attain their education goals which they value. Personal conversion factors affected students in different ways during the pandemic e-learning. Such included a need for student-lecturer interaction, digital resources, and self-motivation to study. In addition, battling with situations at home and dealing with psychological issues, which created a barrier for them amid the e-learning, qualify as a personal conversion factor. These factors identified in the study diminish students' capabilities. With enabling factors for e-learning, students can convert their internal capability. In essence, without the proper educational resources, e-learning poses a chance of students being able to understand their educational values.

6.3.2 Environmental factors

The environment does contribute to students' ability to achieve educational goals. In this study, I looked at the factors that enable or hinder students' capabilities during e-learning. In education, environmental conversion factors can be classified as a university or home environment, and a few examples include policies and physical learning conditions (Manase, 2021). E-learning meant remote learning in that students performed their academic activities at home, away from a university setting. They were studying in an environment without a stable internet network or digital resources, attending online classes at home where a student shares a room with siblings, the distractions while attending class, and attending other non-academic activities during online lessons. These factors not only qualify as environmental conversion factors, but could potentially have hindered students from achieving their educational goals, which they value. Remote learning opportunities also presented themselves as positive environmental conversion factors, and students could juggle part-time jobs and study. The method of assessments in the form of assignments made it less challenging for students, as narrated by a third-year student.

6.3.3 Social factors

Social conversion factors relate to the relations individual have with others. In this study, the students' narratives demonstrate that the people around them influence their e-learning experiences to achieve their desired educational goals. In the case of the students, these relationships can be family members, lecturers, and peers. The lack of interaction with the lecturers surfaced as one of the factors of social conventions. This was a constraint for some students as information would only come later after assignments' due dates. The support from the students' families was instrumental in their resilience to see the e-learning phase through with its challenges and to achieve their educational functionings.

The conversion factors analysed in this study demonstrate that the degree to which students could transform the limited resource available during the pandemic into functioning was constrained. Understanding these conversion factors during the pandemic can shed light on institutions of higher learning in terms of policymaking for the way forward in equalising the opportunities for students to achieve their educational capabilities.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter presented e-learning experiences through a theoretical framework during the pandemic. A set of pre-determined capabilities show that due to the value and expectations students have of education to equalise, students made it through the pandemic learning because of support from family, aspirations, and resilience. However, some students, due to the setup of the e-learning, needed more confidence in their abilities. Conversion factors like home situation and lack of digital resources played a massive part in students' capabilities to achieve their valued freedoms.

Through the Capability Approach framework, I also established that students' capabilities during the pandemic did not reflect inclusivity in education, as many students, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, were left behind. I argue that this further exacerbated the inequalities in education during the pandemic.

Based on the results presented in this chapter and the previous chapter, I argue that development is about people rather than goods. The focus must be on something other

than dispatching digital devices and data during e-learning. Human development in this context is about what students can do, like being educated and being able to participate. I argue that this is human development regression if only a certain percentage of the students could not achieve during the pandemic due to inequalities. It is social injustice; quite the opposite of the expectation by a higher learning institution of being an equaliser.

CHAPTER 7:
CONCLUSION

7.1 Introduction

This study examined students' e-learning experiences during the pandemic to assess the social justice goals of a higher learning institution through the lens of the capability approach. This study emanated from adapting to lockdown measures associated with COVID-19 in 2020. South Africa went into lockdown on the 20th of March 2020. People had to work remotely, and institutions of higher learning had to adopt remote learning. South Africa has long-term inequalities related to colonialism and apartheid. Education is a way to dismantle these inequalities. My experience in academia during the pandemic led me to question how higher education goals of promoting inclusive education can be achieved, given the glaring inequalities. I wanted to understand through narrative analysis if the students' academic freedoms were compromised or enhanced with e-learning during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

The research started with a literature review to guide me on social justice, the historical state of higher education in South Africa and e-learning. The literature points to an education system embedded in inequalities like a lack of access for individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. There needs to be more resources. In addition, I read the literature on the Capability Approach, which is concerned with social justice. The Capabilities Approach emphasises that individuals need the freedom to pursue the things they value. I used the Capabilities Approach as the lens to analyse how (if at all) the e-learning environment during the COVID-19 lockdowns enabled the students to develop capabilities to achieve educational functionings. This framework also allowed me to understand what students value and their capabilities to convert opportunities into achievements.

