Covid-19: Interdisciplinary Explorations of Impacts on Higher Education

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1

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AS A PLATFORM TO RETHINK THE DECOLONISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

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The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore numerous challenges that South Africa has been grappling with since the end of apartheid. Higher education in particular has been facing many challenges that have opportunistically become salient in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. This chapter explores a wide range of challenges within the higher education sector that participants (mainly students) on the official Facebook Page of the Department of Higher Education and Technology (DHET) raised in the context of the Covid-19 National Lockdown.¹ I draw on concepts from decolonial theory, particularly the notion of “coloniality”, to examine how Covid-19 can be appropriated to rethink the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa. Coloniality refers to the perpetuation of quasi-colonial systems and structures long after the end of official colonialism. Decolonial theory seeks to identify and dismantle logics of coloniality in existing structures, systems and patterns of thought in former colonised territories. Covid-19 has not only highlighted the inequalities that continue to stalk South African society post-apartheid, but also the shortcomings of interventions that the government has put in place to address these challenges. The chapter argues that the Covid-19 crisis has presented an opportunity to rethink the unfinished business of decolonisation in higher education.

¹ South Africa declared a National Lockdown on 26 March 2020 following the outbreak of the novel coronavirus.

In South Africa, the call for the decolonisation of higher education became a buzzword in the context of the student protests of 2015-2016 which focused on, among other things, removing offensive colonial symbols from public spaces, eradicating racism in universities, and abolishing exorbitant and unaffordable tuition fees. Griffiths (2019:145) argues that although the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements formulated their agenda around “free, decolonized education for black people”, what the movement achieved through the promulgation of free higher education in 2017 was a small fraction of what the broader decolonisation agenda entailed. In fact, Covid-19 has demonstrated that decolonisation in the 21st century goes far beyond the provision of tuition-free higher education. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, government-funded students in South Africa enjoyed a reasonable degree of comfort in paid accommodation on and off-campus with access to university facilities such as computer labs and libraries. However, when Covid-19 struck, poor students were once again faced with the reality of academic exclusion based on their socio-economic circumstances. The drastic transition from face-to-face to virtual learning methods affected many disadvantaged students from poor communities such as townships, rural areas and informal settlements.

Drawing on decolonial theory, I argue that Covid-19 has exacerbated the violence of modernity for those who live on its “darker side” (Mignolo, 2007:450). The fact that students from particular geographical and socio-economic spaces suffered the most from the effects of Covid-19 should open a debate about what needs to be done to end the violence of modernity in former colonised territories. Despite the advent of the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR), students from poor communities continue to live in the shadow of modernity (without electricity, relevant gadgets or internet connectivity). In Fanon’s formulation, decolonisation is a process of reasserting the humanity of the colonised. It “infuses a new rhythm, a new language and a new humanity ... [it is] the creation of new men” (Fanon, 1961:2). Fanon’s writings affirm the perpetuation of relations of coloniality between the Global West and the Global South even after political decolonisation. For Fanon, national consciousness ought to be accompanied by a complete overhaul of socio-economic structures that continue to exclude the formerly colonised while entrenching coloniality. The building of a post-Covid-19 society (and higher education sector) requires a new theoretical language that can radically dismantle structural inequalities and ensure equitable distribution of the benefits of modernity. To create a new rhythm, a new language and a new humanity in the context of this analysis is metaphorically to reclaim the dignity of the formerly colonised by eradicating social injustice and ensuring that all students have access to opportunities and technologies necessary for learning in the 21st century.

Maldonado-Torres' (2007) three dimensions of coloniality, namely coloniality of power, coloniality of knowledge and coloniality of being, show that coloniality is relentless in its attempt to keep the colonised in the shadow of modernity. In fact, former colonised countries in the Global South continue to be on the receiving end of the negative consequences of modernity ranging from climate change to Covid-19. Covid-19 is in many ways a child of modernity, born through the environmental catastrophes of relentless resource extraction and transported to the world through globalisation. The association between Covid-19 and the environmental ravages of modernity means that countries in the Global South will continue to bear the consequences of a modern project from which they are largely excluded. While the Global North has resources and the latest technologies to alleviate crises of modernity such as Covid-19, the Global South is left to deal with crises of apocalyptic proportions.

