The Digitalisation of Elitism and Sifting? Observations on the Online Registration of First-Year University Students in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

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Abstracts: This paper argues that the digitalisation of university registration processes has given rise to *concealed elitism*. The phenomenon became apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, as elite students accessed advanced medical care and education degrees while individuals from indigent families and rural communities bore the brunt of the pandemic. Drawing from the perspectives of *critical emancipatory research* (CER), the observational study described in this paper sought to explain students' experiences during the transition to digitalised registration processes and to identify practical solutions for the deficiencies in the new system, ensuring inclusivity for all students in the future. This *observational study* did not have a specific sample size but observed the groups of incoming first-year students gathered outside many university gates during the registration period in the province of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. The study consequently concluded that many universities in KwaZulu-Natal are not prepared for digitalisation of student applications for several reasons: (i) the use of technology conceals elitism, a lingering aspect of the apartheid era that disenfranchises students from indigent and rural communities; (ii) universities lack reliable infrastructure, as they were not initially designed for contemporary communication and teaching methods; and (iii) the rise of technological innovation destabilises the intentions of our South African democracy and the massification agenda. This paper proposes a dual method of communication (virtual and walk-in inquiries) that would accommodate democracy and recognise people's right to education. This approach would ensure that students from different socio-economic backgrounds are accommodated in higher education institutions. The paper recommends technological innovations that do not remind black and poor students that they were once marginalised from accessing tertiary education due to systems that were not favourable to them.

Keywords: COVID-19, Concealed Elitism, Marginalisation, Technology, University Students, Online Registration.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is undeniable that COVID-19 wrought significant socio-economic disruptions in the lives of university students. Individuals from indigent families bore the brunt of COVID-19's impact, particularly in online/virtual learning. Institutions of higher education were compelled to resort to online/remote teaching and learning, for which they were ill-prepared, to maintain the curriculum delivery sessional dates. South African universities faced numerous challenges as they had to (i) heed the mitigation of COVID-19 infections and (ii) rapidly adapt to digitalised/online teaching methods requiring technological advancements to meet planned curriculum targets. To comply with the drive for flattening the infection curve, COVID-19 restrictions necessitated the cessation of physical contact to deliver lectures. This shift underscored the significance of digitalisation in higher education processes, which continued after the pandemic in the form of online registration.

This paper aims to analyse whether changes made during COVID-19 unintentionally fostered elitism in institutions of higher learning, concealed within the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) which is the digitalisation of processes and systems, thus giving rise to the following questions: i) Does the ability to register and undergo orientation online successfully mean that students from affluent families have more accessible and guaranteed access to universities? ii) Are students from indigent families encountering barriers due to technological unfamiliarity, the inability to afford devices like smartphones and laptops, and limited network coverage in their locations? iii) Does this signal the encroachment of elitism in the era of massification? iv) Are we digitalising universities through online registration or promoting elitism and sifting?

As the study endeavours to address these crucial questions, we are prompted to inquire whether the physical return to institutions of higher learning implies that matriculants (or prospective first-year students) from rural areas are reminded of historical measures in colonial institutions that sifted out students from low-income families, confirming that the academic journey of a financially challenged student is defined by rejection and resilience. The paper also questions the rationale behind the decision for online registration. In responding to these queries, the paper contemplates whether COVID-19 inadvertently promoted elitism, considering that affluent individuals accessed superior medical care from private health facilities. At the same time, impoverished families encountered challenges accessing government medical facilities. University students from wealthy families had the necessary technology for online education, while their counterparts from indigent families struggled with technology gadgets, data, and coverage.

These questions arise at a time when the 4IR has garnered optimism and has been celebrated as a much-needed development globally. In the African context, the ascent of industrialisation is perceived as progress that enables African institutions of higher learning to compete on par with historically advanced institutions. Are they prepared to meet this standard, considering that 55.5 per cent (30.3 million people) in South Africa are living below the poverty line? [1]. [2] asserts that digital transformation is an evolutionary process influencing all aspects and dimensions of life, involving individuals and organisations. It entails developing new, more advanced, and effective methods and practices in pursuit of the mission of higher education. [3] elucidate that technology has become a useful instrument for development because it cramps space and time while ensuring effective delivery of information; however, not everyone has access to it in the South African context.