This thesis contains seven chapters. I identified the research problem and questions in the first chapter. The second chapter dealt with the literature review on human development, social justice, and e-learning from local and international perspectives. The third chapter discussed the Capability Approach as the theoretical framework. The fourth chapter detailed the research design, followed by chapters five and six, which detailed empirical data derived from the narratives of students and academic staff to

address this study's research questions and objectives. In this final chapter, I summarise the key findings, provide recommendations and point out the limitations.

7.2 Summary of main research findings

The findings in this study originate from the experiences and narratives of students, the academic staff and document analysis. The following research aims were addressed:

To document both the CUT's switch to e-learning as a pandemic measure and the e-learning experiences of selected CUT students.

- To demonstrate the contribution of the Capability Approach to understanding e-learning's impact on social justice in higher education.
- To examine how – if at all – the switch to e-learning has affected the potential of higher education as an instrument of social justice for selected CUT students.
- To make recommendations and suggestions based on the CUT case regarding e-learning pedagogy and its impact on social justice.

The following section is set out to show how the research aims were addressed.

7.2.1 A general overview of students' e-learning experiences

This section is set out to address ***Objective 1: To document both the CUT's switch to e-learning as a pandemic measure and the e-learning experiences of selected CUT students.***

Students' narratives of learning experiences show that most students did not achieve valuable educational achievements due to the lack of resources for e-learning pedagogy. The lack of access to data and the internet was a concern. The narratives reveal that students used their allowances and financial assistance from family members to buy data. Furthermore, students' agency was constrained by the environment under which they had to study. Some had to share rooms with siblings at home. Consequently, students found it difficult to access quiet places to study and attend classes online. Learning environments become stressful. This shows that e-learning hurts students' functioning capabilities.

Another constrained freedom was the need for more interaction with the lecturers. This contributed to a lack of motivation and self-determination. The lack of access to lecturers and the need for self-regulated study are not capabilities many students possess (especially those entering university for the first time). Furthermore, the academic staff and students needed more time to prepare for e-learning. The document review also alludes to the lecturers' lack of e-learning skills. This also means that the capability for knowledge was constrained, translating to epistemic injustice.

E-learning also presented opportunities. For example, it allowed some students to work and study because of less contact time. This pedagogical practice was favourable, and some students were taught self-reliance or self-efficacy as they did not have to rely on a lecturer for learning. Students' narratives highlight that some students' marks improved during the pandemic. This increase in marks was a concern for the HOD interviewed for this study, who related it to questions about the credibility of online assessments. However, some students had to repeat modules because of e-learning.

The university recognised the digital inequalities in South Africa. The University allocated funding to assist students with devices and data. The university also offered psychological assistance through the wellness programme.

7.2.2 Capability Approach to understanding students' experiences.

This section sets out to address ***Objective 2: To demonstrate the contribution of the Capability Approach to understanding e-learning's impact on social justice in higher educatio*n.**

I used the Capability Approach as a lens to examine the experiences of e-learning among students. The Capability Approach as a framework allows us to see what students can do and achieve regarding education, which is one of the things they have a reason to value. It further allows us to analyse students' agency and capabilities regarding the conversion factors to achieve their academic freedoms.

I studied students' aspirations and the value they place on education. The value placed on education by the students depends on their socio-economic background and the need and will to improve the standard of living of their families. Many students are first-

generation university students. They believe education will get them a job and inspire others. However, education is more than just about obtaining jobs. It is also about their well-being. I used the capability approach to comprehend the conversion factors of aspiration, knowledge, affiliation, resilience and confidence. The complexities that came with e-learning saw some students needing confidence and knowledge due to the structure of the pedagogy. Despite these problems, some of these conversions enabled students to choose education which they value and to achieve their functionings. Students had great support from family members, which enhanced their resilience during a difficult period. The lack of access to data and lecturers made the e-learning pedagogy much more difficult. Some students' capability for confidence took a knock, while others improved due to the improvement of marks.