In light of the above, it becomes evident that the “soft reform” (Andreotti, Stein, Ahenakew & Hunt, 2015:26) approach to decolonisation that South Africa has arguably embraced (see Vorster & Quinn, 2017) cannot address the inherent violence of modernity and its logic of coloniality. Modernity is prone to crisis because it is sustained by violence inflicted on those on “the other side of the line” (Santos, 2007:1). Scientists have argued that crises such as Covid-19 are likely to recur in the future because of global warming (Brower, 2001). If this is the case, the future of poor, racialised and low-income students (and indeed other populations in the Global South) is subject to the endless ravages of Western modernity. If the logic of coloniality is so pervasive that it permeates every sphere of former colonised spaces, then it goes without saying that decolonisation “cannot be accomplished by the wave of a magic wand” as Fanon (1961:2) argues.

Decoloniality and South African higher education

Previous studies on decolonising higher education (Naidoo, Traher, Lucas, Muhuro & Wisker, 2020; Zembylas, 2018) have generally focused on transforming university curricula to reflect the diversity of current student populations. However, few studies have investigated the socio-economic conditions of coloniality that continue to affect previously disadvantaged students. Le Grange (2016:3) posits that “the transformation of the university curriculum is both a microcosm of and impetus for broader societal transformation”. To illustrate this, Le Grange (2016) argues that the curriculum consists of three facets namely, the explicit curriculum (prescribed readings, module guides, theories etc.), the hidden curriculum (the culture and values of the university) and the null curriculum (that which is excluded in the curriculum). When talking about renewing the curriculum, the temptation is always to focus on

the explicit curriculum, yet the modern university often perpetuates conditions of coloniality through institutional cultures and values that exclude and “peripheralise” other forms of knowledge. What Grange (2016:7) calls the null curriculum is “what universities leave out – what is not taught and learned in a university”. To leave out some knowledge from the curriculum is tantamount to leaving out some people. Given that the violence of modernity is embedded in structures and systems of the modern neo-liberal university, it is people of the Global South who are often left out from the curriculum.

Considering this, decolonising the university becomes a painstaking process of identifying experiences, ways of being and contextual realities of the “other” that have been, and continue to be, excluded from the curriculum. Maldonado-Torres (2007) describes coloniality as a system that defines the organisation and dissemination of epistemic, material and aesthetic resources in ways that reproduce modernity’s colonial project. Santos (2014) in Zembylas (2018:2) also highlight that the struggle for global social justice is inseparable from the struggle for cognitive justice. Covid-19 has shown that universities remain entangled in structures of global coloniality. Thus, attempts to decolonise the university without decolonising society are superficial and bound to fail.

In a study of rural students’ experiences of the curriculum in South Africa, Naidoo et al. (2020) found that students from rural communities continue to experience epistemic exclusion, because universities disregard the realities of their socio-economic contexts. The neoliberal university is insensitive to the socio-economic realities of poor students, because it is entangled in a neoliberal framework that sustains coloniality. If the triad of education consists of the teacher, the learner and the curriculum, as Vandeyar (2019) argues, changing the curriculum without changing the socio-economic conditions of the learner is likely to reproduce existing inequalities. How do we ensure that students from poor backgrounds (and those whose socio-economic status have been eroded by the pandemic) are included in the new framework of the post-Covid-19 university? Paulo Freire (1992:85) avers that “the liberation of individuals acquires profound meaning only when the transformation of society is achieved”. Covid-19 clearly demonstrates that the decolonisation agenda must be aligned to the lived realities of poor, low-income and racialised students.