[4] is among the scholars who agree that the COVID-19 pandemic exposed inequalities. In his recent publication, he asserts that "inequality kills" and that "inequality is a structural economic violence" that has been experienced by poor people. He insinuated that the world's political economy favoured the richest while harm was directed at the vast majority of ordinary people worldwide. Approximately, 5,7 to 8.4 million people died owing to a lack of access to healthcare in poor countries [5]. On a similar note, [6] contend that COVID-19 inequalities were evident in many domains of life, e.g., age, education, gender, ethnicity, unemployment, socio-economic and geography. [6] confirm that these inequalities were rife even before COVID-19, but the situation worsened because they hindered poor people, especially women, from accessing medical care during the pandemic. Within the scope of inequalities, [7] agree that COVID-19 caused an enormous dislocation of society, especially in South Africa.

[8] confirm that between 71 and 100 million people worldwide fall under the poverty datum line. This margin was widened by the COVID-19 pandemic, which pushed poor people into extreme poverty, implying that those with more continued to have more, while those with less continued to have less. The brutality of COVID-19 in South Africa was statistically measured. For instance, [9] reveals that 34 per cent of South Africans went to bed hungry every night during the lockdown. Already, the 2018 South African Statistics household survey confirmed that about 11.3 per cent of the total population of South Africa was vulnerable due to hunger [10].

[11] reiterates the above, asserting that COVID-19 brought steep economic inequalities in Africa. Those who lived in poverty found COVID-19 lockdown restrictions unbearable because of lost jobs, tough access to basics, crowded living, and little government support. The existing socio-economic disparities, a historic legacy of apartheid (which created inequalities between people racially and geographically), heightened the impact of the pandemic on these communities.

According to [12], the apartheid era gave birth to racially classified and diversified universities in South Africa and excluded the black majority. The rise of black universities aroused inherited policies that further deepened socio-economic challenges amongst blacks; hence, there is a classification of elite blacks and poor blacks. These two categories do not enjoy the same access rights to higher education institutions. Elite blacks can fund their university fees, while poor blacks depend on the National Student Funding Aid Scheme, and they have been at the forefront of the *Fees Must Fall* campaign.

From the perspective of this study, the use of technology as a blanket approach to accessing higher education paralyses all the democratic efforts that South Africa, through its Constitution and policies such as the massification agenda for South African institutions of higher learning, formulated to redress past injustices. The primary objective of the massification agenda is to maximize access to education for the historically marginalised and the indigent. Furthermore, the discriminatory history is to be buried by maximising access to education as an immediate right for all. In essence, the historically marginalised populace is granted access to education without prejudgments such as race, which was an exclusion rule for the apartheid regime.

Exclusion of Black Marginalised Students in Digitalised Higher Education

South Africa has a bitter history of student activism that dismantled institutional systems, giving prominence to inequalities. The *1976 uprising* was followed by the *2015 Fees-Must-Fall* movement, which began as a protest proposed tuition fee increases at universities in South Africa and later evolved into a broader movement advocating for free, decolonised education and addressing issues of institutional racism and inequality within the higher education system.

In 2023, a new dimension emerged as students, led by their student governance bodies, protested online registration and the resulting exclusions, primarily affecting first-time university students from indigent families and deep rural communities. The dismissal of students with rubber bullets and widespread arrests during protests for walk-in inquiries in institutions of higher learning is a reminder that many historical challenges persist in South Africa, echoing the tactics used to suppress the 1976 uprising by the apartheid regime.