The challenges brought by e-learning forced students to exercise agency by purchasing data from their already limited financial resources. The university also created the means to assist students, although students assert that this came in later. Social, personal, and environmental conversion factors in this study paint a picture that students found it difficult to convert to achieve, except for students with resources at their disposal. This included data, access to lecturers, and a conducive home environment.

7.2.3 Social justice and human development

This section addresses ***Objective 3: To examine how – if at all – the switch to e-learning has affected the potential of higher education as an instrument of social justice for selected CUT students.***

E-learning appears to have magnified the lingering inequalities in higher education. The unequal conversion of educational opportunities during e-learning perpetuated the injustices. Despite the university's agency of making resources available, students from disadvantaged backgrounds were left behind, whereas students from upper socio-economic standing mostly managed with e-learning. Several students are disadvantaged in that they live in areas without network coverage. These students are from environments where e-learning is almost impossible due to large households with distractions. These students are not as tech-savvy to use all the e-learning platforms, especially without prior training. Students expected higher education to drive them out

of poverty, improve their standard of living, and achieve their aspirations. However, based on students' accounts, I argue that pandemic e-learning further maintained the status of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and improved the status of students with resources. Most students enjoyed few advantages of e-learning, no fair distribution of benefits, a definition of social injustice.

7.3 Recommendations

Objective 4: To make recommendations and suggestions based on the CUT case regarding e-learning pedagogy and its impact on social justice.

I recommend that social justice should be a key aspect in responses to pandemics. The recommendations are based on students' e-learning experiences. The CUT showed agency by supporting students with data and devices. However, many aspects factors constrain students' capabilities.

The situation of students needing digital resources became better after the university provided the data and devices. Despite appreciating this intervention, the students faced other problems, like no network environment or environments that are not conducive to study. When e-learning pedagogy is integrated, universities should consider an environment where learning occurs, not only focusing on learning material. A student may have data and live in a rural area without a proper network. Digital devices and free access to educational sites should be available to first-year students to ensure that no one is left behind. In light of the digital divide and tech-savvy, teaching and learning methodologies should include digital literacy in all modules to close the gap. Seldom attention is given to students' capabilities, I argue that higher learning should be an environment that allows for the development of capabilities for students to achieve educational functionings.

A lecturer plays an important role in facilitating the learning process. However, students had a disconnect with the lecturers during the pandemic. They were losing interest and motivation, particularly those who still needed the capability for self-efficacy. Waiting for a long time to get a response from the lecturers can be disadvantaging to a student and lead to a lack of confidence. Lecturers need to facilitate students' personal growth and development by respecting their educational freedoms so that students can decide what they value. In light of the lecturer's e-

learning proficiency, the academic staff is ill-equipped to facilitate e-learning. The University should ensure that lecturers have skills inclusively to manage e-learning pedagogy. Furthermore, the university could adopt measures that safeguard e-learning assessments' credibility. The CUT is a contact university; however, this study recommends that e-learning should not be treated as emergency remote teaching. It must be blended as part of the teaching practices where a module is presented face-to-face and online. This way, the university can easily shift to e-learning in the case of unforeseen circumstances like natural disasters or health crises.

Personal and environmental factors are rarely tackled or considered by universities. University needs to understand and analyse the relationship between educational resources and the capability of students to convert these resources into valued capabilities. It is one thing to provide a laptop and a learning tool. However, individuals are still compromised if they cannot covert such resources to achieve. Students' capabilities should be expanded beyond resources. The quality of education and knowledge should be based on epistemic justice. Although this study does not aim to debate policy, it recommends that policy formulations address the university's social justice goals. In other words, policies should reflect that pedagogies are inclusive, and that lecturers and students can have the freedoms of well-being and agency.

Overall, for all the stakeholders in higher education, particularly DHET, higher learning institution, and HoDs, there is a need for comprehensive e-learning policies that articulate the digital divide to foster social justice goals as higher learning institutions adopts Artificial Intelligence (AI).