In an assessment of possible approaches to the violence of modernity, Andreotti et al. (2015) developed a social cartography which consists of three approaches namely, soft-reform, radical-reform and beyond-reform. Andreotti et al.’s cartography is relevant to the way South African universities have implemented the decolonisation/

transformation agenda. The soft-reform approach seeks to decolonise the university by inserting an African voice into its systems and structures. This approach works on the assumption that it is possible for those who were formerly excluded to find space within the structures and strictures of a Western-oriented university. On the other hand, radical-reform seeks to achieve systemic and structural transformation by rejecting values, norms and worldviews that perpetuate coloniality. What distinguishes beyond-reform from radical-reform is that beyond-reform rejects the idea that incorporating other epistemes into existing structures will ultimately change the system. In fact, the beyond-reform approach recognises that modernity itself is flawed and needs to be disbanded.

In the context of this analysis, South Africa's approach to decolonising higher education is located within the soft-reform/radical-reform paradigm which focuses on providing "additional resources to indigenous, racialized, low-income and first-generation students" without "questioning the integrity of the system itself" (Andreotti et al., 2015:32). The question that arises is whether this approach is sustainable especially in the "new age" of pandemics. If pandemics turn out to be the "new normal" of 21st century society, as some scientists have predicted, how will students from low-income, poorly serviced communities cope? Is it not more sustainable to address the structures that reproduce inequalities than to continue to provide support to students in a structurally flawed system?

Grosfoguel (2007) argues that people located in the Global South are characterised by a catalogue of deficits and lacks. Although Grosfoguel's position was meant to theorise the perpetual state of overdraft that colonialism bequeathed to former colonised countries, it echoes the "overdraft" situation of poor students in South Africa which has been aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic. The township, where the majority of students reside, is reminiscent of Frantz Fanon's (1961:4) Medina, a "hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light". The postcolonial township (at least in South Africa) suffers from constant power cuts, poor housing and limited internet connectivity – conditions that make it difficult for students to keep up with the neoliberal call to "save the academic year".² Clearly, the new world of pandemics requires a new decolonised education model that recognises the contextual needs of students living on the darker side of modernity. Students from South Africa's townships, informal settlements and rural areas do not only need laptops and data to engage in online learning but also a conducive learning environment. Decolonising the university without decolonising the socio-economic

2 The Department of Higher Education and Training articulated its objective in the context of Covid-19 as saving lives and saving the academic year.

conditions of blackness is a superficial exercise that will only postpone the problem. While the South African government has done a great deal to help poor students through the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), more challenges have emerged in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Method

This is a qualitative study that uses textual analysis as its analytical tool and purposive sampling as its method to identify and select relevant data from the DHET's Facebook Page. I purposively selected messages posted by students on the DHET Facebook Page between 1 and 11 June 2020, a period that marked the beginning of the Level 3 National Lockdown which lifted a number of restrictions on businesses and public gatherings. DHET used Facebook to communicate new regulations and government initiatives to students. Comments that students posted in direct response to official posts were included while those that they post in response to other students were excluded.

Data were purposively sampled and analysed using the process of coding described by Miles and Huberman (1994) to identify themes or emergent concepts. In this process, texts that discussed the same theme or topic were clustered together and given particular labels. Data was organised in line with Miles and Huberman's (1994) three stages of data analysis namely, data reduction, data display, and verification and analysis. Data were categorised into eight themes namely, differential treatment of students from different institutions, the rural-urban divide, lack of appropriate gadgets, accommodation challenges, the neoliberal preoccupation with saving the academic year, power outages, delayed government response and the costs of extending the academic year. Comments that did not reveal any new information on a particular topic were excluded. A maximum of four comments under each theme were selected for analysis.

Data were analysed using decolonial theory as a theoretical prism and thematic analysis as an analytic tool to investigate how the challenges faced by students in the Covid-19 context were entangled with modernity and its logic of coloniality. The study followed Wiles, Heath, Crow and Charles's (2005) principles of ethical research, particularly the view that research must not cause harm to participants and that participants should be treated fairly and equally during the research process. Principles of confidentiality and anonymity were observed by identifying participants through pseudonyms (initials).