The study employed *critical emancipatory research* (CER); an offshoot of *critical theory* associated with the Frankfurt School in Germany in the late 1920s [13]. CER challenges and transforms existing power structures and social inequalities. As grounded in critical theory, it seeks to empower marginalised communities by giving them a voice and engaging them in the research process. [14:99] notes that critical emancipatory theory has "philosophical roots in several traditions such as Marx's analysis of socio-economic conditions and class structure, Haberman's notion of emancipatory knowledge and Freire's transformative and emancipatory pedagogy". The core of CER is social justice, which should be accessible and enjoyed by beneficiaries, to primarily receive service. [14:3] explains that equitable social justice is important because "humankind has gone through many struggles against imperialism, ranging from colonisation, marginalization, superiority as well as secondary beneficiaries of knowledge". This observational study observed four University of KwaZulu-Natal campuses (known as the Pietermaritzburg, Howard College, Edgewood and Westville campuses). This study did not have contact with students who were frustrated outside the university's main gates.

The German philosopher, Jürgen Habermas (1929) developed CER to enhance the participation of other sectors of society, especially in decision-making concerning educational issues. The contribution of the CER is that it interrogates social justice, social transformation and how people are affected by such facets in their daily lives. Researchers can question the extent to which social justice and social transformation affect beneficiaries in a manner that does not objectify them nor exclude them in the process just because they are considered beneficiaries, not decision-makers [15]. *Critical emancipatory research* aims to produce knowledge that can promote social justice and positive social change, often involving collaborative work with the community being studied.

In CER, the researcher is not seen as an objective observer but as an active participant in the research process. The researcher's role is to facilitate the empowerment of marginali**s**ed communities and challenge dominant power

structures contributing to social inequalities. CER was chosen for this observational study based on [16: 224-237] observation that it allows the researcher to interpret other people's interpretations, working towards fulfilling people through a democratic process, such as collective engagement. This research approach applies to various topic areas, including education, healthcare, and social policy.

CER is beneficial for investigating issues concerning marginali**s**ed communities who lack representation in mainstream research and have their perspectives ignored. Overall, CER seeks to challenge the status quo and create a more equitable society by centring the voices and experiences of marginali**s**ed communities. In the study, the CER theory proved relevant, as it opposes conditions fostering exclusion, social injustice, and a lack of participation. It was particularly applicable to investigating the challenges encountered by those marginalised and excluded black rural university students going to institutions of higher education when digitalising university processes, such as registration at the beginning of the year. The CER allows the study to establish if universities' digitalising is promoting elitism or sifting, as they declared online registration as a mandatory rule for all incoming new students.

[17, 18, 19] Dube (2020), raises concerns regarding the potential exclusion of students who: lack access to the necessary online resources; face challenges in adapting to the new system; and encounter difficulties in their physical environment. Hence, the study sought to explore students' experiences during the transition to digitalised registration processes. The objective was to identify practical solutions for the deficiencies in the new system, ensuring inclusivity for all students in the future. Higher learning institutions in South Africa have explicitly communicated through circulars that administrators will not respond to walk-in inquiries, emphasising the shift towards online registration processes. This has intensified the challenges faced by students who lack access to online resources in navigating the transition to online registration processes.

Access to university premises is verified and validated by proof of registration, which students must present to university security guards. This verification process underscores the importance of a well-functioning registration system and illuminates the challenges faced by students in adapting to the shift towards digitalised registration processes, as highlighted by [17, 18,19]. In addition, the requirement to produce proof of registration becomes particularly significant in the context of the limitations posed by eradicating walk-in inquiries. This intensifies the negative impact of the digitalisation transition on students' experiences and access to educational resources.

Such restrictions serve as a reminder that constraints in South Africa are still experienced by marginalised people, with the security system being at the forefront to defend the institution. History reflects that this was the same in 1952 when blacks had to be verified by providing a *compass*, which was a passbook that contained personal details, employment history, and other information about individuals. It was a form of identification used during the apartheid era in South Africa and a tool of racial segregation and control, restricting the movement of black people.