7.4 Conclusion

This final chapter aimed to close the discussions and analyses on students' e-learning experiences during the pandemic and the impact (negative or positive) on the social justice goals of an institution. Overall, this study points out that e-learning during the pandemic assisted some students in achieving their freedoms while disadvantaging others. The measures put in place by the university to address e-learning issues during the pandemic showed agency but not enough due to constricting individual personal, social, and environmental conversion factors.

The higher education system in South Africa is embedded in structural inequalities, and through empirical research, students' narratives on e-learning echo those inequalities that persist in institutions of higher learning. The blanket approach to equalising by universities could further have unintended ramifications of reinforcing educational disparities. The Capability Approach as a theoretical framework in this study adds value to comprehending social injustices when pedagogy is not inclusive.

This study only featured a few students and only represented the views of some students at the CUT; therefore, the results cannot be generalised. However, the study allows further investigation into understanding social injustices in face-to-face classes. Therefore, future studies could incorporate the capability approach theory in understating institutions of higher learning' goals of social justice and the impact on students.

7.5 Limitations and directions for future research

Although this study makes some significant contributions to social justice in higher education, I recognise some limitations.

The results from this study cannot be representative of the general make-up of higher learning institutions in South Africa as this is based on one university. I acknowledge that universities in South Africa are different in nature. This is a mini-thesis, therefore the sample size is relatively small. The study focused on a specific time of COVID-19, the purposive sampling of students during the pandemic resulted in first years and second years being excluded. I acknowledge that including first-entry students as participants would have given a broader and more comparative viewpoint of students from all levels of study. I adopted the Capability Approach for this study, and I acknowledge that this framework is not perfect.

For future research, more different universities could be included, and the sample size could be increased. Perhaps future studies could combine the Capability Approach with other theoretical frameworks.

To conclude, this study established that e-learning in the context of inequalities in HE and society, in general, impedes student's ability to attain their academic freedoms. This study examines an important and timely topic related to social justice.

Understanding this topic is vital for fostering inclusive education and equity. This study contributes to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of quality education and reduced inequalities.

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ANNEXURES

ANNEXURE 1: ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER FROM UFS

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

GENERAL/HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (GHREC)

06-Oct-2022

Dear Mr Lehlohonolo Mokoena

Application Approved

Research Project Title:
Pandemic e-learning and the interruption of higher education's social justice goals: Narratives from the Central University of Technology (CUT) in the Free State (FS)

Ethical Clearance number:
UFS-HSD2022/0802/22

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

Adri Du Plessis
Digitally signed by Adri Du Plessis
Date: 2022.10.06 12:56:00 +02'00'

205 Nelson Mandela Drive
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Bloemfontein 9301
South Africa

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Bloemfontein 9300
Tel: +27 (0)51 401 9337
duplessisA@ufs.ac.za
www.ufs.ac.za

ANNEXURE 2: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

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

STUDENTS: RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION LEAFLET AND CONSENT FORM

DATE
October 2022

TITLE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Pandemic e-learning and the interruption of higher education's social justice goals: Narratives from the Central University of Technology (CUT) in the Free State (FS)

PRINCIPLE INVESTIGATOR / RESEARCHER(S) NAME(S) AND CONTACT NUMBER(S):

Lehlohonolo Gibson Mokoena 2020870792 0739833226
Dr. Monique Kwachou

FACULTY AND DEPARTMENT:

Name of Faculty: Economic and Management Sciences
Name of Department: Centre For Development Support (CDS)

STUDY LEADER(S) NAME AND CONTACT NUMBER:

Dr. Monique Kwachou (UFS staff member)
Contact number

WHAT IS THE AIM / PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

The main aim of this study is to investigate how (if at all) the sudden shift to e-learning brought about by the pandemic affected the ability of higher education to serve as an instrument of social justice for CUT students in particular.

WHO IS DOING THE RESEARCH?

Mr. LG Mokoena is a Tourism Lecturer at Central University of Technology, Free State. This research project is important as my direction is to shift to social justices in education. This research project will allow me to take this direction and further my studies in this field of expertise.

HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICAL APPROVAL?

This study is approved by the Research Ethics Committee of UFS and CUT's Faculty Research Innovation Committee. A copy of the approval letter can be obtained from the researcher.

Approval number: *UFS-HSD2022/0802/22 & FMSEC27922*

WHY ARE YOU INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT?

In the course of the pandemic, higher learning institutions in South Africa moved to e-learning. Given that higher education promises and is expected to be instrumental in enabling social justice as an equalizer, this researcher finds it is necessary to investigate how the sudden switch to e-learning has fostered or inhibited the ability of a specific higher education institution- CUT, FS- to meet the expectations of it as an enabler of social justice. This study will focus mainly on the experiences of students of the tourism and hospitality management departments at the Central University of Technology (CUT), Free State given that more students of these departments have been identified to come from marginalized backgrounds compared to others. As such, the researcher is purposively sampling 10 students of each department; it is for this reason that you – as a student of one of these departments- is being invited to take part in this research project.

WHAT IS THE NATURE OF PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

Student participants of the study are expected to narrate their personal story of higher education (accessing it and expectation of social justice they may have had of it), their narratives will climax with a focus on the switch to e-learning during the pandemic period, outlining how that experience ultimately affected them. This will be done through narrative interviewing. All interviews will be recorded. Interview times are expected to range from 60 to 90 minutes (this excludes the pre-interview discussions) with breaks over the course of the day.

CAN THE PARTICIPANT WITHDRAW FROM THE STUDY?

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Therefore, this consent form permits the participants to withdraw from the study at any given time with no penalty for non-participation.

WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

Although this research studies an experience of a slowly ending pandemic, the findings are relevant post-pandemic as well as they will speak of the risk and potential which changes to e-learning come with in this increasingly digitized time. The information unearthed in the course of this investigation will benefit the university in question- CUT and all those involved in improving the delivery of higher education by e-learning as it may be used to identify risk areas that universities address to ensure they meet the expectation of enabling social justice even in e-learning format.

WHAT IS THE ANTICIPATED INCONVENIENCE OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?

The only foreseeable discomfort to the student participants is a potential discomfort in narration of personal background and the difficulties experienced as the course of higher education- particularly during the pandemic period. There are no foreseeable inconveniences for administrators participating in this study.

WILL WHAT I SAY BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?

The study participants in this study will be assured confidentiality by means of using pseudonyms. The participants' name will not be recorded, anywhere and the narratives captured will not be traced back to the participants. The data may be used for other purposes such as the publications in journal articles and conference presentation and participants will still be protected through pseudonyms. Only the researcher, supervisor and possibly a transcriber will have access to the data and all these parties are liable to maintain confidentiality by signing a confidentiality agreement). Furthermore, the consent form signed by the participants protects the data such as emails of the participants received through a third party, as this data will be kept confidential.

HOW WILL THE INFORMATION BE STORED AND ULTIMATELY DESTROYED?

The transcribed audio recorded data from the narrative interviews will be stored in research safe google drive protected with a password. This data will only be used for this study under the supervision and management of the supervisor. After this usage, the data will be stored for at least three years, then destroyed (by means of permanently deleting data from the drive). The only foreseeable risks of harm or side-effects to the potential participants is computer being hacked. To encounter this potential risk password will be changed every 3 months as per UFS institutional policy.

WILL I RECEIVE PAYMENT OR ANY INCENTIVES FOR PARTICPATING IN THIS STUDY?

There will be no payment or reward offered to the participants in this research project. No foreseeable costs incurred by the participant or risks as the study will be conducted at the convenience of the participants.

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 Lehlohonolo Gibson Mokoena on 0739833226 or email at lgmokoena0@gmail.com. The findings are accessible for three years. Should you have concerns about the way in which the research has been conducted, you may contact the research supervisor- Dr Monique Kwachou- in person at the Higher Education and Human Research Group of the Centre for Development Support at the University of the Free State or via email at kwachoutangahme@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,

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

Confirm that I voluntarily agree to participate in the research study entitled "Pandemic e-learning and the interruption of higher education's social justice goals: Narratives from the CUT, FS" that aims to investigate how (if at all) the sudden shift to e-learning brought about by the pandemic affected the ability of higher education to serve as an instrument of social justice for CUT students in particular and which is being conducted by ***Lehlohonolo Gibson Mokoena*** (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 de-identified 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 **Narrative Interview**/**Semi-structured** interview (circle that which is applicable to you).