Student responses to the Covid-19 pandemic: The darker side of modernity

This section presents and analyses data obtained from the DHET Facebook Page between 1 and 11 June 2020. While official messages posted on the Page sought to create the impression that the Department had the Covid-19-induced crisis under control, most of the comments from students expressed frustration with the way the Department and institutions of higher learning addressed challenges posed by the pandemic. The prevalent perception among students was that previously advantaged institutions and universities in general were treated better than previously disadvantaged institutions, especially in relation to the provision of necessary resources for virtual learning. This perceived discrepancy highlighted the perpetuation of quasi-colonial structures in the distribution of resources across universities in South Africa. A cursory analysis of the data showed that most participants on the Facebook Page were enrolled at former black universities, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) colleges and private colleges. These institutions have experienced numerous challenges since the dawn of democracy, ranging from lack of student funding to lack of resources such as laptops and infrastructure.

Scholars of decoloniality such as Quijano (2017) and Grosfoguel (2007) have argued that former colonised territories in the Global South subsidise the bright shine of modernity in the Global North, an observation that mirrors the situation in South African higher education where former white universities continue to shine while former black universities remain in a state of crisis. The “shine” of modernity in the Global North means that Western countries are likely to be in a better position to respond to the consequences of pandemics than those in the Global South where the majority of citizens are excluded from the global economy. The same can be said about South African universities’ unequal capacity to respond to the Covid-19 crisis. Most of the students in South Africa are funded by government through NSFAS. The question that arises is whether this is going to be sustainable given that South Africa’s economy has been on a downward spiral even before the outbreak of the pandemic. What does Covid-19, and other pandemics that may happen in the future, mean for those students (mainly black) who live in the shadow of modernity in South Africa? Most of the contributions on the DHET Facebook Page suggest that the decolonisation of higher education in South Africa must include dismantling structural inequalities not only within universities, but also within communities where students live.

Some are more equal than others: Covid-19 and inequality in higher education

When universities announced the migration of teaching and learning to online platforms, the question of access became topical given that South Africa's rural areas, townships and informal settlements do not have reliable access to basic services such as electricity, decent housing and internet connectivity. Although the government announced that it would provide data and laptops to poor students, most of the students said they never received the laptops and data packages as the government promised. Students from different institutions, such as private colleges, TVET colleges and previously disadvantaged universities, felt that they were not being treated fairly. A comment by a TVET college student (SS) suggested that former white universities such as the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) were treated better than previously disadvantaged institutions because their students "received laptops and 30gig data" in time to prepare for virtual learning.

My observation during data collection was that most of the students who complained about virtual learning were from former black universities, TVET colleges and private colleges. Wits was one of the first universities to announce data packages for students to facilitate online learning. Previously disadvantaged universities took longer to make announcements and when they did, students raised concerns about the inefficiency of the new learning model. In fact, some students at the University of the Free State (UFS) raised their concerns under the hashtag #UFSMUSTFALL which trended for several weeks on Facebook and Twitter.³ Another TVET student (ENE) expressed disgruntlement with the way TVET college students were treated by DHET. ENE was unhappy that some students received "50GB plus... while some of us received nothing". The comment expressed frustration not only with online learning but also with perceived and/or real inequalities in the higher education sector. ENE's contribution started as a desperate plea for help from the government, but it ended as an insult ("this is bullshit").

The perceived discrepancy in the way students were treated resonates with Fanon's theorisation of the colonial society as a compartmentalised society. The logic of coloniality which drives the modern project is evident in the way universities are disparately resourced in ways that mimic the colonial economic structure. This is why Covid-19 did not affect former white institutions and geographical spaces in the same way it affected black institutions and geographical spaces. ENE's world

3 #UfsMustFall, University Of Free State Must Fall and this why it's called to fall, available at: <http://bit.ly/3Ifegh4>

reminds us of Fanon's zone of non-being which breeds frustration and violence. Students from previously disadvantaged universities have been reduced to beggars pleading with government to give them "a tablet that has got a sim with data". Another participant (ZOM) complained that the government was only concerned about students on NSFAS, neglecting other equally poor students who did not qualify for government funding. The DHET's obsession with the so-called poor students has become problematic because of its political implications. Some students felt that the DHET was no longer representing all students, but only those on NSFAS. What the Department overlooked was that Covid-19 had pauperised many families, thus consequently re-designating some previously advantaged students into the "poor and needy" category.