In the current democratic era, a disconcerting aspect arises when considering the role of a black person appointed as a security guard. This individual is assigned the responsibility of vetting individuals' eligibility to be on campus and making decisions about restricting access. Thus, individuals from the same racial background are placed in positions where they have to regulate access to educational institutions. This raises questions about the perpetuation of historical patterns of control and discrimination within a democratic context.

The study witnessed risk management/security guards assuming the role of gatekeepers in institutions. This act brought back memories of the 1976 uprising, where police security was used to negotiate with students instead of education officials. Notably, first-year students were restricted from seeking information to guide their decisions upon entering the university premises. Security guards served as gatekeepers, creating a historical event that generations will recall as a harsh era that excluded black people from accessing education. Is this the history that should be recorded by students seeking change from higher education institutions?

The study also observed that student political constituencies mediated between groups of people outside the university gates and the university. This tangible evidence indicated that university policies endorsing online registration deepened social injustices reminiscent of the apartheid regime. Access continues to be regulated racially and economically, simply because those who have access to the economy have technological devices that they can use to register, while those who are excluded economically because they come from indigent families are not able to register as they cannot afford smartphones and the data to access registration portals.

This paper argues that in KwaZulu-Natal, institutions of higher learning are predominantly attended by black students from deep rural and indigent families, who were led to believe that the democratic dispensation meant ensuring their right to (i) access institutions for inquiries and (ii) access institutions of higher education as students. However, these democratic pronouncements were destabilised during the COVID-19 pandemic, at which time institutions of higher learning were forced to opt for online systems, detrimentally affecting poor students. The advent of COVID-19 rationalised technology as the medium that grants and denies access. COVID-19 has exposed economic inequalities that the democratic dispensation has not resolved in the 30 years since its inception. The COVID-19 virus promoted digitalising and elitism which excludes those that were historically marginalised by the apartheid dispensation.

[20] asserts that although historically, black universities in South Africa played a pivotal role in education and empowering black students, there is a great need to observe and evaluate the current state of affairs in higher education in the post-apartheid era. Despite notable progress, systemic exclusion, marginalisation, and discrimination persist. [21] agree that access to higher education, particularly university education, has been a significant problem in every African country. Marbley, Bonner, and Williams, [22] concur that students in many historic apartheid institutions still face racism, discrimination, alienation, and academic and social barriers that were meant to be dismantled by democracy and the era of massification. Returning to the era of digitalisation, the study notes that while digitalisation has gained international acclaim, other scholars have indicated that universities are facing difficulties in adopting technologies. Their system infrastructure has not been ready to service the number of students in many traditional universities (Carver, 2016; Reid, 2014). Most scholars do not believe universities have a clear digital vision [23].

Elitism vs Massification: The Importance of Classification In Higher Education

Elitism and educational massification represent two distinct approaches to education that have been subjects of debate for many years, and such debate revolves around questions on the purpose of education and who should have access to it. Elitism focuses on providing education to a select few individuals considered the best and brightest, often involving expensive and exclusive private schools or universities. It posits that only a small group of individuals can succeed in higher education and should have access to the best resources and opportunities. Proponents of elitism argue that only the most talented individuals should have access to high-quality education, ensuring they can excel and contribute to society. In contrast, supporters of educational massification contend that education is a fundamental right that should be accessible to everyone, regardless of abilities or social status.

Both approaches have strengths and weaknesses, requiring a consideration of the specific context and goals of education. Elitism is a tangible ramification of COVID-19, as South African institutions regulate access, eroding attempts to address injustices from the colonial and apartheid eras. The decision to implement online registration during the pandemic has contributed to elitism. It has amplified existing disparities, particularly disadvantaging students from indigent and rural backgrounds. [24] as well as [25] confirm that the global COVID-19 pandemic created a heightened sense of awareness of the inequalities that prevail in society. The reality of the digital divide implies that some citizens, especially those in far-flung rural areas, are not as fortunate as others to be able to access information, given that Internet access at the household level is only a reality for approximately 12 per cent of South Africa.

The OECD (2019) report spells out that rural areas are without the required technological infrastructure, thus the right conditions must be established at the local level for the effective use of technology amongst rural communities.