Full Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Full Name(s) of Researcher(s): Lehlohonolo Gibson Mokoena

Signature of Researcher: _____ Date: _____

ANNEXURE 3: PERMISSION LETTER FROM CUT

Central University of Technology, Free State

FACULTY RESEARCH AND INNOVATION COMMITTEE

FACULTY OF MANAGEMENT SCIENCES

RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER

Date: 27/09/2022

This is to confirm that:

Applicant's Name	LEHLOHONOLO MOKOENA
Supervisors' Name[s] for Student Project (where applicable)	Monique Kwachou, PhD.
Level of Qualification for Student Project (where applicable)	Masters
Tittle of research project	Pandemic e-learning and the interruption of higher education's social justice goals: Narratives from the Central University of Technology (CUT) in the Free State (FS)

Ethical clearance has been provided by the Faculty Research and Innovation Committee in view of the CUT Research Ethics and Integrity Framework, 2016 with reference number **FMSEC27922**

The following special conditions were set:

[X] None

[ ] Specific conditions

The following specific conditions apply:

1. _____NA_____
2. _____NA_____
3. _____NA_____

We wish you success with your research project.

Professor D Kokt
Acting FRIC Chairperson

ANNEXURE 4: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STUDENTS

NARRATIVE INTERVIEW GUIDE

FOR STUDENTS AT THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY

I. Introduction

My name is Lehlohonolo Gibson Mokoena, I would like to have an interview with you for a study entitled: ***Pandemic e-learning and the interruption of higher education's social justice goals: Narratives from the CUT, FS.***

The main aim of the study you are participating in is to investigate how (if at all) the sudden shift to e-learning brought about by the pandemic affected the ability of higher education to serve as an instrument of social justice for CUT students in particular. As noted on the consent form you signed, the information you provide here will be strictly confidential and you can opt not to respond to certain questions or withdraw from the interview at any time.

II. About the Narrative interview style

According to McAdams (2008) 'The life story model of adult identity is one of a number of new approaches in psychology and the social sciences that emphasize narrative and the storied nature of human conduct'. This Life-Story Interview is tailored following a template developed by Professor McAdams of the Foley Centre for Life-Story Research (see McAdams and Guo (2014 p.17).

With this narrative interview, I would like you to tell your personal story of higher education; that includes your experience accessing higher education, any expectations you may have had or still have of it of it enabling your ability to 'equalize' with more privileged member of society, and its capacity to foster social justice, your pre-pandemic experience of it, and post-pandemic experience of it etc. Please feel free to tell your story in your own way, I may only occasionally interrupt with prompts. The story's climax should focus on the switch to e-learning during the pandemic period, outlining how that experience ultimately affected them.

THEME	QUESTIONS
Story	If you had to write a book or story about your experience on the switch from face-to-face learning to e-learning during the pandemic, what does you story look like from the beginning to end? In other words, from the time face to face classes were suspended, to going online. Think back to your experience migrating from the "norm" to e-learning pedagogy. Your story can be categorised into section or chapters that details your experience. Perhaps before you get into the e-learning your first section as a preface could provide a background on the importance of higher education attainment for you personally. Why is obtaining this qualification so important for you? And what expectations do you have from attaining higher education at CUT?
Take from the story	Having considered the story you have just narrated, what would you say stood out for you in terms of challenges you faced with e-learning or opportunities brought by e-learning pedagogy? Explain these challenges and opportunities in detail, and perhaps how you overcame the challenges.

Reflection	In your reflection of your story on e-learning, do you think the switch from face-to-face learning to e-learning during the pandemic enabled you to achieve your educational goals/expectation you alluded to in your first section of you book?

Thank you for your participation!