ZOM's comment suggests that the government neglected students from private colleges and left them at the messy profit-seeking institutions who he calls "money chasers". The comment shows that South Africa's private education sector faces challenges such as lack of qualified personnel and profiteering. The fact that students in private colleges are taught "ten subjects by one lecturer" implies that there is limited government oversight in these institutions. As a result, students continue to pay for poor quality education. Another participant (TTFS) highlighted discrepancies in the way different institutions responded to Covid-19, raising questions about persistent racial inequalities in post-apartheid South Africa. TTFS felt that the DHET treated students from under-resourced institutions as "the step child(ren) of the family" fed on false promises of free data and laptops. Thus, TTFS considered e-learning an "anti-Black" initiative that expected poor black students to "watch countless videos" without taking cognizance of data costs. The idea that black students were treated as stepchildren of the Department suggests the persistence of quasi-colonial structures in higher education. Black students felt as if they were second-class citizens, always grovelling for handouts from government. TTFS posed a series of questions that highlighted the challenges faced by black students, namely high data costs, government neglect of non-NSFAS students and lack of appropriate gadgets such as laptops and tablets.

The rural-urban divide: Covid-19 and connectivity inequalities

Covid-19 put many previously disadvantaged students in a conundrum where, on the one hand, they were expected to heed the neoliberal call to save the academic year, while on the other, they had to deal with limited resources and unsupportive social contexts. When universities relocated to online platforms, they only addressed issues of curriculum delivery and ignored and/or superficially addressed a wide range of socio-economic realities that affected student access to the curriculum. One

participant (BTM) pointed out that virtual learning favoured students from urban environments, such as Johannesburg, “where there are WIFI hotspots everywhere”. The implication is that the online learning approach adopted by universities reinforced existing inequalities by ignoring the lived realities of students from the rural areas. BTM complained that students from villages in provinces such as the Eastern Cape (EC) did not have reliable “power supply and it cost a fortune to get to town”. The EC is the poorest province in South Africa, hence issues such as power cuts and poor internet access are a reality that students experience on a daily basis. In an article that reflected on connectivity challenges in rural spaces, Ndepa (2020:2) argued that online learning “only benefits the children of the rich and middle class, who are mostly located in urban areas and big cities”.

Other participants such as BT opposed the phased reopening of colleges and universities, arguing that institutions in the rural areas were not ready to reopen. BT questioned the DHET’s criteria for assessing institutional readiness saying the Department only visited institutions in the cities. What is evident in BT’s comment is that the DHET’s phased reopening agenda was influenced more by the need to save the academic year than the readiness of colleges and universities. The plight of students from previously disadvantaged rural universities was aptly captured by TTL, who argued that “our institution doesn’t have a plan for online learning”. TTL also pointed out that even if the institution had a plan, rural areas “face[d] challenges such as connection and time to study”. The living conditions of students in rural areas and townships are generally not conducive for learning from home. This explains TTL’s plea for the government to “allow us to go back to our residence[s] and study”. TTL’s plight underscored the coloniality of life for poor black students in post-apartheid South Africa who can only study outside the discomfort of their homes. For most poor students, the home space is not associated with comfort and tranquillity, but with lack of basic amenities and violence. The crude reality of studying from home amid Covid-19 is aptly captured by NZN who submitted that some students lived in small home spaces where they were “overcrowded by siblings” and drunken parents (*abazali bayasela*) who often communicated through violence.