This includes ensuring high-quality broadband and civil infrastructure to support their broadband requirements. In many cases, rural regions are proven to be lagging in broadband access and this affects capacity for sufficient speeds. Most of the improvement made has been in urban areas, while the geographic and demographic characteristics of rural regions present as variables usually observed as resulting in the digital gap between rural and urban areas. Factors including residential blocks, houses in densely populated areas, or proximity of villages, and remote houses are listed as those that led to the exclusion of rural communities from benefiting from robust provisions of the technology. Policies that support digitalisation should consider these factors as promoting the exclusion of rural communities from advancing at the same pace as urban areas. [26] assert that basically, new technologies stay in urban areas while rural areas and villages get less of the new technologies.

[27] also highlighted the rural-urban digital divide and its repercussions. The phenomenon, as explained by [24], refers to the gap that exists between individuals who have reasonable opportunities to access technology tools and those who do not have such opportunities. This digital divide breaks along many fault lines, including, but not limited to, education, income, ethnicity, geography, infrastructure and accessibility. The global COVID-19 pandemic created a heightened sense of awareness of the inequalities that prevail in society. According to [28], people in urban communities have access to resources because these areas are facilitated with libraries and multipurpose community centres that are used to access information. Rural communities suffer from this digital divide because houses are scattered, and it is difficult to have a centre where people can access information. Also, people from rural areas have neither the skills nor the trainers to assist them in the use of these resources. In many instances, these centres end up getting vandalised by community members as an obstruction towards development and advancement. [29] further explains that rural villages have suffered because of corruption and budget cuts that have hindered their technological advancement.

One significant challenge has been the transition to remote learning during the advent of COVID-19. While some students have access to digital devices and reliable Internet connections, many do not, particularly those in rural areas and low-income households. This has resulted in unequal access to education, with some students falling behind due to a lack of resources. As outlined earlier in the introduction, following the COVID-19 pandemic, many institutions of higher learning opted for a complete shift to digitalised day-to-day operations. This pandemic era has deeply entrenched inequalities that were masked by the massification era as well as the democratic dispensation as a blanket of hope for those that were historically marginalised by the apartheid regime. The prominent use of the technology has unmasked realities that are particularly facing rural communities, including learners who matriculate from rural schools. The increased reliance on digital technologies for registration has created barriers for those without Internet access or familiarity with online processes, leading to exclusion and elitism. Only those with the necessary resources and knowledge can successfully navigate the process.

Students' Experiences with The Digitalisation of Registration

Observations from four University of KwaZulu-Natal campuses (Pietermaritzburg, Howard College, Edgewood and Westville campuses) revealed that 90 per cent of the students who: i) struggled with the new online/digitalised system, ii) waited and slept by university gates, and iii) faced the most challenges, all hailed from deep rural areas were from Quintile 1 to 3 schools. Quintile 1 to 3 schools are in communities with high unemployment rates, impoverished socio-economic conditions, and low literacy. These schools lack essential requirements for decent living, such as electricity, running water, proper housing, and roads, and have high poverty rates, inadequate network coverage, and reception. They are unfamiliar with technological systems, and for them to even access central application forms, they require assistance from philanthropic non-profit organisations [29].

[17] emphasises the significantly negative impact of rurality on adapting to the new pedagogical transition. He argues that students from rural areas are likely to feel excluded, being less technically literate and facing challenges in following instructions in English, which differs from the Zulu language used in their high schools. The digitalisation of universities has introduced language barriers for these students, as instructions for online registration systems were only provided in English, creating a barrier to entry. These institutions failed to offer multilingual support, hindering students' understanding and navigation of the system.