ANNEXURE 5: INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR HOD'S

INTERVIEW GUIDE FOR STAFF MEMBERS AT THE DEPARTMENT OF TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY

My name is Lehlohonolo Gibson Mokoena, I would like to have an interview with you for a study entitled: ***Pandemic e-learning and the interruption of higher education's social justice goals: Narratives from the CUT, FS***

The main aim of this study is to establish if the sudden shift to e-learning during the pandemic has enabled social justices or contributed to the social injustices and the role of university thereof. As an academic staff/administrator, I value your opinion and experience of having to deal directly with students' queries during the pandemic. This interview consists of four semi-structured open questions, based on your answers, I may require an elaboration to be able to have an in-depth discussion.

Note: the interviews will be recorded, safely kept, and later destroyed. This study will use pseudonyms for confidentially and anonymity and the participants can withdraw from the interview at any time.

THEME	QUESTIONS
Background	1. Gender……. 2. Age……. 3. What is your current position at CUT? 4. How long have you been in this position? 5. How long have you worked at CUT? 6. What is your educational background? 7. Has it always been your career of choice to be an academic? If yes, why? 8. How are you involved with the students in relation to your work/position? 9. How often do you deal with students' challenges? a. Very often b. Regularly c. Rarely
Higher education attainment	10. In your opinion, what are the challenges facing higher education currently? *11. On a scale of one to ten (with ten being highest and one being lowest rating) how do you rate hospitality Management programme in terms of:* a. Human development b. Importance in a society c. Equal opportunities d. Diversity e. Quality education 12. CUT is historically a White institution; do you think over the years CUT has been welcoming to all South Africans?

The switch to e-learning	13. Do you think the students you are getting are from historically disadvantaged background? please explain. 14. One of CUT's strategic goals is to promote good governance, human rights, and social justice. As the department how is higher education attainment by your students is expected to enable or promote social justice? 15. What do you think the switch to e-learning pedagogy during the pandemic entailed for your department and students? 16. Reflecting on e-learning during the pandemic, do you agree or disagree with the following statements? a. Teaching and learning activities got enough time. b. Staff had enough experience in e-learning requirements. c. Interaction between students and staff during e-learning was satisfactory. d. Online assessments were effective to test the students' knowledge. e. Students had resources for e-learning. f. The majority of the students are tech savvy. 17. How many of your students during the pandemic had sufficient access to the internet and other digital devices to effectively access e-learning: a. Almost all b. Most c. Only some d. Hardly any
Challenges and opportunities	18. In your discussion with students and handling of students' queries, what were some of the challenges and opportunities if any, that you have noticed out of the switch to e-learning for the student? 19. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: e-learning during the pandemic affected our departmental pass rate negatively? a. Strongly agree b. Somewhat agree c. Somewhat disagree d. Strongly disagree
Social justice goals	

Parting thought	20. As mentioned earlier, CUT has a strategic goal to promote good governance, human rights, and social justice. Would you say the pandemic e-learning with its challenges and opportunities has enabled social injustices or has enabled CUT's goal of social justice? 21. Is there anything else that you would like to comment on that perhaps crossed your mind during the interview?

Thank you for your participation!

ANNEXURE 6: LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

CORNELIA GELDENHUYS

✆083 2877088
corrieg@mweb.co.za

9 July 2023

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

Herewith I, **Cornelia Geldenhuys (ID 521114 0083 088)** declare that I am a qualified, accredited language practitioner and that I have edited the following master's dissertation:

Pandemic e-learning and the interruption of higher education's social justice goals: Narratives from the Central University of Technology (CUT) in the Free State (FS)

by

Lehlohonolo Gibson Mokoena

All changes were indicated by track changes and comments **for the author to verify, clarify aspects that are unclear, make the necessary adjustments and finalise.** The editor takes no responsibility in the instance of this not being done. The document remains the final responsibility of the author.