NZN’s desperate plea for government to allow students to go “quarantine themselves in their respective residences” suggested that the Covid-19 university posed serious challenges for students who could not study from home. Perhaps the question is: what is the meaning of free education in the context of Covid-19? Free education comes with paid tuition fees, accommodation, transport and meal allowances. However, students lost some of these privileges when they were forced to finish the academic year at home. In this context, students from poor communities are likely to struggle academically. Other participants, such as VDF, raised the issue of residence

allowances, which they claimed universities did not pay given that students were not staying on campus. In most cases, universities eventually paid the allowances, however, the delays negatively impacted the academic welfare of students who relied on government funding. Other students, such as NN, complained that bursary funds took a long time to be paid, putting students in situations where they had to “study on empty stomachs”. An important point to make is that not all students used NSFAS funds for prescribed purposes such as accommodation and meal allowance. Some students used NSFAS and bursary funds to support families at home. One student (WS) mentioned that “NSFAS money” was for taking care of “the struggles we have at our home”. The fact that students used NSFAS funds to support families at home vindicates the view that transformation of the university must be complimented by transformation of society.

The Eskom problem: Power cuts in townships

Load-shedding is one of the major challenges faced by students from townships, rural areas and informal settlements. Lack of electricity usually results in poor or no internet connectivity, making it difficult for students to engage in online learning. One participant (SM) asked what the department was doing about load-shedding that lasted “for over 5 hours almost every day, disrupting internet connectivity and online lessons”. Another participant (SM) also indicated that power outages were serious “in the townships where our black students are”. These comments highlighted the coloniality of service delivery in post-apartheid South Africa where black communities continued to receive substandard services.

Poor students and the N+2 rule

Covid-19 also amplified shortcomings of government interventions designed to address issues of access to higher education. Students who participated on the DHET Facebook Page used the platform to contest the N+2 rule which the DHET put in place to cap the number of years that beneficiaries of NSFAS benefitted from the funding. According to this rule, NSFAS can only fund a student for the total number of years it takes to complete a degree plus two years. Thus, a four-year degree is funded for a maximum of six years. Although students have contested this rule since its inception, Covid-19 has highlighted its shortcomings especially with regard to students from poor communities. Given the litany of challenges highlighted above, students from poor communities are likely to fail because of socio-economic circumstances beyond their control. Participants, such as SM, wanted the N+2 rule to be revised so that NSFAS can count only those years that a student was on NSFAS funding.

Currently, the N+2 rule considers the number of years that a student appears in the system regardless of whether those years were funded by NSFAS or not. The N+2 rule is problematic because it cannot distinguish between students who fail out of negligence and those who fail out of genuine financial problems.

The fact that the majority of the students who raised concerns on the DHET Facebook Page were black does not only reveal the slow pace of transformation in South African institutions since 1994, but also the continuation of quasi-colonial structures and systems within the higher education sector. When the DHET posted a message saying that the Deputy Minister was going to visit colleges and universities to evaluate their state of readiness to reopen, students from previously disadvantaged institutions pleaded with the department to visit their institutions. Participants from institutions such as the University of Zululand (UNIZULU), the Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT) and the University of Venda (UNIVEN), pleaded with the department to visit their institutions, which they believed had many issues that needed “serious attention”. Although the participants did not mention specific challenges faced by their institutions, the comments suggested that students were aware of numerous problems at their institutions.

Summary of findings and recommendations

The study has revealed, through an analysis of messages posted by students on the DHET Facebook Page, that Covid-19 poses a threat to the welfare of poor, low-income students in South African universities. The results show that students were unhappy with the way the government treated different institutions, especially with regard to the provision of data and laptops for e-learning purposes. Previously disadvantaged institutions were most affected, because they were already experiencing problems before the outbreak of Covid-19. Students from rural areas and informal settlements also raised concerns about poor internet connectivity and power outages, which adversely affected their ability to engage in elearning. The prevailing perception among participants was that online learning favoured students from urban communities where power cuts were less frequent and internet connectivity was more reliable. The study also found that students were unhappy with the DHET’s focus on NSFAS students at the expense of other students (especially the missing middle) who were equally affected by the pandemic. Government response to the pandemic was seen as slow, because some students received their allowances late while others never received the laptops and data packages that the government promised. Concerns were also raised about NSFAS’s N+2 rule which stipulates that

students can only be funded for the maximum number of years it takes to complete a degree plus two years. In the context of Covid-19, the N+2 rule is likely to affect students from poor communities who may fail modules because of reasons beyond their control.