Online registration processes have presented barriers for students who lack access to the necessary technology or face challenges navigating the online system. According to observations, potential ways in which online registration processes have excluded black marginalised students include the lack of access to technology. Many students from low-income or marginalised communities may not have the necessary technology, such as a computer or stable internet connection, resulting in barriers to entry that limit their ability to participate in higher education. [30] postulates that the rural schooling sector in South Africa has failed to prepare students for online registration. Because rural schools are so under-resourced, students go through the schooling sector without learning how to use a computer. Most do not have computers; those that have computers do not have electricity, and those that have electricity have connectivity problems due to load shedding. Educators from Quintiles 3, 4 and 5 can teach technology because they have access to technology. Quintile 1 and 2 educators are not able to teach technology even though they may have the skill because such schools are not resourced. Inequalities between Quintiles 3, 4 and 5 as well as 1 and 2 depict inequalities that the democratic government has not redressed. These experiences compromise basic digital literacy for rural school-going learners and question what the government does to bridge the inequalities that are evident in government schools. As discussed by [31], Quintiles 1-3 schools are non-fee-paying in poorer communities, while Quintiles 4 and 5 are fee-paying schools in better-off communities. Such categorisation has been described as dividing the schools in South Africa according to "schools for the poor" and "schools for the rich" whereby the rich have access to technological innovations and advancement, and the learners are technologically savvy [32; 33; 34].

In this paper, the digitalised online system that was introduced in South African higher learning institutions has been regarded as biased and promoting elitism. Matriculants from rural schools are reminded that they matriculated in under-resourced schools while urban school learners are celebrating being part of the 4IR and advancing with the times. Online registration systems may unintentionally perpetuate systemic biases, such as discrimination based on race or socio-economic status. Institutions should review their online registration systems to ensure fairness and lack of bias. [17] concurs with [35], maintaining that the transition to online systems primarily benefits students from well-established backgrounds, disproportionately favouring those who are considered wealthy, come from cities, are high-performing, and have highly educated families.

These challenges raise the central question of whether online/digitalised registration is more effective than face-to-face or blended registration in institutions of higher learning. [19] argues, in agreement with [18] and [17], that most challenges associated with online/digitalised registration result from a lack of access to required resources, basic needs, difficulties in adjustment, an unfavourable study environment, and mental or physical health issues, especially for students with disabilities.

[19] contends that introducing e-learning might widen inequality gaps between privileged and underprivileged individuals regarding socio-economic and literacy backgrounds. The probability of experiencing a further digital divide arises due to uneven access to online resources caused by a shortage of digital devices. In the observational study, a participant argued that the sudden transition from a traditional system to digitalisation was only favourable to the rich and those in cities, where development is fully matured, while oppressive to the poor in rural areas where development remains a 'wet dream'.

CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19-related disruptions to the education system have widened inequalities, resulting in a new systematic exclusion of black marginalised students. This exclusion through digital online registration in institutions of higher learning is a significant issue that needs addressing because it reflects a flaw in South African democracy and the massification agenda governing historically excluded higher education institutions. While the world celebrates the4IR, learners from rural areas are left behind due to indigent family backgrounds, and lacking access to necessary devices because basic needs like food must be prioritised. Structural issues, such as a lack of electricity, crime affecting donated computers, and no Wi-Fi exclude learners and rural schools from the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Digital registration, while improving access for many students, creates barriers for those

lacking necessary technology, Internet access, or digital literacy skills, particularly those from poor and deep rural areas.