.....
C GELDENHUYS
MA (Lin) cum laude, MA (Mus), BA Hons (French), HED, HDL, UELM

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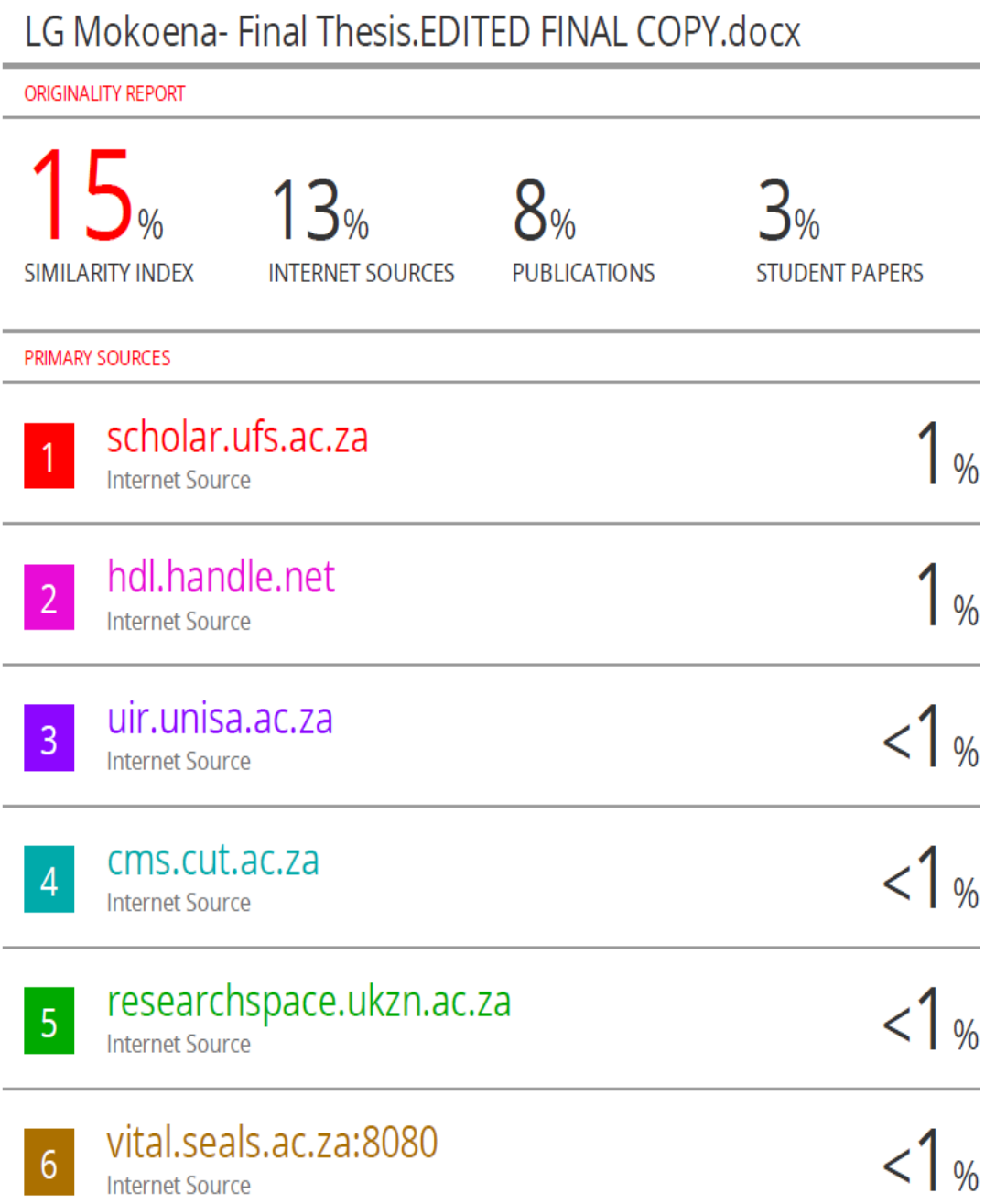
Full member/Volle lid, Professional Editors Guild (PEG, Membership GEL001)
Mediterranean Editors and Translators (MET: Membership 02393)
European Association of Scientific Editors (EASE: Membership 5523)

ANNEXURE 7: PLAGIARISM RECEIPT AND REPORT



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