In view of these findings, it is evident that universities in the Global South in general, and South Africa in particular, need to adopt a beyond-reform approach that addresses the inherent violence of modernity. In the past, the violence of modernity manifested through Western projects such as slavery, colonisation, globalisation and neoliberalism. In the 21st century, pandemics have become the new vehicle through which modernity unleashes violence on the peoples and economies of the Global South. While the form and scope of the beyond-reform approach may differ from university to university and country to country, there is no doubt that the current approaches to the decolonisation of higher education are inadequate and unsustainable. Therefore, I recommend that universities should not only focus on delivering epistemic justice, but also work with the government to find ways of addressing systemic inequalities that continue to deny poor students access to the benefits of the 4IR. While I recognise the immense difficulty associated with dismantling the current modern project, the beyond-reform approach requires the dismantling of existing structural inequalities that keep poor students in the shadow of modernity. However, in the short term, the government should dismantle historical inequalities among universities and ensure that all universities are adequately resourced and equipped to respond to crises. The current situation where some universities (previously advantaged) are better resourced than others (previously disadvantaged) perpetuates the violence of modernity on vulnerable social groups. It is also important for both universities and the DHET to take the socio-economic realities of students seriously.

The post-Covid-19 university (and world) needs to be vigilant so that vulnerable students (and groups) are better prepared to survive pandemics. A starting point would be to deliver social justice to all students through the provision of relevant gadgets, internet connectivity and liveable home spaces that can facilitate learning in the 21st century. An important point to note is that the decolonisation of the university is not possible without the decolonisation of society. The Covid-19 pandemic has starkly reminded us that the university is not an island. Societal challenges such as power outages and poor service delivery have a direct impact on the operations of the university, especially in the context of a pandemic. This study recommends that universities and the DHET should be more flexible in times of crisis and be ready to change rules and policies to alleviate the impact of the crisis, especially on poor students and communities. In the South African context, this may

require broadening the scope of NSFAS to include students in the missing middle and those whose incomes have been eroded by the crisis. Rules such as N+2 may need to be revised to cater for students who have been economically downgraded by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

If any lesson has been learnt from the Covid-19 crisis, it is that universities need a complete beyond-reform approach to decolonisation rather than the current additive-inclusive approach that seeks to include marginalised students into universities modelled on the logic of coloniality. The beyond-reform approach recognises that social justice cannot be delayed any further because it is intricately intertwined with epistemic justice. The decolonisation of the university should of necessity include the decolonisation of society otherwise students from poor backgrounds will continue to be treated as second-class citizens of the higher education sector. While pandemics such as Covid-19 affect all nations across the globe, nations on the “darker side of Western modernity” suffer the most because they do not have big budgets to cushion their populations. The irony, however, is that the bright shine of modernity in the West is subsided by the darkness it creates in the Global South. Given that the world is becoming more and more prone to pandemics and other natural disasters, the situation of poor students in the Global South (including South Africa) is likely to get worse.

Students who participated on the DHET Facebook Page in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic lamented the perpetuation of conditions of coloniality in the post-apartheid higher education system. Poor black students from low-income communities were left with no choice but to contend with a litany of challenges that, overnight, turned education into a privilege rather than a right. If the advent of pandemics signals the beginning of the end of the four-walled university as we know it, the implication is that South Africa’s higher education institutions would need to rethink the decolonisation of the university. In the 21st century, the decolonisation of the university should entail making the benefits of the 4IR accessible to all students. Learning in a world of pandemics and natural disasters is only possible when all students have access to the internet, appropriate gadgets and habitable home spaces. Participants on the DHET Facebook Page highlighted that students from poor households faced numerous challenges such as lack of data, lack of appropriate gadgets, power outages and hostile home-learning environments. Clearly, Covid-19 has not only given South Africa an opportunity to reset the economy, but also to broaden its scope of transformation/decolonisation.

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