Given the cycle of digital frustration that is experienced by matriculants who may want to access universities in the era of online registration, prospective students from rural communities are engulfed by the following challenges:
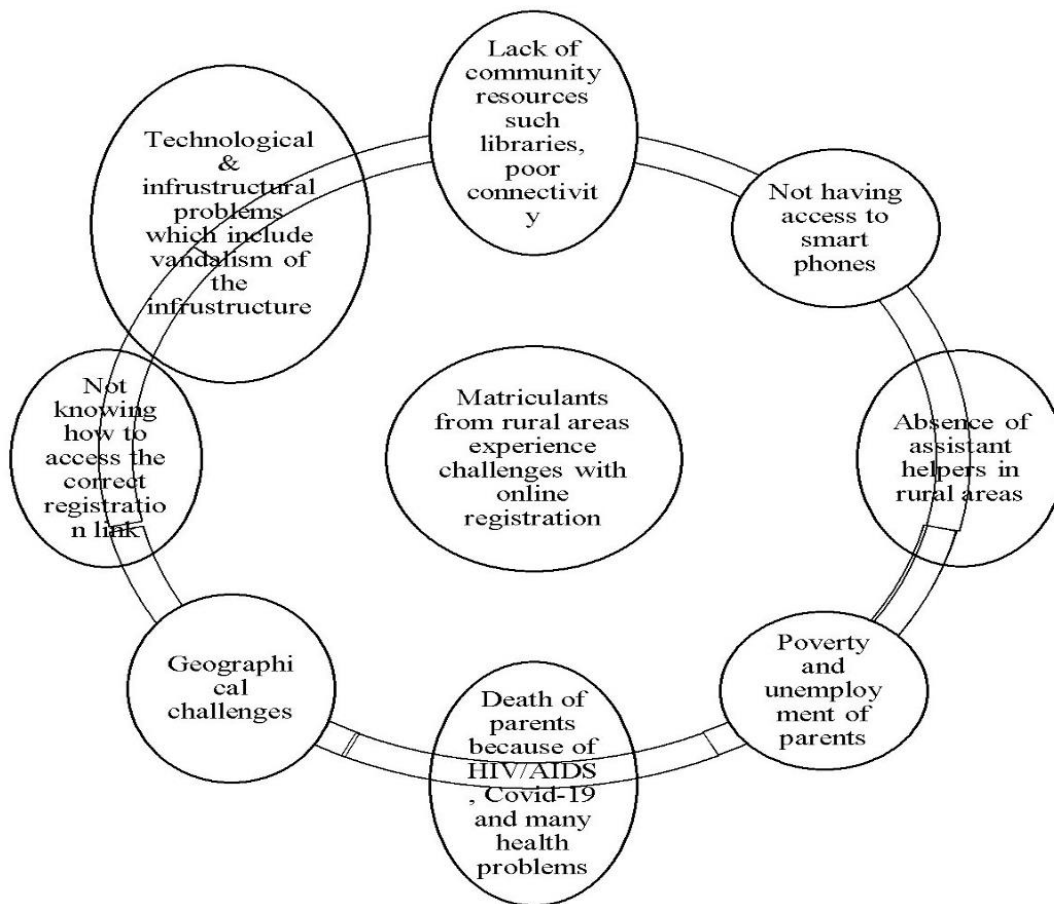

Figure 1: Challenges engulfing prospective students from rural communities.

This paper thus opines that digital registration systems have been designed without considering the specific needs and challenges faced by black marginalised students, resulting in missed deadlines, denial of admission, and recurring exclusion. The depicted figure shows the cyclical intersection of factors that exclude black marginalised students from tapping easily into the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Institutions of higher learning should prioritise inclusivity and accessibility by providing resources and support for students lacking access to technology and offering alternative registration options. Proactive steps are essential to ensure equal access to higher education opportunities for all students, preventing the recurrence of a history of black students from indigent and rural communities being victims of socio-economic systems. This paper thus recommends that institutions of higher learning in the KwaZulu-Natal province should understand that they cater for matriculants who are from deep rural communities, who are mostly engulfed by a myriad of issues which contribute to student marginalisation in their efforts to access tertiary institutions at the beginning of the academic year. To bridge the gap between technologically savvy and non-technologically savvy prospective students, institutions of higher learning in KwaZulu-Natal should allow walk-in inquiries. Senior university students should be contracted by institutions of higher learning so that they can offer peer assistance to first-year students who might be in contact with the technology for the first time. In this regard, no student would feel marginalised. The massification dawn and intentions of the democratic dispensation would then yield the intended outcomes. The right to tertiary education will be maximised for rural disadvantaged matriculants. The failure to support rural disadvantaged matriculants during

online registration would imply that access to education is a panacea that is not intended to redress injustices of the past in the South African context.

Conflict of Interest

The authors do not have any conflict of interest.

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